

Dumbledore's Army

By

DrT

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Chapter 01

Monday July 22, 1996

Harry Potter looked at the grandfather clock in the up-stairs hallway and sighed. 12:25 In thirty-five minutes or so, the magical chimes Dumbledore had installed would sound and Harry would have to talk to someone.

He was not overjoyed by the prospect.

Less than a week after he arrived back at Privet Drive, Uncle Vernon had locked him in the cupboard again. Around midnight, Mad-Eye Moody had swept into the house and had scared all three Dursleys. The up-shot was, nearly every afternoon at 1:00 someone would visit Harry.

The good part about this set-up was that all the Dursleys were out of the house every day between 1:00 and 4:00, and the visits were usually over by 1:40. The bad part of the situation was the 20 to 40 minutes he had to spend talking to people.

The first two weeks of the summer, Harry had been continuously depressed, no matter how that term might be defined. Harry had glanced at letters from Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Remus, the twins, and even Neville, and then had tossed them away without answering. He had glanced at his O.W.L. results, allowed himself a mild feeling of pleasure, and then repressed it. He sent one copy-quill note to his friends telling them he had done well, but little else.

Harry was not totally non-functional, even if he slept from 10:00 at night until 9:00 in the morning, fighting through the nightmares. Being depressed, Harry had decided, at least allowed him to rest. N.E.W.T. classes would not be approved until late August, so Harry had no summer work. In the late mornings, he caught up on his Muggle reading (from the local library -- it had been his request to borrow books that had caused Vernon Dursley to go into a rage), mostly mysteries, science fiction, and some non-fiction. He had now even started in on Tolkien. After his visitor left, Harry would go into the basement to use the equipment Uncle Vernon had rented for Dudley to train with over the summer. Harry would hit the heavy bag, jog on the tread mill for an hour, and use whatever time might be left to weight train and hit the bag again before showering. Harry was working out hard; he knew he would have to be in good shape for the next few years.

Harry had also decided hitting the bag, working out his frustrations, was what had kept him from slipping from a mild depression into something worse. He refused to admit that the visitors helped as well. He was still depressed, but not to the extent he had been.

No, as far as Harry would admit, the visitors were necessary evils; necessary to keep Uncle Vernon in-line and everyone out of the house for at least three hours.

The worst visitors were strangers or near-strangers, members of the Order of the Phoenix who treated Harry as a hero. Harry knew they meant well, but they were hard to take, and he usually had to prod them to get them to leave after 40 minutes or so. He had hoped Moody or

Tonks would stop by, so that Harry could ask them about Auror training, but so far they hadn't. Despite everything, Harry still hoped to train as an Auror.

The hardest visits had been with Remus Lupin.

Remus had visited four times over the past two weeks. The first two times had been very strained indeed. Neither really wanted to get into their feelings about the late Sirius Black. Remus' third visit had occurred after Dumbledore's one and only visit. Harry had to admit to himself that he had behaved very badly towards Dumbledore, and the only letter he had written that summer, other than a request for more information on the N.E.W.T. classes and the note to his friends about his O.W.L. results, had been a letter of apology to Dumbledore.

When Remus had shown up the next day, Harry had finally let his anger and grief out, which triggered Remus' as well. Both had needed the catharsis; neither mentioned it in the last meeting. Instead, Remus had gone over Sirius' will. As it had been attested to before his conviction, it still stood. Since Sirius had never married, and James Potter was dead, nearly all of the Black family fortune went to his cousin Andromeda (Tonks' mother) or Harry. Harry also found out that there was a Potter Trust, slightly smaller than his share of the Black Trust, which he would gain income from once he reached 17, and which he would control at age 21.

And so, slowly, Harry had partially recovered from the series of traumas that had hit him since the Third Task at the end of his Fourth year. He had even recovered enough to start sketching a form letter to his friends, apologizing for not writing sooner.

As the clock ticked closer to 1:00, Harry thought about three of his correspondents: Hermione Granger; Luna Lovegood; and Ginny Weasley. In very different ways, Ginny and Luna were both good friends, although of course not as close to him as Hermione was. And they were all, he admitted to himself, attractive girls.

After the fiasco with Cho the previous spring, Harry had not been sure he wanted to risk being more than friends with any girl any time soon. Harry had realized by the end of the term that he needed his friends, and Ginny and Luna, along with Neville, had demonstrated that they would stand by him just as Ron and Hermione would.

Harry also had to admit that, when he wasn't sleeping or moping about, he was thinking more and more about girls in general, and those three girls -- Hermione, Ginny, and Luna -- in particular. He wasn't certain what he should do about those feelings, especially when those thoughts weren't totally centered on one person. He decided he should really think about his feelings while he waited for the next visitor.

As he sat, Harry admitted to himself that he had had some thoughts about Hermione before he had fallen for Cho, and he had also noticed that Ron and Hermione might be interested in each other. Harry also admitted he had been too embarrassed by Ginny's crush and then his own infatuation with Cho to think of her as anything more than Ron's pesky sister. Riding the train back the month before, he had finally noticed Ginny as the attractive girl she was. It had taken him most of the year to realize that whatever Luna was, she wasn't 'loony' in any sense of the term.

None of the three were stunningly beautiful, although Ginny was a classic cute 'tom-boy' type, Hermione was the classic very slim 'girl-next-door,' and Luna looked like a very oblivious Muggle waif-fashion model. (None of those types were apparently well-liked in the wizarding world, or at least none ever appeared in the glossy soft-core magazines Seamus had smuggled in the last two years. They did show up in Dean's Muggle lingerie catalogues, but not in the soft-core Muggle magazines he traded with Seamus.)

Like Hermione, both Ginny and Luna had shown depths to Harry that made him want to become more than just their leader. He wanted to be their friend. He wasn't hoping for more from any of them -- Ginny had shown herself interested in many boys, and might not want to be tied down to one boyfriend, and Harry doubted anyone could anticipate Luna. And of course Hermione and Ron sometimes acted like they were already a couple, although as far as he knew they weren't. Harry was hoping just to know all three of them better. Maybe that could be enough, maybe he could at least become their real friend. Maybe. . . .

The sound of Westminster chimes filled the air at #4 Privet Drive. Neighbors would have thought that strange, as the door chime merely sounded a minor third 'Ding-Dong' when they rang.

"Boy!" Aunt Petunia yelled, "Answer that door before the neighbors see whatever freak is checking on you early!"

"Yes, Aunt Petunia," Harry Potter answered, his voice dull.

Harry was not sure who would be worse, someone he liked and respected enough to answer their questions, like Remus Lupin or even Tonks, or some virtual stranger, who would gaze at Harry with admiration.

The chimes which Dumbledore had installed to identify magical visitors rang again. "Boy!" Petunia Dursley screeched.

"I'm getting it!" Harry yelled back. "Yell at me when I don't answer fast enough, yell at me when I run to get it; Shit!" he muttered as he swung the door open. "Yes?"

This was not a wizard Harry knew. "Yes?" Harry asked again. This was in many ways a nondescript wizard. Tallish -- a shade over six foot -- and very broad and muscular, but a wizard who could easily pass for a Muggle. The wizard simply stared at Harry, so Harry stared back. The wizard had a hard expression, and rather cold dark blue eyes. "What?" Harry demanded.

The wizard snorted and brushed past Harry without a word.

Harry blinked, and followed the wizard into the kitchen.

"Get out of my kitchen!" Petunia demanded as soon as she saw the wizard. "You freaks can force yourself on us, but. . . ."

"Leave," the wizard said.

"What? How dare you. . . ."

"Leave, for at least three hours." The voice was deep, but unemotional.

"No! Why. . . ." Petunia got no further before the wizard had pulled out his wand and petrified her.

"I have no time to waste on you, woman," the wizard said. "I will be here every afternoon this week. On Saturday, Potter will leave with me. You will either leave after noon, or I shall petrify you every afternoon. After today, the choice is yours."

The wizard turned to Harry. "Leaving with you, am I? First I heard about it!" Harry said, almost with a snarl. "Just who do you think you are? And she would have left in a few minutes. Why are you here early?"

"My name is Tomas Zoric. I am your tutor. This week, I am going to drive the basics of Occlumency through your thick skull, if that is possible. Snape thinks it unlikely, but then he is a lousy teacher. If you prove incapable of learning, then the Order will have to decide on ways of babying you along." Harry flushed with anger. "If you can learn, and learn some patience, then maybe you will earn some degree of autonomy." This was all said somewhat flatly, as if both Harry and Zoric were unfeeling, unthinking robots.

"No way," Harry said.

"Then you want to die," Zoric stated, "and you don't care who else dies."

"Of course I care. . . ."

"This is real life, Potter. You survived your second, third, and fourth encounters with Voldemort because you have more power than you know what to do with, because Voldemort was weak all three times, and because of plain dumb luck. You survived your fifth encounter because Dumbledore was there to save your selfish, incompetent arse. You are unlikely to be so lucky next time." Harry scowled at the wizard.

"Dumbledore should have either risked teaching you last year, or called someone like me in. He made the mistake of asking Snape, who is very skilled but, like I said, a poor teacher with a grudge against you. And, be honest, did you even try?"

"Who do you think you are?" Harry yelled.

"I am what you need, Potter," Zoric answered, undismayed. "I don't hate you, like Snape. I don't love you, like Dumbledore. I'm not tied up with your family, like Remus. . . ."

"You know Remus?"

The first real expression, one that seemed to acknowledge a slight slip, crossed Zoric's face. "Yes. I was in your parents' year at Hogwarts, in Ravenclaw. I didn't like your father or Black; I didn't really dislike them, either. I wasn't in love with your mother or worship her from afar. Remus and I are friends, and yes, I know he's a werewolf. Now, do you want to learn, or do you want to be a victim?"

"Are you Muggle-born? You look like you fit in."

A slight frown almost formed, and then disappeared. "If you must know, no, I am Pure-Blood. The Communists drove many of us out of Yugoslavia in the later 1940s and early 50s. My parents came to this country, where I was born." Zoric's brows beetled and his expressionless voice took on a nasty tone. "Enough delays. Agree to work, or tell me to go. I have no desire to bandy words with a brat."

"Don't call me that!" Harry said in a petulant voice.

"Then don't act like one!" Zoric mocked. "Decide! Fighter or victim?"

Harry sighed. "Fighter." He nodded towards his aunt. "Does she have to stay petrified?"

"Yes. Maybe she'll learn not to dither. It's a trait you need to suppress as well." Harry frowned. "Come along, Mister Potter."

Two and a half hours later, Harry managed to stagger out of the basement to his room while Zoric set Petunia free, and then left after having a stern talk with her. Harry took a quick shower, and then sat on his bed to think about the day's events.

Snape had obviously chosen the 'throw them in the deep end and see if they swim or drown' approach to teaching him Occlumency. Harry had, in that sense, drowned. Zoric had taken him through the process in a more step-by-step process, with full explanations.

It had still been very hard work, but Harry felt he now knew what was expected of him. And, best of all, after four more days of practice, he would be leaving.

Harry mentally kicked himself. Leaving for where? He had forgotten to find out.

Tuesday July 23, 1996

Petunia fled right after she fed Dudley an early lunch. Dudley bolted his lunch and went to a nearby gym to pound the heavy bag, leaving Harry to clean up. Harry had finished his meager allowance of food, and, for the first time since he had come to Privet Drive that summer, he still felt hungry. He ate the left-overs and placed the plates in the dishwasher.

Promptly at 1:00 (Zoric had agreed to come at the usual time), the magical chimes rang. When Harry opened the door, Zoric hurried him down to the basement to practice without listening to Harry's protestations that he needed to ask questions. All Zoric said was, "Later."

Just over two hours later, Zoric called a halt. "Well, Potter, either I'm even a better teacher than I thought, or you must have somehow have learned something from Snape after all."

"Thanks, I think," Harry replied tiredly. "Can I ask questions now?"

Zoric seemed to think about it for a moment. "Very well. We should go upstairs; you need some water."

"Are you going to tutor me after this week?" Harry asked as they climbed the basement stairs.

"Yes. I will be supervising all your courses this year."

"Really?" Harry asked, surprised.

"You intend on trying to be an Auror, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered.

"So, you will be taking Potions, Charms, Defense, Transfiguration, and what are your fifth and sixth courses? Herbology, perhaps?" Sixth and Seventh year students only took five to seven courses. Harry knew that he would need five N.E.W.T.s of some kind to apply for Auror training.

"Snape agreed to let me take Advance Potions?" Harry was surprised again. Normally, Snape only accepted those with O O.W.L.s, and Harry had managed the second of three levels, the E.

"A number of students, inspired by recent events, and, to be honest, inspired by you, have expressed a desire to become Aurors."

"Really?" Harry interrupted.

"Really," Zoric replied drily. "You, Weasley, Macmillan, Bones, Boot, Turpin, and Finch-Fletchley all achieved E's and yet wish to try and become Aurors. A Mister Longbottom achieved an A, and also wishes to try. Granger and Zabini also have expressed interest, but they both achieved O's. Snape has been persuaded to teach a class devoted to the potions portion of the Aurors exam."

"There's an Aurors exam?" Harry asked.

"Yes. For those who do not achieve the E or O N.E.W.T. in one of the important areas. They allow one major area, other than Defense, to be made up that way. You need a total of five E and O N.E.W.T.s, and one must be in Defense. Besides that, a candidate either needs, or needs to make up, Transfiguration and Potions. Beyond that, you need the other N.E.W.T.s in general. They favor Charms, Creatures, Muggle Studies, or Basic Magical Medicine, but will accept any of the other areas. So, if you can make five E or O N.E.W.T.s, including Defense and Transfiguration, you can make up for the Potions by the exam."

"What else?" Harry asked, cursing Umbridge for interrupting his discussion with McGonagall on the subject.

"There is also a physical fitness exam." Zoric sat in a kitchen chair without relaxing. "I will both teach and train you, Potter. If necessary, I will help the others to some degree as well. Now, what is your optional area? Or areas."

"I haven't decided yet," Harry admitted. "I don't have the background to do Runes, let alone Arithmancy, and obviously I can't do Divination."

"True. That leaves Herbology, History, Muggles, Medical, and Creatures."

"Are you an Auror?" Harry asked.

"Do you always have a problem sticking to the subject?"

Harry frowned, but then relented. "Normally, no. This summer, yes."

"Sleeping more than usual, but irregularly. Tired even when you wake up. Eating problems, too little in your case, unless you're bingeing and puking. Trouble concentrating. Disinterest in nearly everything. Mood swings. Right?"

Harry sighed. "It's getting a little better."

"You're depressed, Potter. Not surprising."

"So I should snap out of it, right?" Harry said in a flat voice.

"No." There was a pause, then, "Look at me, Potter."

Harry looked up. Harry realized he was looking at the darkest blue eyes he had ever seen. They seemed to bore into him without triggering either his Occlumency sensitivity or training.

"You can help yourself work your way out of it, but it's not easy. No one can just 'snap out' of true depression. The first step is to understand you're depressed and that you don't really want to be."

"I don't!"

"Potter, if you're mildly depressed, we can probably help you work your way out of it. It won't be easy, but it's far from impossible. If you're more severely depressed, then there are some effective Muggle medications to help you along."

"Muggle?" Harry asked.

"Muggle," Zoric said firmly. "They are slightly more effective in the long-term, and you don't want it to leak out you're seeing a psyche healer unless you really have a serious problem."

"Oh."

"To answer your questions, I trained as an Auror with your father and Black. I was an Auror, and worked as a hit wizard for the three months before Voldemort's disappearance, until 1984." Zoric frowned very slightly at the memories. "Just about the first thing Fudge did after he took over was cut back the budget on MLES, especially the Aurors. I left early, in part because I was disgusted and in part because I thought they needed to keep some of the older Aurors they were going to force into early retirement. Since then, I've been the only full-time magical private investigator in Europe. I even set up my own agency."

"And now you're my tutor?"

Zoric shrugged. "My oath to the Order puts me where I am needed. I am needed here."

"And at Hogwarts."

"And at Hogwarts," Zoric agreed.

"How are they going to explain you?" Harry asked, curious. "Are you going to be the new Defense teacher?"

"No," he answered, "Remus will be returning, at least for the year, although it took some arm-twisting to get the Ministry and the Board of Governors to agree. They'll be sending out information on the Wolfsbane potion and other security measures to the students' families. I will be 'explained' as a security consultant. And I will likely fill in for Remus if he has a bad transformation."

Harry seemed to be musing about this. "Question?" Zoric asked.

"Can I really fight this depression?" Harry asked.

"Do you feel depressed now?"

"Well, no," Harry admitted.

"That's a good sign. One problem will be how to keep you busy enough to be engaged, without overwhelming you. The other problem will be that when you are alone, or not busy, the depression will come back. Is there anything that makes you happy?"

Harry shrugged. "Flying used to help, but since Umbridge stole my broom. . . ."

"Dumbledore has it. He was going to return it when you came back to Hogwarts, but I think you should get it Saturday."

"Where will I be going?" Harry asked. "I forgot to ask yesterday."

"That is still under discussion. But flying is a good idea, and that strikes Grimmauld Place. I have several ideas. Hopefully, some of your friends will be allowed to join you for at least a few days. Have you been writing them?"

"Not really," Harry answered, hanging his head in shame, although he was a bit pleased to know he did not have to return to the Black house. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Neville had all written three or four times, but Harry had only returned that one short note.

"A pair of assignments, Mister Potter," Zoric stated. "Draw up a balance sheet, outlining reasons for and against your taking Herbology, History, Basic Medicine, Creatures, or Muggle Studies. Also, write a short note to each of your friends stating that you will not be here starting Saturday, but are not certain of your next location. However, do inform them that you will write next week, and, if you wish, state that you might be able to invite them, or at least any of those who were with you at the Ministry, to stay with you either for your birthday or for part of August. Acceptable?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered.

Zoric looked at Harry carefully. "Is this how you normally dress?"

Harry flushed. "Yes, sir. You see. . . ."

"I understand," Zoric said. "For your knowledge only, then, we will leave Saturday morning and go clothes shopping. It's time to smarten your image."

"But. . . ."

"No buts, unless you enjoy dressing like that."

"I don't," Harry said fiercely, "but I don't need charity!"

Zoric gave him a long, penetrating look. Finally, he said, "I shall keep a tab. When you turn seventeen, you are welcome to pay me back. I shall also try to get you postal access to your own money after this weekend. Acceptable?"

"Yes, sir."

Chapter 02

That night, Harry sat down thoughtfully at the small table he used as a desk. He picked up the copy quill Hermione had given him. Like a broomstick, its magic was self-contained. He could therefore use it without being cited.

Dear

I'm sorry I've been such a poor writer this summer. I guess I've been acting like a prat, but you know everything that happened last spring, or at least most of it. Dumbledore is sending back my Firebolt, but I don't know if I can play. At least I'll be able to fly!

I'm being released from my relatives this Saturday. I'm not certain where I'll be sent, but I've been told it should be some place I can fly. Hedwig will have to deliver six letters, so she will not be able to wait around. I'll have to send her around again next week, unless Dumbledore allows other owls to find me.

Speaking of owls, as I told you I did well on my OWLs. I just realized I didn't send the actual results. I got the O in Defense and Creatures, E's in Potions, Charms, and Transfiguration, and A's in Astronomy, Herbology, History, and the two Theory areas. I did get the P in Divination, so no D's or T's. 10 OWLs, I'm shocked! Especially by the A's in Astronomy and especially History! I still don't know how that one happened, since I could swear I didn't finish one question. And I've been told there will be a special potions class for those of us interested in becoming Aurors but who didn't get the O Snape demands for the NEWT classes.

I'm still trying to decide if I want to do Herbology, Creatures, History, Muggle Studies or perhaps Basic Medicine for my final courses. The medical course might be good, it just requires A OWLs in Herbology and Potions. I enjoy working with Hagrid, but really that's the only reason to do Creatures. I do not like working with Binns (who does?), which is an excellent reason not to pursue that. Am I too far behind to do Muggle Studies? would that help me if I do become an Auror? I guess I'll have to write McGonagall, but your opinion is welcome.

I still miss Sirius every day, but I'm starting to accept that it wasn't all my fault he was killed. And I miss my friends; I'm sorry I cut you all off. I hope to hear from you next week. Maybe there'll be some chance we can get together in August?

Harry reread the letter, and decided to leave it as it was. He had apologized, let his friends know he wasn't continuing on his downward spiral, asked them for advice (he knew they all loved giving him advice, especially Hermione). And Hedwig was looking happy for the first time since they arrived.

"Yes," he told the bird, "You can deliver these in a little bit. I've not finished yet." Hedwig let out a happy squawk.

Harry thought a moment, and then signed and addressed Neville's as it was. He then went to add more to the other five.

To Ginny Weasley

I hope I am allowed to come to the Burrow, but I don't think that will happen. I hope to see you and Ron before 1 September.

To Remus Lupin

The above is a copy quill letter I sent to my school friends, but I thought I should send this to you, too. I realized last week that I haven't written to you all summer, even if you've been writing me every third day or so. I realized that as much as I missed Sirius, because I loved and needed him, you probably miss him even more. I'm sorry, Professor.

I know, you told me in your first letter and each time we met to call you Remus, but Mr. Zoric told me you should be coming back to Hogwarts, so I guess I shouldn't get used to calling you Remus. I don't suppose you can tell me anything useful about him, can you?

I would value your advice, about what class to take and about what I should do about Professor Dumbledore. I trusted him so much, yet I really felt, and feel, betrayed. I need someone I can trust to really have my interests at heart. Can that someone be you? I know I can trust Ron and Hermione, but I don't know if I can really tell them about the Prophecy yet. Do you know it? I have to either kill Voldemort, or die trying. Can I really kill anyone? Help me, please

At that point, Harry did something he had been resisting doing for weeks, and had only done that one time with Remus since Sirius died. He cried.

When he recovered, Harry almost tore the letter to Lupin to pieces. After a long struggle, he signed, sealed, and addressed it.

To Ron Weasley

I wish I knew where I was being sent. Hopefully your place, but somehow, I doubt it. If it is someplace I can fly, and you can come, I'll let you know so you can bring your broom. Even if I can't play, I can practice with you. Hope to see you soon.

To Hermione Granger

For once, I can not only use your advice, but I promise to listen to what you and Professor Lupin have to say. And I'm sorry I didn't write back, and congratulations on your 12 OWLs. Yes, I'm sorry you only got 11 O's, and yes they should have scored on Astronomy practical on more of a curve, but I'm still very proud of your score, and I hope you are, too.

And please don't take the Auror potions class with us; not because we won't need you there to help us, but because you deserve to take the NEWT potions class. At least none of us have to take the 'vocational' classes, right?

Thinking about last year, and really most of the previous year, I have to admit you've almost always been right (not that you've ever been totally wrong). I promise to try to listen to you more; but as I've heard you say several times, the problem is not always choosing between right and wrong, but between two rights. Somehow, I suspect I won't always do what you think is right, but I hope you will always know it's because I think I'm doing something that is also right, not because I think you're wrong.

Thank you for being my friend, even if I've treated you badly.

To Luna Lovegood

I hope you're having a good time in Sweden. Thank your father for me for the subscription to The Quibbler. If I don't see you in August, I hope to see you on the train.

I think about our talk by the bulletin board often (I hope you got all your things back). Thank you for trusting me and believing in me. Both mean a lot. Could we at least walk to Hogsmeade sometime and talk some more? It's hard to find time and places to talk with someone in another year and another House.

"What's the worst thing she can say?" Harry asked Hedwig. "And if she does say 'yes,' at least she won't cry on me."

Hedwig glided from the top of her cage to the table, and nuzzled against Harry's hand. "I guess I should tell you 'thank you,' too," Harry told her. "It's going to get better, somehow; I promise. But it's not going to be easy."

Wednesday, July 24, 1996

Tomas Zoric arrived at precisely 1:00 the next day.

"And how are you, Mister Potter?" he asked.

"About the same. Writing the letters did make me feel a little better," Harry answered. "I kept a copy of the basic letter I sent off, if you want to read it."

"Thank you, Mister Potter," Zoric answered, taking the copy. "To whom did you send it?"

"Neville, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Professor Lupin," Harry answered. "And I thought about the classes, but I'll wait until Hermione and Professor Lupin write back before I decide anything."

"With your background, you're not too far behind in Muggle Studies," Zoric told him, handing the letter back. "And those with strong Muggle backgrounds often work cases that cross into the Muggle world."

"Oh!" Harry sounded interested.

"And don't forget, you can take two or three more courses," Zoric pointed out. "I would recommend Muggle Studies and one other, perhaps Medicine, but you are correct. You should hear from the others before deciding for yourself."

Harry merely nodded his understanding.

"If you don't mind, I should like to step things up a notch today," Zoric told him.

"What does that mean? That I can start Legilimency?"

"Legilimency may only be taught in special circumstances, including Auror training, so that will have to wait." Zoric handed Harry a parchment. "I'd like to incorporate the Imperius Curse. I will not do so at any time without your express consent. I will not make you do anything embarrassing or harmful."

Harry stared at the paper, already co-signed by a number of officials. He looked over the parchment at Zoric.

"Do not let the fact all these people approved sway you, Mister Potter."

"You can call me Harry, you know."

"Thank you, Harry."

Harry reached for a ball point pen that was on the hall table. "Stop!" Zoric commanded.

"What?"

"Think about your image, Harry. We do not want people to think of you as . . . odd, for any reason. Skeeter, and then the Prophet, did quite a number on you over the past two years. We must not give even a little sign of eccentricity if it can be helped."

"Like signing with a pen?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"At least not one of **those** pens." Zoric handed Harry a fountain pen.

"All right," Harry said, doubt in his voice as he signed. "Is that why you're taking me clothes shopping?"

"In part. You want to feel like a new man, so we're going to give you a new image."

"Because I can't be a hero. . . ."

"Dressed like a ragamuffin," Zoric finished. "Although, of course you can be, it is just easier to be confident when you dress that way." He shrugged slightly. "It can't hurt if we find you clothes you're actually comfortable in, right?"

"I guess."

"Harry, if I ask you to do something that makes you uncomfortable, tell me. If you have any questions, and circumstances permit it, ask them."

"You seem a little upset," Harry said, no daring to go further. Zoric gave off few signals, and it was clear that he didn't like giving those few signals off.

Zoric moved towards the basement, but told Harry what he was thinking anyway. "When Dumbledore told me the Prophecy, he told me you knew."

"True."

"So, I do not fully approve of what he did with you over the years."

"What do you think he should have done?" Harry obviously had some ideas of his own about that subject.

"If he really needed to leave you here, he should have had at least slightly more supervision. Your uncle would not have liked it, but there is a simple way he could have been encouraged to accept it."

"A quick kick in the backside?"

That earned Harry a disapproving look. "No. Positive reinforcement would be better for the magic."

"Ah; cash."

"Exactly. It could even have been done without your knowing, if that was really important. And once you learned of your heritage, you should have had a summer tutor every summer, to help prepare you for this burden."

"So you don't blindly agree with him? Good!"

"Mister Potter, I hope I do not 'blindly agree' with anyone or anything." Zoric looked at Harry closely. "Questions? If they are important, we can deal with them now."

"Have you ever killed anyone?" Harry asked bluntly.

Zoric understood. "Yes. I have killed twelve people. And some people have died because of me. I do not feel guilty about any of the former. It takes time to deal with the latter."

Harry nodded his understanding.

"However," Zoric went on, "I never set off to kill anyone. That is a heavy burden."

"It is," Harry agreed. "Not telling me my First year is one of Dumbledore's decisions I can't argue with, but maybe he should have told me by the end of my Fourth year."

The session was a little short of two hours. Harry was more mentally exhausted than usual, but he had shown great ability to throw off the Imperius curse by itself. Harry had not been able to throw it and practice Occlumency at the same time, but Zoric explained that even achieving half the results was far above average.

That evening, Uncle Vernon announced that the Dursleys would be leaving the next morning. Dudley had a boxing tournament that weekend near Liverpool, and they would be leaving early. To celebrate getting away from Harry, the Dursleys went out for the evening. He was instructed not to leave the house until he left the house for good that Saturday.

Harry was happy to make the promise, even when he realized there were only canned goods left in the house to eat. 'I can make do with tinned soup,' he told himself as his relatives packed. After all, that was better than he had usually given over the years.

As soon as they were gone, Harry dialed Hermione's parents, remembering to reverse the charges as she had instructed him.

"Yes! We will!" Hermione told the exchange operator, "Harry! Is that you?"

"Hello, Hermione. Err, maybe you should call me back? It's a lot cheaper that way."

"You're still at the Dursleys?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Hang up and I'll call right back!"

Harry answered on the first ring. "The Dursleys."

"Harry! Are you all right?" Hermione sounded worried.

"I'm fine. . . ."

"Harry!" Hermione scolded.

Harry grimaced. "I'm better?"

"Are you really?"

"You know," Harry said, considering it, "I think I am. And are you recovered?"

"I am still a little sore, but that is starting to fade," Hermione answered. She added firmly, "I am in perfect health. I have the feeling you want to ask me something."

"Yes, well . . . Hermione, can I trust you?"

"Do you really have to ask, after all we've been through?" She was offended.

"Hermione, I know you're my friend. I know you will stand beside me, and I certainly know you'll give me advice. . . ."

"Even if you don't follow it," she said tartly.

"Even if I don't always follow it," Harry agreed. "That's not what I'm asking. . . ."

"What are you asking?"

Suddenly, Harry's feelings for Hermione coalesced and became perfectly clear. "Hermione, I love you," Harry blurted.

Hermione made strangling sounds of shock and surprise.

"Not like that," Harry hastened to clarify, "although I meant it when I said you are pretty."

"Then . . . how?"

"I need . . . I think I need a sister, I guess. Someone. . . ." Harry choked up.

"Someone who loves you unconditionally as well as for who you are; someone who trusts you and you can trust; someone who will comfort you and accept comfort from you; someone who will confide in you and that you can confide in," Hermione said, her voice saying she felt those very things, and would give it all for him. "Is that what you mean, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry managed to say.

"Then yes, Harry. I love you that way, too."

Harry cleared his throat. "Ron might get jealous, of both of us."

"I know, and that worries me at times," Hermione acknowledged.

"Are you two . . . dating?"

"Sort of." She paused. "We've never actually talked about it."

"Not that it's really any of my business, but are you two, well. . . ."

"Kissing?"

"Well, yes." Harry decided that sounded better than snogging.

"Nothing serious, yet," Hermione said. "Harry, does it bother you than Ron and I might become . . . seriously involved?"

"Not really," Harry said.

"Go on."

"I, well, I hate to sound selfish, but I need you both."

"I know, Harry, and we need you, too," Hermione said gently. "Thank God he can finally admit it," she thought. "How about you, Harry? Are you really over Cho?"

"Oh, yes," Harry said firmly. "No more older women for me!"

Hermione almost giggled. "Oh, and what younger girl are you attracted to?"

"Besides you?" Harry asked, only semi-teasingly.

"Yes, besides me." Hermione paused. "It's not Ginny, is it?"

"Was she serious about Dean?" Harry asked.

"Not really," Hermione answered cautiously. "But I do think, as much as she likes you and is attracted to you, she'd really fall back into her crush if you actually dated at this point, and that wouldn't be good for either of you."

"That's what I thought, too," Harry admitted. "I do hope we can be closer friends, though."

'Yes!' Hermione thought. She really did love Harry platonically, but possessively, yet she still wanted him to have more close friends to rely on. "Is it Luna?"

"That would be nice," Harry told her. "But you don't really like her, do you?"

"I just don't know what to make of her," Hermione admitted. "Ginny says she has a form of Second Sight, which might explain things."

"At least she doesn't think she's a Seer like Trelawney," Harry muttered.

"True," Hermione admitted. "And she does like you, although I don't know if she likes you in that way. And, if she does, she's probably the one girl at school who doesn't care you're, well. . . ."

"The Boy-Who-Lived, or Harry Potter, crazy celebrity," Harry finished drily.

"Exactly. To Luna, you're. . . ."

"Just Harry!"

". . . a boy she wants to be friends with," Hermione said firmly, "maybe more."

"And she won't cry on me so much," Harry added.

Hermione did giggle at that. She wasn't sure what to make of Luna Lovegood, but she knew she didn't like Cho dating Harry. "So, you never said exactly how you did on your O.W.L.s," Hermione said, to change the subject.

"I wrote everyone a real letter, with that copy quill you gave me. Hedwig probably delivered to Remus, Neville, and the Weasleys before going to you and then Luna. He should be at your place any time now."

"Oh, okay. Is there any word on when they might let you go to the Burrow, or is that secret until I get the letter, too?" Hermione asked archily.

"Sorry. I got ten O.W.L.s, but didn't get the O in Potions. The Aurors do allow candidates to test on areas they don't get N.E.W.T.s in, other than Defense. I'm leaving here Saturday, but I'm not certain where I'll be sent."

"Are you going to take the Household Potions class, then?"

"Apparently there were a lot of us who got E's or A's who want to try to become Aurors. Snape is supposed to teach a class for us."

"That should be fun!"

"Hermione," Harry said serious, "don't take it."

"Why not? I don't want to become a Potion Master."

"You deserve a chance at every N.E.W.T. possible. Don't miss out on one because you want to help us in class."

Hermione sighed. "You're probably right."

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry?"

"I . . . I really will need some people I can confide in."

'Harry sounds like he's about to cry,' Hermione realized. 'That's what he really means. He needs someone who can comfort as well as advise him. It can't be anyone but me, not even Luna, for some time yet.' She smiled.

"I love you, Harry," Hermione said. "If I could, I'd come there right now."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Like I said, I'm leaving here Saturday, but I'm not certain where I'm going. I hope you and everyone else can visit me wherever in August."

"If I can, I will be there," Hermione promised. "If it's possible, I will **always** be there for you."

"Thank you," Harry said so sincerely Hermione actually teared up at the sound. If there was one thing that could be said about both Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, it was that they always kept their word.

Chapter 03

Thursday, July 25, 1996

Harry woke up just after dawn, which hadn't happened before that summer. A soft "hoot" from the window gave him a strong hint why. This was a common barn owl, but it was bearing a message.

Harry got up and took the owl's letter and give it one of Hedwig's owl treats. Harry looked around after the owl left, but Hedwig was still delivering his letters. "Probably had to go to Sweden to give Luna hers," Harry muttered. He yawned and opened the letter.

It was from Remus.

Dear Harry:

I was very glad to hear from you. From the look of Hedwig, you decided to catch up on most of your correspondence at once.

What can I tell you about Tomas Zoric? Not nearly enough.

Our year was the most academically competitive in this century. Seven of us competed every year for the top grades on Hermione's level or higher, and there were a few others who gave us competition in different classes (Peter was very good at Care/Creatures for example). I'm sure you can guess at five if not six of us: your parents, Sirius, Severus, Tomas, and myself. You may not have known that Professor Sinistra was in our year as well (I always think of her when I need to remind myself there can be GOOD Slytherins).

I don't remember every year's standings, but I do remember the fifth year totals -- awards for the top grades accumulated in the basic curriculum over the five years are mailed out in early August and they are announced in that Alumni news letter the American exchange students started thirty years ago or so. There is one for each subject, plus one for the top five in the seven core courses (hint: buy at least one present for Hermione, Harry!) That year, the seven of us held the top seven spots in the main seven classes:

<i>DADA.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Charms.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Potions.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Transfiguration</i>
<i>Lupin</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Evans</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Snape.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Potter</i>
<i>Zoric</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Evans</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Zoric.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Black</i>
<i>Snape</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Black.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Zoric</i>
<i>Potter.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Potter.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Potter</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Evans</i>
<i>Black</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Snape</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Sinistra</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Lupin</i>
<i>Sinistra.</i>	<i>Lupin</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Evans.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Snape</i>	
<i>Evans</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Sinistra.</i>	<i>Lupin.</i>	<i>. . .</i>	<i>Sinistra</i>	

Astronomy Herbology . History. . . Final Standing

Sinistra. Evans . . . Lupin. . . . Zoric

Black . . . Zoric . . . Zoric. . . . Black

Zoric . . . Lupin . . . Evans. . . . Lupin

Lupin . . . Snape . . . Sinistra . . . Evans

Potter. . . Black . . . Snape. . . . Potter

Evans . . . Potter. . . Black. . . . Snape

Snape . . . Sinistra. . . Potter . . . Sinistra

We all received O.W.L.s in all our subjects, by the way, although I admit I have forgotten what level everyone earned.

Tomas and I met during our Third year, as we shared Runes and Arithmancy.

We were also prefects together. We were very good friends, although never as close as I was to your father and Sirius and Peter. However, your father and Sirius were closer than twins, and Peter was never an intellectual.

Tomas filled that niche for me. I never told him about my condition, but he was well-able to deduce it himself at some point.

Even though your father replaced me as a prefect due to Sirius' little stunt in Sixth year, every one expected Tomas to be the Head Boy. Why wasn't he? I have always suspected it was due to the fact that he somehow learned exactly what had happened in the tunnel, and appeared at my hearing.

I was almost 'put down' Harry. Having Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, Pomfrey, and my dorm mates testify for me helped, but I have little doubt that Tomas showing up and calmly saying that I was no danger helped save my life. The Zorics have been famous 'dark hunters' for almost a thousand years -- vampire hunters, aurors, hit wizards, etc. I really think the Governors deliberately skipped over him, although at least that made your father head boy.

In case you're wondering, your parents reconciled Sirius and myself just before the start of our Seventh year.

I've run into Tomas a number of times since we left Hogwarts. He is really hard to know. He had one sibling, a very sweet younger sister who was two years behind us. She was killed over the Easter break our Seventh year, when the Muggle-born's family she was visiting was killed. And yes, I was dating her at the time. Tomas had always been reserved, if not stoic, but he partially retreated, at least to everyone except his wife. He married a really sweet Hufflepuff who was two years behind us and his sister's other best friend just a few weeks before your parents were killed. Even though she was injured in that same Death Eater attack and her health has steadily declined, they still managed to have one child (I think she starts next year) and have wardship over three magical orphans. The youngest two are both Hufflepuffs, a year behind you, the oldest left school the year before I taught.

I trust Tomas. He no doubt appears an unfeeling person; I can assure you, he is not. He has trained himself to give little away in most situations. I wish I could act as your tutor, but the current regulations make that difficult, as Tomas may act in part as your magical guardian (in case you haven't heard the details, however, Dumbledore twisted enough arms to get me a one-year reappointment as the DADA instructor). Failing my taking on the role, I am glad that Dumbledore has managed to recruit Tomas. He is an incredibly powerful and well-rounded wizard. With his auror and detective background, he will teach you and protect you. And, to be frank, I doubt if any Death Eater who knows of him (and most probably do) would want to tangle with him, one-on-one.

I hope to see you on your birthday, and failing that, my owl will find you. I have already told the Headmaster that I will be giving you the passwords to my inner office and my private rooms. I will not permit a situation to arise like it did at the end of your last term. I am certain either Tomas or I will always be available for you to consult. Since he was an auror, take Tomas' advice on your classes over mine, but I recommend Muggle Studies and, if you're really interested in it, Basic Medicine. Otherwise, I suggest Creatures.

I can never replace Sirius, any more than Sirius could replace James. I swear that I love you, Harry, and have since before you were born. I accepted the position at Hogwarts your Third year not because I love to teach, for although I do I knew that I would be exposed and be hurt at some point. I came because I love you, and I tried to protect you. I failed. Sirius and I failed you last year. This time, I will be there for you as you need me. I will do my best not to fail you again.

love
Remus

Harry considered what Remus said, and decided he should sleep on it a while.

A few minutes before 8:00, Professors McGonagall and Snape met at the entrance to the Headmaster's Office. "Any idea what pleasant subject we shall be discussing so early this morning?" Snape inquired with just a slight sneer in his voice. He had been summonsed to several low-level meetings with the Death Eaters. The stress of the various possible scenarios were affecting him more than he had remembered.

"Not really," McGonagall replied. "I just know he wanted us a few minutes before the hour. Jelly babies." The entrance opened, and they ascended.

"You wished to see us, Headmaster?" McGonagall asked as they entered the office proper.

"Yes, I do," he replied. "I am certain you have speculated why, and perhaps reached a conclusion?"

"Let me guess," Snape said, with a sneer that was rarely used in front of the Headmaster, "Potter needs yet more favoritism?"

Dumbledore raised his hand, preventing McGonagall from commenting. "He needs more help. There is a difference. If you prefer being ruled by Voldemort, you may leave. If you still dislike that possibility, you may stay."

"I resent that!" Snape stated, flushing slightly. "I would hope that you would remember that I opposed relying too much on this prophecy even before I knew what it said or who made it!"

He turned to McGonagall. "We may disagree about many things -- perhaps even most things - - but I think we both believe that even the greatest prophecy at best outlines the most probable course of events. A prophecy is not fate!"

"You know he's right, Albus," McGonagall said softly. "While I disagree with Severus -- I think we must give Harry all the help we can -- we cannot rely totally on his defeating He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"We are not," Dumbledore retorted. "In both veins, I hope we are going to have a special consultant staying with us. In part, he will be tutoring Harry this summer. If he stays with us over the next year or two, he will also provide a set of very capable eyes, and help with the Defense class when necessary."

"Why would we need help with Defense?" Snape demanded. "Who have we been stuck with this time?"

"The Ministry have given us a variance on some of their sillier rules, so we will have a returning professor."

Snape struggled to his feet. "**NO!**"

"Really!" McGonagall enthused. "How wonderful!"

"It is **not** wonderful! He could kill or infect someone!"

"Hopefully, the potion will be more effective this time. . . ."

"It only partially failed once! And he didn't take it that last time!" Snape sat back in his chair and pouted. "If he wasn't so dangerous, I would refuse to make it!"

"Perhaps I shall make it, if you find yourself incapable," a deep, expressionless voice from the doorway almost snarled.

"Ah! Tomas. . . ." Dumbledore started.

"Zoric! What are you doing here?"

"I work here."

Dumbledore beamed, and McGonagall smiled. "I am glad you are taking us up on the offers," Dumbledore said with great sincerity.

"Having met him, I believe I have no alternative."

"I suppose that blasted boy has you wrapped around his little finger, too," Snape complained.

Zoric looked down at him. "You are an incompetent, bigoted ass." Somehow, the near-expressionless tone made the statement seem very factual.

Snape bounced up again. "How dare you. . . ."

Zoric turned to Dumbledore, cutting Snape off. "You know that I have two wards attending the school, plus one that recently left. I became very concerned about some of the things they have told me, so I have done a little research. Do you know, only one teacher's marks do not seem to predict his students' performances on the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s to any degree? For every other professor, even the Divination professor, nearly every student who scores over a 96 every term scores an O.W.L.; students who constantly score over a 93 have a 91% chance of scoring their O.W.L., and almost no student who scores under an 81 in both their Fourth and Fifth year ever makes the O.W.L. And yet this professor's House constantly underperforms in the O.W.L.s based on their grades in his subject, and the other Houses vastly outscore their grades."

"Now see here. . . ." Snape stabbed Zoric in the chest with his finger.

It was as if a statue had sprung to life. A look of great anger and greater disgust went over Zoric's features, and he grabbed Snape's wrist, twisting it behind his back and forcing Snape over Dumbledore's desk, all in one smooth, brisk motion.

McGonagall exhaled in shock, and Dumbledore leapt to his feet. "I have learned how you 'taught' Potter Occlumency," Zoric snarled in a tone that worried Snape, frightened McGonagall, and startled all three, including Dumbledore. "If you mastered it being taught that way, you are truly a prodigy. If you didn't, you are a disgrace."

"Let him go, Tomas," Dumbledore ordered. Zoric twisted and flung Snape effortlessly into a chair. He recaptured his mask, which sent chills into all three. "No one 'wraps me' around anything, Snape." He looked up at Dumbledore. "I will tutor the boy. I will defend the boy."

"And what does that mean?" Snape demanded, massaging his wrist.

"You are a native speaker of English. My meanings should be plain."

"It could also mean you are accepting him as an apprentice," Snape said snidely.

"It could at that," Zoric mused. "I will think upon it."

Snape's and McGonagall's eyes grew wide -- the relationship between a Master and Apprentice was a sacred one, if one that was rarely invoked anymore in Western Europe at this level. And Tomas Zoric's reputation was such that few wizards, other than Voldemort, would care to tangle with his apprentice.

"Well, at least that would get the boy out of this school," Snape muttered.

"Not necessarily," Dumbledore stated. "The Master may use others to tutor or teach the Apprentice, although he must closely supervise that instruction."

"I see no advantage to making Voldemort think Potter is weaker than he is," Zoric mused. "The boy is incredibly powerful for his age -- I have never seen anyone like him. Not a brilliant scholar, but lots of raw power."

"But he thinks he is responsible for everything that goes wrong," McGonagall commented.

Snape snorted at that. "He does, Severus," she insisted. "He doesn't seek out the limelight, like his father, but in this one respect, you are right. He does think it always comes down to him."

"Is that why he fouled up so badly in June?" Snape demanded. "I will grant you, he had little choice but to inform me in front that . . . that . . . woman. Why couldn't he then leave things well-enough alone? If he had just stayed put. . . ."

"What?" McGonagall demanded. "What consequence do you regret?"

"I admit it, I hated Sirius Black since our mothers tried to make us friends in the crib," Snape answered, pain in his voice. "He and Potter were everything I dislike in a wizard of any background. But I did not want either of them dead."

"Leaving that one horrible aspect aside," Dumbledore added, "Harry's invasion had many more positive consequences than negative. It exposed Voldemort's return and led to the capture of the most influential Death Eater. . . ."

"I'm surprised he's still in jail," Snape muttered.

"As I am," Dumbledore admitted. "Still, that is not a bad thing. It gave Harry three more allies, and he needs close friends. It humiliated the remaining core of the Death Eaters -- to be fought to a draw by six students! And best of all, it exposed Voldemort's greatest weakness as far as his followers are concerned."

"And what is that?" Snape demanded. "Why wasn't I told?"

"I was hoping you would learn it through the meetings," Dumbledore admitted. "Still, since you have not, it is time to tell you. Tell me, what sort of ancestries do the Death Eaters look down upon?"

"Muggle-born, Squib-born, Half-bloods, Mixed-bloods, and of course Half-breeds of all types," Snape answered.

"Now, Bellatrix Lestrange insulted Harry by calling him a Half-blood, but of course he is not. By that nomenclature, he would be a Mixed-blood, the child of a wizard and a Muggle-born witch. Tom Riddle was a Half-blood; his mother was a witch, but his father was a Muggle."

Both Snape's and Zoric's eyes grew large. "No!" Snape said in horror.

"Yes. Voldemort was Tom Marvolo Riddle when he was a student here. His father was a pure Muggle, not even a squib."

Snape smiled evilly. "Does anyone else know this for certain on His side?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "Pettigrew does; I do not know if any others do. Malfoy of course knows Voldemort's real name, but may not know his background, although his father was a fellow Slytherin with Riddle."

"That should be sufficient."

Zoric looked at them all. "Plot and plan all you wish. I will speak with the boy this afternoon." He strode from the room.

"I remember him being smart," Snape said, "but is he really as tough and powerful as his reputation?"

"He can defeat anyone allied or following Voldemort except the Dark Lord himself," Dumbledore stated. "And if he can't kill Voldemort, I think he can at least hold his own long enough to escape. He is what Harry needs, someone who respects him, but doesn't love him."

Snape looked at Dumbledore in surprise, but then he understood. After all, Dumbledore loved even a former Death Eater like himself. Dumbledore could only love those he trusted first. He had helped Snape more than Snape thought he deserved. Realizing that Dumbledore also loved, and therefore trusted, the boy, explained a lot.

"If I might be excused, Headmaster, I wish to review Zoric's allegations. You know why my cover requires me to act as I do. However, if the gap is as wide as he stated, I will strive to modify the effects."

"It should be easier to do so, now that Harry will be in a class of like-minded students."

Snape gave a twisted smile, bowed, and left.

"Daddy's. . . ." The teen's enthusiastic welcome died on her lips. Her guardian was still in 'work mode' as he strode angrily into the anonymous London suburb a little after 9:00.

Tomas realized his error at once. He halted, and took a deep breath. Animation seeped into his face and body language. He opened his eyes. "Sorry, Princess. It's been a rough morning already."

Ginny Driver smiled. Her guardian could be a very intimidating man, especially when he was in what his family called his 'business' or 'work mode', or 'wearing the mask.' "That's okay, Daddy."

"Where are your sisters and mother?"

"In the retiring room," Ginny answered. The injured Mona Zoric only came down to the sunny ground-floor room on her 'good days.'

Tomas smiled. "Great. I need to talk to all of you." Ginny wrapped her arm around her guardian's waist and he draped his arm over her shoulder.

Mona looked up from her Victorian 'fainting' couch and gave her husband and ward a large smile. Ginny was the 'daddy's girl', bright and bouncy, while Georgia Anderson was the 'mummy's girl', stylish and attempting to be sophisticated. Their natural daughter, Irena, was everyone's favorite and yet not-quite spoiled.

"What brings you back?" Mona asked. "I thought you were on assignment all summer?"

"I am, but I did say I would probably be able to pop in a lot."

"So, just here for a short 'pop,' Pop?" Ginny asked with a leer.

"You have been watching too many old American television programs again," Tomas said as he pretended to cuff the back of her head. "Shoo, girls; I do have to talk to your Mum. That's talk, you little perv." Irena giggled.

Georgia stood with her practiced languid movement. "Father, you know we're both all talk, no action."

"Considering you both just turned fifteen, I would hope so," Tomas growled. "Shoo!" Ginny pulled his collar, and all three girls kissed his cheek as they left.

Mona patted the couch. "So, can you tell me about your secret assignment?"

Tomas sat. "Harry Potter."

Mona's eyes went wide. "Oh, my!" She thought a moment. "So, is he crazy or a super hero?"

"Neither. He's an extraordinarily powerful, fairly bright, confused and abused boy."

"Abused?"

"Abused," Tomas confirmed. "Those Muggle relatives of his should be convicted of mental and emotional child abuse."

"Why hasn't Dumbledore done anything about it? Why hasn't someone else?"

Tomas sat. "It's complicated. Harry was never really physically abused, so it never triggered the wards. And his relatives hate magic so much, it was difficult for us to intrude. What puzzles me is why the Muggle authorities never caught on." He frowned. "They dressed him poorly, in his much larger cousin's cast-offs and they never fit. Harry was never starved, but he was not well-nourished. The difference between the two boys, who were in the same class, should have triggered investigations. I went so far last week as to break into his schools and read his records. I found his teachers and district workers repeatedly wrote margin notes, which they then erased or crossed out. Dumbledore was shocked when I told him -- he was never made aware of the problems, because the problems were ignored."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know if anyone did it," Tomas admitted. "I next questioned six different people -- three teachers, two district visitors, and a school head. As best I can tell, they changed their minds in real time. That excuses for the problems would simply pop in their head."

Mona was a very pale brunette, but somehow she became even more pale. "It sounds like Higher Magic."

"It does. And it made me feel like I need to help him."

"How did it start?"

"Dumbledore asked me to consider to act as Harry's tutor and bodyguard. I didn't want to do either, but I agreed to do some background work. I investigated Harry for two weeks; that's when I investigated his Muggle school background and such. I was confused; I still didn't really want to work for Dumbledore at Hogwarts past this summer, let alone babysit Potter. Then I met him Monday."

Tomas looked out into space. "Mona, that boy. . . ." He shrugged. "Just one look, and I simply told him I would tutor him for the year, if he would work with me. He's pretty depressed from the events of the last year or so, and from having to go back to those . . . people."

"What can you tutor him about during the summer?" Since Harry was under 17, he of course could not use any 'active magic.'

"Occlumency."

"Ah. That makes some sense, but why does he need to learn . . . oh, wait . . . He's still after Harry, right?"

"What's more, Harry has some sort of connection to Him, through that curse scar. Harry could sense Him, and sometimes even His thoughts, but the Dark Lord learned about that close connection last winter. That's how He lured the students to the Ministry last month."

"Is he learning anything yet?" She knew Occlumency could be difficult.

"Severus Snape gave him some half-ass lessons. It only took me one day to straighten Harry out, and after a mere three days, he's as good as most Auror candidates are after the full three months' training -- and Snape's training held him back more than it helped."

"Very impressive," Mona admitted. "So, what are you going to do for him? Or can't you tell me?"

"Not yet. It would be nice if he could spend some time with us in August at the coast, but I don't know if that would be a good idea or not."

"I don't know, Tomas. Could we trust him with the girls. . . ."

"As shy as he is, we would have to worry more about what the girls would do to him, but that is a consideration."

"Shy?" The idea that The-Boy-Who-Lived might be shy had never occurred to her.

"Painfully shy. Still, think about it but don't mention it yet. I have a place to take him to next week, and hopefully one or more of his friends will be able to come. I shall watch them interact."

"I have the feeling I have an assignment, too," Mona teased. She knew where her husband would take Harry to train him, since it had been her dowry.

"Talk to the girls about him. They're only a year behind him, after all, and even if he's in a different House, they must have opinions, even if they might not be well-informed ones. Also, see if they know anything about his friends."

"Names, dear? Or is this a blank slate?"

"Ask first, but the names I am most interested in are Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Neville Longbottom, Gryffindors from Harry's year; and two girls from Ginny and Georgia's year. Ginny Weasley, Gryffindor, and Luna Lovegood, Ravenclaw."

"Ginny Weasley is a popular tom-boy type," Mona said. "Our Ginny admires her because she took Potter's place as the Gryffindor seeker after Umbridge banned him. If Luna is who I think she is, she's an eccentric, even by your House standards." Mona Osgood had been a Hufflepuff and liked teasing her husband. "Her father runs that silly Quibbler."

"That might pose some problems. I asked Mike to check out her location; Harry thinks she might be in Sweden. I have to check in with him before I go to Harry's at One." Mike was one of Tomas' junior agents.

"So, when will we see you again?"

"Hopefully before Monday, but I'm not sure when." He leaned over and kissed his wife.

"Try to eat some lunch, dear," Mona reminded him.

"I'll do my best. I doubt if Mike has a long report."

"Go! Go! Go! Go!" the three girls chanted while Tomas captured his mask. While they disliked seeing their father walk in with the mask, they got a kick out of seeing him 'put it on.'

Tomas bowed stiffly to the three girls and walked out of the house's side door. He locked the door with a charm and disappeared to meet his agent. He was early, but he preferred being early for everything; something very few people knew.

Tomas was meeting Mike in a run-down area of back alleys in the East End. He popped into existence, invisible to any Muggle and to almost any wizard's eye, a trick that few could ever master.

Five minutes later, Mike appeared, fifteen minutes early. Tomas stayed invisible.

Less than two minutes later, three others appeared, all wearing hooded cloaks. "You're cutting things close," Mike protested.

"Then talk quick," one of the wizards snarled, with a Canadian accent. "What's your boss on about?"

"I don't know," Mike answered. "He just asked me to find out the location of a Hogwarts student."

"Is it Potter or Granger?" another wizard demanded.

"No, Luna Lovegood."

"Is that The Quibbler editor's brat?" the first wizard asked, puzzled. "Why her?"

Mike shrugged. "Don't know."

"Maybe she was the one we couldn't identify who was with Potter in the Ministry," the second wizard mused.

"Find out," the third wizard said, speaking for the first time. Tomas thought for a moment it was Lucius Malfoy. Then he realized that this did not sound like the Lucius Malfoy of today, but of Lucius Malfoy as he remembered him when he was a student a few years ahead of him at Hogwarts. Despite the hood on the cloak, Tomas managed to confirm this was Draco Malfoy.

Malfoy tossed Mike a small money bag. "Fifty galleons. Have better information next time." The three Death Eaters disappeared.

Tomas waited just over a minute, then simulated apparating in.

"Chief! You're early!"

"So are you," Tomas said in his usual toneless voice. "What's wrong? You look . . . ill."

"I'll take some pepper-up when I get home," Mike said, covering for himself well.

"Did you find Miss Lovegood's location?"

"Not exactly; she and her father will be coming back from Sweden Saturday, most likely to their cottage near Ottery St. Catchpole."

"Thank you, Mike."

Tomas turned, as if to walk away.

"Say, chief. . . ."

"Yes, Mike?" Tomas turned and stared.

"Err, not that it's any of my business. . . ."

"But you are interested in knowing why I wished to know Miss Lovegood's location." Tomas made full eye contact as he said this, and had seized access to Mike's mind, although the young agent didn't realize it.

"It was just an off-the-books job, so I wondered."

"So it was. By the way, what do you call giving information on my work assignments? Is that something new?"

"No different than all the other times," Mike confirmed, shocked he would reveal his activities. It suddenly occurred to him that something was forcing him to tell the truth.

"Sorry I ever trusted you," Tomas said, exploding two key arteries inside Mike's brain. He collapsed.

Tomas started to turn, then remembered that Mike had no close relatives. He retrieved the money bag, and decided he had just enough time to summons the Aurors. He would tell them Mike had been free-lancing, and Mike had asked to meet him because he might have incriminating information on Draco Malfoy.

Chapter 04

"Right on time, Mister Zoric," Harry said as he opened the door. Harry had noticed his tutor liked being early. This was the first time he hadn't at least appeared to be early.

"I had an exceptionally busy morning today, Harry."

"What are we doing today?"

"Talking, then just more Occlumency practice."

Harry turned to his tutor and cocked his head. "Talk? About what?"

"Let us sit down, Harry," Zoric said, leading him into the front room. After they sat facing each other, Zoric asked, "Would you say anyone is your close friend other than the five who went with you to the Ministry?"

"No," Harry replied. "Ron is my best friend, and Hermione is almost as close, maybe closer in a few ways. I really like Neville and Ginny, especially since they don't seem as . . ."

"In awe of The Boy-Who-Lived as they used to be?" Zoric supplied, when Harry couldn't.

"Exactly."

"And may I assume that your interest in Miss Lovegood is more than just friendly?"

Harry blushed very slightly.

"I take that for a yes. Now, if I can arrange it, would you like any or all those five to be with you for your birthday?"

"Yes," Harry answered, "please!" the eagerness in his voice pulling on Tomas' hidden heart strings. He wondered if the boy had ever had a birthday party. Probably not since his first birthday.

"I take it Longbottom is just a friend and dorm mate, not a really close friend, then?"

"Yeah, I think that's about right, although I'd say he's becoming a close friend."

"I can't promise, but I think I can get Longbottom and probably both of the Weasleys for your birthday. Granger and Lovegood will be a bit more difficult. I will also probably take you out of the country in August, but I'm not certain where, or which, if any, of your friends, may come with you. We shall see how we fare in getting Miss Lovegood next week and how things go then. She may be in danger." Tomas had managed to stop by his office, and had sent three of his more trusted agents to Sweden.

"Why?" Harry demanded. "How. . . ?"

"I have just learned that the Death Eaters had not identified her as being with you in the Ministry, the only one they had not identified in fact. Her name came up as a possibility, and I have little doubt they will start investigating the idea in a day or so."

The remains of Harry's blush disappeared, and he went very pale. "How do you know? And what can we do to stop them?"

'Yes indeed,' Tomas thought, 'the boy really likes her.' "I needed to find out where she was, to invite her to your birthday. I used one of my new agents to find out. I learned this morning that he was selling the information to the Death Eaters."

"I'll kill him!" Harry shouted, jumping to his feet more from the intense emotions than from any idea he could do anything about it.

"Too late, Harry."

It took Harry a few seconds to register what Zoric had said. Then, his eyes went very wide and he collapsed in his chair. "You mean. . . ."

"I killed him. I was eavesdropping at the meeting. Unfortunately, he was meeting with two other Death Eaters as well as young Draco Malfoy, so I could do nothing to them. Technically, I am guilty of murder, so I must ask you not to mention this to anyone. Ever."

Harry looked at Zoric in amazement.

Zoric's face was still, as it almost always had been in Harry's presence. "I am not proud of what I did, Harry. I felt I had little choice. This is war."

"Why?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"In part because he betrayed my trust. In part because I learned he had been feeding information to the Malfoys for some time, and he was about to go on assignment to protect Ministry families -- my firm was awarded a sub-contract. In part because he had put Miss Lovegood in greater danger. In part because he put you in greater danger. In part because he knew the location of one of my safe houses, although I divined he had not yet revealed it. In part because there was no advantage to letting him live. In part, to be honest, because I had the opportunity to kill him and get away with it. No one or even three items warranted his death. All of them together, well, I can not undo it."

Harry just looked at his tutor. "And Malfoy?"

"I told the Aurors my agent was investigating him as a possible sympathizer. That might put a little pressure on him. I shall also notify Dumbledore and Snape. I would advise you and your friends not to trust him."

"We've never liked him, let alone trusted him," Harry assured his tutor. Tomas thought Harry sounded a bit like James Potter talking about Snape. "I guess I should thank you for . . . protecting Luna," Harry went on.

"I have sworn to teach and protect you, Harry Potter." Zoric stood and handed Harry a small pamphlet. "Read this over; it is another possibility. If you think you might be interested, we

will decide together if it will work. Talk to your friends Weasley and Longbottom about it. . .
."

"Why not Hermione?" Harry asked.

"She is . . . not wizard-raised. She will understand the words, of course, but cannot feel the social and personal implications. If she spends any more time than just your birthday with you, then you of course can inform her, and Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley, and solicit their opinions as well."

Harry looked at the title: The Magical Apprenticeship What it Means.

"Shall we begin your lessons, Harry? Or do you have relevant questions?"

"I would be your apprentice?"

"Yes. I would be your mentor for at least five years. It would not conflict with your school work or Auror training. As you would live with me at least for the next two summers, I would have to talk it over with my wife. I doubt your Muggle guardians will mind."

"Away from here!" Harry said softly to himself.

"Don't do it for that reason, Harry. Read the pamphlet."

"What does Dumbledore say?"

"This isn't about what Dumbledore says or thinks anymore. This is about what is best for you."

"Me Harry, or me the boy who will have to fight Voldemort?"

"I said we would decide together, Harry. Those two Harrys are not easily separated, even by you. I do promise that if you say no at any point up to the contract-signing, I will drop the idea with no hard feelings."

"Alright. I'll read it, and let you know after my birthday."

"Fair enough. Now, let us set to work."

Harry and Tomas were pleased with Harry's work over the next two days. Harry was shocked to learn he had already slightly exceeded the minimum Occlumency standards for the Aurors. As long as he faithfully did his exercises every day, he would become stronger. That left Harry wondering what other things he might learn that summer.

Harry wrote the Dursleys a note, reminding them he was gone for the rest of the summer. Zoric said they would be leaving by 9:00 am, so Harry was ready to go at 8:00. Sure enough, at 8:20 the magical doorbell rang.

"Mister Zoric!" Harry said happily, mostly because he was so happy he was leaving the Dursleys, perhaps for the last time. He was so glad to be going that he hadn't felt at all depressed since his telephone conversation with Hermione. He understood that it would likely still return at times, but he wasn't worried about that now.

"Everything packed, Harry?"

Harry stared. Zoric's voice had been warm and friendly, his face animated. Zoric grinned. "This is the real me, Harry. I have developed a series of mental exercises and charms that allows me to do my work. These do not suppress emotions, but the outward expression of emotions only. Watch."

Harry watched the expression drain from his tutor. "Would you prefer this most of the time? Or primarily only when I am instructing?"

"Whichever you prefer, sir."

Tomas' expressions returned. "Now, have you packed everything?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you mind if I double-check the house? You may never return, after all?"

"No, sir. Go ahead."

Zoric pulled out a small device. He ran it over Harry's trunk and knapsack, then Hedwig and her cage, then finally Harry and himself. "Magic detector," he explained. "I've eliminated our traces. Let's tour the house."

Harry had left nothing, but Tomas found a small box of magical photos tucked away under a pile of other boxes in the basement and a strong box that later turned out to have a few of his parents' possessions in it in the attic. Zoric added both to Harry's things. There were a few items with residual magic, but these really did belong to the Dursleys (the electric fireplace, a few pieces of jewelry, and other such items that had had strong magic used on them, but which were not enchanted).

"Do you have any preference where we go shopping, Harry?" Tomas asked as they were going through the house.

"We're not going to Diagon Alley?"

"Not today. We're getting you things like underwear and shirts. Diagon Alley prices are higher than Muggle stores.

"Any place is fine. . . ." Harry started, then he got a really evil look on his face.

"What?" Tomas asked.

"May we shop here in Little Whinging?" Harry asked.

Tomas frowned in confusion. "Why?"

"The Dursleys have always said that I'm abnormal, and they dressed me that way. Since I don't want to come back next summer for a month. . . ." he trailed off.

Harry was meandering again, Tomas noted. Still, he put the ideas together. "Very well, if they have a place to get eye glasses in an hour."

"They do," Harry said. "They just finished a major restoration of the High Street and a new optometrist opened two weeks ago, although I'm not sure if we can shop there. I mean, where would we put everything?"

"I can drive an auto," Tomas said with a growl. The pair moved Harry's trunk and boxes to the magically expanded boot of the small sedan Tomas was driving. Tomas whispered to Hedwig, and sent her off to meet them later.

Harry had a good time shopping, coming away with a complete set of clothes, from trainers, boots, and socks all the way up to a denim jacket. Harry also bought three pair of glasses. One pair was a set of wrap-around goggles (which he hoped he could use for Quidditch), and Zoric arranged for them to be mailed to his office, as those would not be ready until the following week. Since Harry had a common prescription, his other glasses were ready that morning.

Some of the tradespeople had looked at Harry a bit strangely, knowing the stories the Dursleys had spread. Tomas let it be known that Harry's private school had arranged to remove him from the Dursleys' care because of the poor performance of their parental duties. While certainly not usual, the Dursley's lack of local popularity inclined everyone to believe the story.

"Where to next?" Harry asked a few minutes before noon, as they drove into a rather deserted, run-down manufacturing area a few miles away from Little Whinging.

"Don't blink," Tomas said as he touched a button on the console. Harry felt the port-key effect, and in a blink the car was somewhere else.

"Where are we?"

"We're on a small, unplottable island off the coast of Scotland," Zoric answered. "Part of my wife's inheritance. It's not huge, some one by three miles, but there's a depression where you can safely fly, and a manor house where we can stay. Underage magic can't be detected here, either. Why don't we get you lunch, and the house elves can get you settled. You can fly this afternoon while I go back and see if I can arrange for any of your friends to be here for your birthday."

Harry quirked a grin. "Hermione will want to free your house elves."

"I'll warn them," he replied as two elves popped up. "Please take Mister Harry's things to the east suite, then show him where to eat, and then where he can fly." He turned to Harry. "Go. Shoo. Eat! Fly!"

Harry's smile widened, and he followed the elves.

Harry was still smiling at 6:30, as he looked for the dining room in the manor house. He had flown all afternoon, and was slightly sun-burnt. He had found it very easy to do the basic Occlumency exercises while flying the oval flight path and had lost himself in the meditation. He'd barely had time to shower and dress.

As he bounced into the dining room, Harry was surprised to see two people. "Neville!"

"Hi ya, Harry!" Neville said enthusiastically. "Thanks for getting me out of the house! Gran was driving me crazy!" He looked at Harry. "New glasses?"

Harry just nodded. "Now, I shall trust you two boys to behave tonight," Tomas told them tonelessly. "We shall have dueling practice tomorrow morning at Nine. At Ten, we will have Occlumency practice. Please remember our location is rather remote. Don't send the house elves off to get things unless you absolutely need them. Try and phrase requests so that, if they can be filled later, the elves have time to work on the problem."

"Yes, sir!" Harry stated.

"Ring the bell when you're ready to eat, and try to have some fun, just not too much."

"Yes, sir!" Harry answered. Tomas bowed stiffly to the boys, and disappeared.

"Harry!" Neville said, in a sort of awed whisper.

"Yeah?"

"That's Tomas Zoric!"

"Yes, I know."

"Harry! He's . . . well, he's more famous than you are!"

"Neville!"

"I'm sorry, Harry, I know you don't like it. But he was one of the most famous Aurors in the last war with You-Know-Who!" Neville's lips trembled a little. "It was he and Moody who led the capture of the Lestranges."

Harry walked over and gripped Neville's shoulder. "I understand, Neville."

Neville looked up at Harry, and the enthusiasm slowly came back into his voice. "He broke up a couple of smuggling rings as a detective, and solved at least three murders and a famous kidnapping before the Aurors could. He was also in a famous stand-off, that was right before the attack on my parents. A bunch of Aurors and nearly all the hit-wizards in Western Europe had a group of sympathizers trapped. On the third day of the stand-off, he somehow got in and captured all of them."

Harry was impressed.

"You probably know he runs the only real wizarding detective agency in Europe."

Harry nodded. "He told me."

Neville shook his head. "I was really surprised to meet him today." Neville looked up at Harry. "Thanks for wanting me here."

"You know you're my friend," Harry replied. "Hopefully, he can at least get the others for my birthday."

"Which others?" Neville asked. "Mister Zoric said you would tell me."

"Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Luna," Harry answered. "He said it would be easiest to get you, Ron, and Ginny. I'm glad you could come early."

"I wonder why he didn't bring Ron and Ginny, then?" Neville wondered.

"Mrs. Weasley might have things for them to do, or maybe she didn't want Ron to come without Ginny, and wouldn't let Ginny come where she'd be out-numbered by boys without a chaperon."

Neville blushed.

"You really like Ginny, huh, Neville?"

Neville nodded. "I hope you don't mind, Harry. . . ."

"Neville, I really like Ginny, but not so much that way."

"Luna?" Neville asked.

"I hope so," Harry answered. "I guess we're kind of in the same boat where girls are concerned, huh?"

Neville smiled. "I guess so."

Harry gripped his friend's arm and turned him towards the table. "Let's see what we're being served."

As soon as Harry lit the candles in his bedroom, Hedwig and Pig called his attention to the window, demanding entrance. Pig and Hedwig both had two letters. Pig took off as soon as Harry gave him an owl treat and he got a sip of water. Hedwig went into her cage, but seemed pleased Harry didn't have to shut the door.

Pig's longer letter was from Ron:

Harry!

Mum says I can stay with you starting Monday, for as long as your 'wizard guardian' allows. 'Wizard guardian'? Who's that? Well, I guess I'll find out Monday. Mum did say Ginny and I should bring our brooms, so that will be fun.

That's right, Ginny will be coming, too. I gather there aren't any women or 'close adult supervision' about wherever you are right now, so Mum wouldn't let Ginny go today, and I can't go until she does. Ginny was already warned she might have to come back early if Hermione can't join us. Sounds like a strange set-up, but if Mum and Dad (especially Mum!) approve, I'm sure it will be alright.

Isn't it great having a summer without homework? I actually broke down and helped Ginny a bit with her charms and transfiguration work, but don't tell Hermione. I was worried a lot of blokes would be owling her (Ginny that is), but so far it's just Neville, so no worries there, if you're at all interested. You do still like girls, right? And if Cho's out, who else would you want to go with? Someone loser like Loony or that Marietta? Just give it some thought, mate. Seeing Ginny date anyone wouldn't be easy, but at least I know I can trust you!

*See you Monday!
Ron*

Harry grinned at Ron's attempt to play matchmaker, although he really wished he wouldn't call Luna 'Loony.'

Dear Harry

Thanks for the letter! Harry, let me ask you straight, are you interested in me, or is Ron just being a prat? Harry, I admit that I had a huge crush on you for years (I know, not news, right?), and I still like you. But I realized last summer that I cannot really try to date you while I am under a wizard's debt to you. I would always wonder if I was dating you because I really like you, or because of that silly crush, or because I owe you my life.

I have thought a lot about you, and other boys, this month. I'm not in love with anyone, but there are three or four boys I wouldn't mind dating, one of whom is you. If only because Ron won't hex you, like he might Colin, Neville, or Scott (he'll be a 7th year Hufflepuff, if you don't know him).

I'm being up-front with you, Harry. Please do the same for me when I see you Monday.

In any event, I will always be

*your friend
Ginny*

Harry frowned. "Hedwig, do you feel like taking a quick note to Ginny? You'd have to get there by dawn Monday."

Hedwig looked at Harry, then hopped out of her cage, spreading her wings.

"Honestly, you don't have to. I can wait and tell her in person, if you want."

Hedwig gave him a hoot and extended her right leg.

"Okay, okay," Harry said, "I didn't mean to insult you. I just wanted you to have the choice."

Hedwig gave a happy hoot. "Just give me a minute." Harry dug out a quill and ink, then used the blank part of Ginny's letter to write back.

Ginny

*Just a quick note so that you can get this before you leave to come here. You want honest?
Here goes*

If I could date any woman on earth, you'd probably be my second choice. I gather I would be your second, third, or even fourth choice. I don't know if my first choice is interested or not. There is a letter here, unopened, that would tell me, but I won't look until I send this off, because you deserve to know the whole truth. I like you as a person, as a close friend, and I don't want to hurt you.

As for the wizard's debt, who decides if it's paid? Are there rules or something? Because, Ginny, you came with me to save Sirius. You risked your life to save Sirius for me. Do I therefore owe a debt to Neville and Luna? (I guess I must already owe Ron and Hermione). Does that cancel or partially repay your debt to me? Believe me, I'm not making light of the concept, I simply don't understand it. They really need a class for us Muggle-raised to learn such things. If I can't get Neville to explain it to me, maybe you or Ron can.

I hope, no matter what happens, we'll at least be very close friends.

Harry

PS As you might have guessed, Neville is here already, and I don't know about Colin or Scott, but Neville really hopes to see you.

Harry sent Hedwig off, and opened the letter with a totally unknown, masculine handwriting:

Dear Mr. Potter:

I suppose I should mention my gratitude for the interview which sent my subscriptions sky high, so consider that mentioned. I am, instead, writing about my daughter.

All fathers no doubt consider their little girls special, especially if there is only one. My Luna, though, is special. She is not a diviness, but she does have the Sight. She sees things others cannot.

She Sees great pain and anger in you, but she also Sees an even greater capacity for power and love -- and a compassion greater than in anyone else she has ever seen, even in Dumbledore.

Please be careful with my little girl's heart. We are entering a perilous time. Any one of us might not make it out alive. Don't let that rush you into decisions.

I look forward to meeting with you.

*Sincerely,
Henry Lovegood*

'Well,' Harry thought, 'that's . . . interesting.'

Harry finally took the one letter he almost dreaded opening and opened it anyway.

Harry!

I'm glad you did well on your O.W.L.s. I watched your Ravenclaw classmates this May and June, and I must say I do not look forward to the experience. While there are formal revisions for the O.W.L.s in Ravenclaw (so that the 6th and 7th years can review the earlier material as well as tutor the Fifth years) I hope you and perhaps Hermione might tutor me as well. Like most Ravenclaws, I have 10 classes; the usual 7 plus Runes, Divination, and Muggle Studies.

Yes, all my possessions were returned. Did you know you're the only person who has ever offered to help me find them? I mean, one or two of my dorm mates discourage the practice, and Padma Patil does as well, but no one actually offered to help me like you did. That is just one tiny sign of how special a person you are, Harry. And yes, I trust and believe in you, because I find you deserve both. It is not because I believe in you that I will walk with you, to Hogsmeade or beyond, but because you are a wonderful person, waiting and wanting to love and care for people. I will walk with you, Harry, if you really will let me. That also means while you may ask me to stay behind, like you did last month, you will not argue so much if I decide to come with you, as I did last month. If we walk together, Harry, we will be together. That is what you must decide.

We did not locate any Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, but did see a Pufflestump and we think we sighted a swarm of Nargles, so it wasn't a wasted trip.

Whether we walk together or not, I will remain, at the least,

*with much affection,
your friend, no matter what the path
Luna*

Harry reread the letter twice.

Then, he smiled.

Chapter 05

July 28

To Harry's slight surprise, the dueling practice was himself and Neville attacking Zoric. To Zoric's surprise, the students sometimes won. The purpose, Zoric had explained, was not just to learn how to attack in pairs, but to so that, in learning, they would learn how they might be attacked. Death Eaters rarely attacked one-on-one.

Neville watched Harry's Occlumency lesson. Zoric would teach Harry's friends the very basics and see if any had any talent in the area. If Harry and his friends were going to keep ending up in the front lines, they should be prepared, and if any of them had any chance of making Auror, they would have to learn to at least Harry's current level.

Zoric left the two boys alone after practice. Harry took Neville down to the small gym in the manor cellar to work out. Neville's garden work had trimmed him down and built up some real muscles, and Neville enjoyed the workout. After showers and lunch, the two teens went out and sat under a tree. Harry would go flying when the day cooled a little, while Neville would go to look over the small formal garden and the kitchen and medicinal gardens.

"Harry. . . ." Neville started.

"Yeah?"

"You keep looking at me. Is there something you want to say?"

Harry flushed a little under his light sunburn from the previous day. "Sorry, Neville. I was wondering if you could tell me some things about wizarding culture."

"What do you mean?" Neville asked, puzzled.

"Well, the Potter family might have been Pure-bloods for all I know. . . ."

"They were, although not one of the really famous families." Neville reminded himself of Harry's upbringing.

"Anyway," Harry went on, "remember, I'm as Muggle-raised as anyone can get. I don't know much about the cultural ideas, except what I've picked up from you and Ron, or that Binns teaches us by accident."

"True," Neville admitted. "What do you need to know?"

"I need to know about wizarding debts and apprenticeships," Harry replied. "Ginny says she owes me a wizarding debt because I saved her life, and Dumbledore says that Snape owes me a debt because my father saved his life. Does that mean I owe you and the others for following me to save Sirius?" Harry didn't want to mention Wormtail to Neville yet.

"Snape and your father disliked each other, right?" Neville asked.

"They **HATED** each other," Harry replied.

"Then Snape owes the debt because there were no other ties. In fact, he was saved by an enemy, which raises the debt. You inherit the debt, because that level, the highest, is for life unless Snape saves your life and you, as an adult, release him."

"So Snape has to try and save my life until I'm an adult?"

"And until you, as an adult, release him. Most would say that he would have to save you at least once as an adult before you should consider releasing him, but that's up to you. You never **have** to release him."

Harry thought about that. "And Ginny?"

"The same applies to a lesser degree, but it wouldn't be inherited, because of your ties with Ron. Plus, didn't you stay with the Weasleys before you saved Ginny?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I did. They rescued me from the Dursleys the summer before."

Neville pulled out a small pocket notebook and started scribbling. "But you and Ginny weren't friends yet, right?"

"Right," Harry agreed.

"Who rescued you?"

"Fred, George, and Ron."

"Did you give Fred and George your Triwizard money to start that joke shop?"

"I did," Harry admitted. Neville had been one of the twins main victims; Harry hoped Neville didn't hold a grudge.

Neville looked up from his notes after a few moments of study. "Then I'd say there was no wizard debt involved on either side, because of the closeness of you and the Weasleys. As for me, well, you're my friend, and, because of the DA if nothing else, you're something of a mentor. We owe each other our support, and no debts can really be transferred. Just like we don't owe Dumbledore an official debt for saving us at the end."

Harry nodded again. "Maybe you could explain that to Ginny for me."

"She's definitely coming, then?" Neville asked, perking up.

"Yes," Harry said. "We'd just better hope Hermione comes, too."

"Why?" Neville asked, puzzled. "I mean, I like having Hermione around, but. . . ."

"Do you think Ron will let you make time with Ginny if Hermione's not here to distract him?" Harry teased.

Now it was Neville's turn to blush, but he gamely retorted, "I can always wait until you and Ron go flying!"

"No, Ginny might want to fly then, too," Harry pointed out. "You'd better hope Hermione shows up."

"Then you'd better hope Luna does," Neville teased back, "or else you might end up flying solo." Neville then paused a second, then asked, "Do you think Ginny would really be . . . interested?"

"I think so," Harry answered. "I don't think she has a crush or really likes anyone right now, no not even me," Harry stated firmly when Neville tried to interject. "I do think she would like to get to know you more. And, if Ron and Hermione and Luna and I are together, and you two are here, that gives you a chance. Plus, if you talk to her about the debt thing, you have a good topic to start off with, and an excuse Ron will have to accept. It's up to you if it works."

Neville grinned to himself for over a minute, while Harry relaxed, happy he was making a closer friend, and happy he was making Neville happy.

Then Neville recovered slightly. "Why would you want to know about apprenticeships? Full wizard apprenticeships are pretty rare these days in Britain, and I doubt if you'd be doing a trade apprenticeship."

"It was mentioned to me as a possibility, and I had never heard of them," Harry answered.

"Harry, is it Zoric?" Neville asked excitedly.

"Well, yes," Harry admitted.

Neville looked at Harry for a few moments. Then he asked, "Harry, do you really want to be an Auror?"

Harry thought about that before answering. "Not necessarily, I guess. But let's be honest; even if I destroy Voldemort, that would make me a target for any fanatical followers and whoever tries to take his place." Seeing Neville's startled look, Harry scolded him slightly. "Come on, even sleeping as we both do in Binns' class, you have to have noticed there are Dark wizards every few generations. Grindelwald and Voldemort were just a bit worse than the bunch in the nineteenth century."

"True," Neville admitted.

"So I'm always going to be a target. I'd best be prepared."

Neville nodded. "Then let me tell you something, Harry. It goes back to some things Hermione and I talked about during Third year. The Ministry is not the same as the Muggle government."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"It means there're not as many rules governing us as there are the Muggles. If, once we're all adults, you walk up to Malfoy and say, 'Ferret, I'm going to hex you, defend yourself,' and he pulls his wand, you can kill him if he agrees to a formal duel. If he doesn't, you can still hex him, although not kill him. Legally. The Lestranges were not put away because they attacked

my parents, but because they used an illegal curse to do it, and because they also attacked me."

"What are you saying, Neville?"

"I'm saying you don't have to be an Auror to fight evil, Harry. Aurors didn't really exist as we know them until about a hundred and fifty years ago. The International Confederation lays down guidelines, and they and the Ministries try to enforce them, but the old families and clans don't always go along, and don't always have to."

"Take the Auror training," Neville concluded, "but don't feel you have to be an Auror. After all, that's what the Zoric Agency does. If you really want to fight evil," Neville added "fight it on your own terms."

Harry shrugged. "Like I said, I don't think I'm going to have a huge choice. And what else can I do when I'm not? Play Quidditch? I'll never be as tall as Ron or as husky as you or the Weasley twins, but if I get much bigger in either way, I'll be too big to be a professional seeker."

Neville looked at his friend and smiled. Harry had put on several pounds of muscle, but he would still be called lanky (although no longer skinny). And he was still just a little shy of five foot six (Krum's height), but Neville knew there were few really good professional seekers over five foot seven. Harry was right; he was unlikely to ever be a professional seeker. "Don't worry," Neville teased, "you'll always be 'little Harry' to us."

"Git," Harry muttered.

Monday, July 29, 1996

Ron and Ginny arrived early in the morning, just after Harry and Neville had finished their breakfast. Hermione and Luna arrived separately, but still slightly before 10:00.

It was at 10:00, their greetings over, that Tomas assembled them, his 'mask' firmly in place. "Every morning at Eight o'clock, breakfast shall be served. At Nine, we will assemble in the entrance hall. You shall be learning the basics of Occlumency. Mister Potter knows the basics, and will be tutoring you, while I shall be testing you. After a ten minute break, we shall be practicing dueling -- or perhaps we should call it combat? -- from Ten to Eleven. Wednesday evening, there will be a dinner party to celebrate Mister Potter's birthday, along with cake for Mister Longbottom and Miss Lovegood on their birthdays. Several guests may be present at Mister Potter's. By next Saturday afternoon, we shall have discussed possible scenarios for the rest of August. Final decisions will be needed by Sunday, if not before."

"Now, I trust you six be behave yourselves. Underage magic can not be detected by the Ministry, but it will be recorded for me. There are six guest bedrooms, and I expect you to be in yours." All six, except Luna, blushed furiously, and even she lowered her eyes.

"At least I can trust you not to abuse the house elves. Remember, that includes asking them for things difficult to procure on short notices." Tomas turned to Hermione. "That also includes trying to change their world view." Ron grinned, while Hermione frowned.

"Stay out of the bar and wine cellar. If you wish one bottle of wine for dinner to split between the six of you, feel free to request it. I would prefer not to have to stay here with you, and I know you probably feel the same, so we shall try it this way for now. Questions?"

There were none any wanted to ask badly.

"Then I shall see you tomorrow morning. Mister Potter, remember, your life is yours." Zoric bowed. "Have a pleasant day."

"Wow," Ron said. "I'd always heard he was one tough man, but I never thought I'd meet someone so. . . ."

"Intimidating?" Hermione supplied.

"Exactly!" Ron said, while Ginny nodded weakly in agreement. "He could give Snape lessons!"

"Hopefully, he will," Harry muttered.

"What did he mean, that crack about your life?" Hermione asked.

Harry had been wondering the same thing. Then, he realized that these five people were more than his friends, let alone just his followers. They were his family, his support. He would need their help to get through what he had to do. It was up to him to decide what to tell them, not Dumbledore or even Zoric. "Dorsey!" Harry called, startling the four newcomers.

A house elf appeared. "Mister Harry?"

"Would it be possible to have a quantity of iced butterbeer in the card room?"

The elf thought for a moment. "Would it perhaps be better for Mister Harry and his friends to have lemonade and pumpkin juice now, and then have butterbeer during or after dinner?"

"That might be better, especially if we could have the option of one butterbeer each with lunch."

"Would soup, salad, and chicken sandwiches be nice for Mister Harry and friends for lunch?"

Harry looked around, and saw general agreement. "Yes, that would be very nice."

"Then Dorsey will arrange for the usual time." The elf disappeared.

Harry looked at his friends. "There are some things I need to tell you, if you will swear never to discuss them with anyone I don't agree you can talk to. There's also some things I need your advice for."

"Will you let us walk the path with you, Harry?" Luna asked.

"Under those conditions, yes."

"Then I shall walk with you, I shall follow you," Luna said. She looked at the others. "Well? If Harry will treat you as friends and followers, will you follow Harry? We all have some idea where he has to go, what he has to do. I will follow him, and help him. Will you?"

"I don't know why you have to put it like that," Ron almost snapped. "I've been Harry's friend for almost six years."

"But it hasn't always been easy, has it Ronald?" Luna asked. "You dislike metaphors? Fine. Will you fight for Harry? Will you sacrifice for Harry? Will you die for Harry? Will you kill for Harry? I will."

"So will I," Ginny said.

"Ginny!" Ron objected.

"No, Ronald," Luna stated. "This is the time for a free choice. You made one when you were all of what? Eleven or twelve? Now you must make it again. This time, you know what it means. Ginny has faced more than any of us have, except for Harry. None of us are innocents any more. Decide for yourself, not for any of us."

Hermione looked at Ron, then Harry. Neville stood up. "I'll follow you, Harry."

"Well?" Ron demanded, looking at Hermione.

"I've made my decision," Hermione said quietly. "What's yours?"

Ron turned to Harry. "What do you have to say?"

Harry shrugged. "I tried to stop all of you last month. I failed. I can't stop any of you now, but I need to know how far you want to go and you need to know what it all means. Ron, this isn't about friendship. I know you're my friend. It's not about trust. I know I can trust you. It's about what role you want to play in what's coming. That's up to you to decide. You won't be betraying me if you want to stay out of things until you finish Hogwarts, so that you can go the Auror route. But that's about all I'm going to say right now. I don't want to influence any of you."

Harry took a deep breath. "I am going to have to face Voldemort at least one more time. That's all I can say right now. I'll explain what I can, to those who want to come with me. I know you'd all come if I ask you to. I'm not asking. Some of us could easily be killed." Harry looked at Ron. "There is no glory in killing or being killed, Ron. It's just a dirty job that somehow I got stuck with. Part of me would rather none of you were involved, because I don't want you hurt or worse. But I've learned my lesson. When I try to stop you, it makes things worse."

"Now, I'm going to the card room. That's up the stairs, the last door down the right side in the front of the house. If any or all of you decide you don't want to come, that's fine. Stand approximately here and call for Dorsey. She'll come and show you to your room. We'll have lunch at noon, and all meet in the dining hall. Please wait ten minutes or so and really think about it before starting to leave. If you want to argue, do so then." Harry walked past them and then up the stairs.

"What the hell is this all about?" Ron demanded. It was clear he was hurt and confused.

"We've always helped Harry," Hermione told him, "but have we ever really thought things through before hand? We helped, because it was the right thing to do at the time. Now, we won't just be taking a chance on being hurt, there is a good chance if we help Harry, some of us will be killed, or even tortured and killed, and the same for our families. If we go up there to talk with him, there is no turning back, Ron. We're agreeing to do whatever is necessary to help Harry beat He-, well, Voldemort."

The others all flinched slightly.

"If we don't go up, we help him just like we always have, but there will be things he won't tell us. If we do go up, there will still be things he can't tell us. Harry will be our friend if we go up or not. If we do, he will also be our leader, or commander. If things get really bad, he might have to even sacrifice us."

"Hermione!" Ginny objected.

"Provided Harry doesn't go completely over to the Dark, how can he not sacrifice someone for the greater good?" Hermione asked. "He'd hate it, but he might have to. Tell me Ron, what would you do if you found out Percy was secretly a Death Eater?"

"Percy is a git, but he's not. . . ."

"You're probably right, but that doesn't matter. If Percy was a Death Eater, could you turn him over to be executed? Could you kill him yourself? Could any of us ignore someone we loved, our father or beloved, being tortured? These are questions we will likely have to face if we walk up those stairs; these are things Harry has already started to face. Harry realizes he made two mistakes last June. One was going to help Sirius at all when he knew it was part of a trap. He's not likely to fall into that error again. Can we resist the same temptation? Can we withstand that torture ourselves, so that we don't give away Harry's plans?" She looked at all of them. "This has been a very dangerous game we've been playing these last five years. It's no longer a game. It's life or a torturous death for the wizarding world. All of us are going to be part of it. The question is, do we fight it from the inside with Harry, or with everyone else later?"

They all looked at Ron. "I don't know what I would do if I had to face Percy in a fight," he admitted. "Hopefully, the git has learned his lesson. But I know I will stand by Harry."

"I will walk with Harry," Luna said again.

"We will walk with Harry," Hermione amended.

Chapter 06

There were five chairs arranged in front of one. Harry was standing in front of a window, with his back to the room. After they had shuffled in, Harry turned. He gave them a very wan smile. "Part of me is very happy you're all here, and part of me wished none of you were."

"What do you want from us, Harry?" Ron asked. "A blood oath? Hermione can probably cook one up that will make the DA oath look like a child's prank."

"No," Harry answered, talking over the shocked noises of the other four, "Nothing like that. Either we, well, either we trust and, well, love each other, or we don't. No oath can strengthen that; it can only punish us if we fail."

The other five went silent. This was not the angry Harry of the year before. Each was certain that the anger was just under the surface, but that surface was more polished at the moment. More than that, there was something different about Harry's demeanor. It reminded them all more than a little of Dumbledore at his most serious.

"First of all, I have to tell you that the Prophecy wasn't entirely lost, only the official memory of the Prophecy. I'm not going over the details, but there is one important feature of the Prophecy that you do have to know about. This is the first thing that has to be kept secret. Alright?"

All five nodded their heads. Luna and Ginny sat, then the others did as well. Harry leaned on the back of his chair to speak with them."

"I am predicted to be the one who faces down Voldemort. There are only three possible outcomes. He will die, I will die, or we both shall die. He has to find a way to challenge me again, and soon. The longer he puts it off, the more powerful I will be, and the better chance that he will lose."

All five students looked shocked, the three girls looked almost ready to cry.

"That's horrible, Harry," Neville said. "That's a heck of a burden."

"It is," Harry acknowledged. "I've just started to come to terms with the knowledge I have to kill or be killed."

"Now," Harry continued, cutting them all off (except Luna, who merely sat quietly, watching him, her eyes seemingly even larger than usual), "Voldemort no doubt has you each marked for kidnaping and torture, and probably your families as well. He will capture and torture them to get to you, and then torture you to get to me. The only way you can hope for that not to happen to you and your families is to leave after Wednesday and pretend once the school year starts that you hate me, or at least dislike me."

"Do you really think we would do that?" Ron demanded.

"No," Harry admitted. "It would be the sensible thing to do, but none of us, not even Hermione, have ever acted that sensibly."

"Do you really think our turning on you, even if it was for real, would stop Voldemort from going after us and ours?" Hermione asked.

"Well, it would at least lower the probability a little," Harry said. "It would turn his attention elsewhere."

"I won't lie to you, Harry," Neville said slowly, "the whole idea, well, it scares me more than I can say. And if this was just between you and . . . Him, well, maybe I would be tempted to stand aside. But it's not. What you're really saying is, in case you don't realize it, is that we have the choice of facing Him now, when you might be able to beat him, or facing Him when He can't be stopped. So, I prefer to get it over with and have a chance."

"I let you down once, Harry," Ron said quietly. "I won't again."

"Alright," Harry said. "I suppose that's how you all feel?"

They nodded. "Then I won't try and stop you," Harry said. "This is a war; if we have to kill, we will be prepared. Do you all know who Tomas Zoric is?"

"He's very famous, Harry," Luna said simply. "Anyone raised in the wizarding world knows of him."

"I'd heard the name," Hermione acknowledged, "and he explained to my parents and to me who he is and what he does."

"He's going to be at Hogwarts to run security for . . . Dumbledore," Harry said, remembering at the last moment that Neville and Luna wouldn't know much, if anything, about the Order of the Phoenix. He'd have to ask Zoric to get them some clearance.

"He won't be the Defense teacher?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"Remus is coming back to do that for a year," Harry said. "Mister Zoric will cover for him, when necessary. He's also going to tutor me. If Dumbledore, Remus, and he all agree, we'll keep the DA going, albeit a little more openly. I asked Mister Zoric to check on that for us, and if we could continue to run it as we see fit, with their suggestions only."

"Why that way, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"There are a couple of ways I can approach this coming fight, Hermione," Harry answered. "I can be what Dumbledore and Snape want me to be -- a tool, a weapon. I can sit and be a good little instrument in Dumbledore's hand, sit and bide my time until he orders me to kill."

"Is that what you think Dumbledore is doing, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Is that all you think he feels for you? A tool?"

Harry shook his head. "Those are two separate questions. I think Dumbledore does care for me at least a bit as a person, but if anything, that just means he can screw things up. Believe

me, he can screw things up just as easily as any of us. If I learned nothing else after the Ministry, it was that Dumbledore, as wise and powerful as he is, is just human."

"That doesn't mean we'd work against him, does it?" Ron asked in a worried voice.

"I hope not," Harry answered honestly. "It at least means retaining an independent judgement. I would hope that Dumbledore learned something from last year as well -- he can't play people like puppets. He can't just manipulate us from a distance. That doesn't mean I expect him to tell us everything, but he's going to have to share more than he has if he doesn't want us acting independently. We'll all stand a better chance if Dumbledore is helping and guiding us, but in the end, this is my responsibility, not his. I trust each of you more than I trust him when he comes to your motives. He's been inscrutable too long."

"Great wizards are like that," Hermione said, "at least in fiction."

"But this isn't fiction," Harry retorted. "This is my. . . ."

"Quest?" Luna suggested.

"I guess it is," Harry admitted. "I'd rather go off alone, but if you want to help, I won't turn you down again."

"Okay, Master Frodo," Hermione teased, "we'll be your Fellowship." Harry smiled, while Ginny and Luna giggled.

"I don't get it," Ron said to Neville.

Harry rolled his eyes and called out to the house elf again. "Mister Harry?" she asked, concerned.

"Could you or one of the other elves do me a favor?" Harry asked.

"We will try, Mister Harry."

"I need eight identical copies of four Muggle books. They come in different editions, but that doesn't matter, as long as they are the same for each volume. I would prefer hard-backs, but I'll take what you can find. I believe Mister Zoric said I could have you charge my accounts for anything I need?"

"Yes, Mister Harry. That arrangement starts today. Muggle items are sometimes difficult for elves to purchase, but if there is no strict time limit, it can easily be done."

"No strict time limit, since I know none of you will take any longer than is needed. The books are by JRR Tolkien, The Hobbit and the three volumes of The Lord of the Rings."

"Master Tomas has them, so Dorsey knows what Mister Harry wants. If Florish and Blotts has, then Mister Harry will have them by tomorrow."

"We read The Hobbit last year in Muggle Studies," Ginny said. "We read the rest this year. I found an old copy of The Fellowship of the Ring and just finished it."

"I just finished," Luna said. "Florish and Blotts have hard cover editions."

The house elf vanished.

"Why eight copies?" Ginny asked, before anyone else could.

"I wanted something we could use to send coded messages, and I think you, Ron, and Neville should read them. Messages coded by magic can be decoded by magic. Book codes are difficult for both Muggle and magical methods to decode. One copy for each of us, two for the people at Hogwarts."

They all nodded. "I'm also looking for some advice from any or all of you. I've practically decided to take Muggle Studies as my fifth course. But if I am to go for Auror training, I need to do the sixth. I guess that would have to be Medicine or Creatures, or maybe History. I'm open for suggestions. Mister Zoric has also said I might become his formal apprentice. I could use some advice there, too."

"Why don't we take a break," Harry finished. "We can talk some more about what might be happening this week and beyond."

Harry walked towards Luna and held out his hand. She stood and took it. While Ron and Hermione ignored the by-play, Ginny looked at Harry and Luna, and shrugged. As she opened her mouth, Harry said, "Ginny, before you say anything, Neville has to talk with you."

Harry and Luna walked hand-in-hand over to the front window. Harry turned to look at her, and simply asked, puzzled, "Why?"

"I don't really think that question can ever really be answered," Luna replied softly. "Some relationships simply grow, like Neville and Ginny's might. Some simply are, like Ronald and Hermione. They fight so much because each is afraid of how much they care for each other, and because they are afraid that in finding themselves, they might lose you."

She looked at him. "Why you? Well, why me? I am smart, but not as smart as Hermione. I am not as pretty as Cho or Ginny or the Patils or even Hermione. Most boys love boobs, bums, or legs. Nearly every girl over thirteen is bustier than I am, and most of the girls have better bums, and you can't really see any of our legs. I'm often not polite, although I do try to be nice."

"You like me for myself," Harry interrupted. "You're right, I can be attracted to any number of girls. I like girls. But I could only be serious with someone who sees the real me, not the Boy-Who-Lived."

"I See," Luna said, with emphasis. "It's not Divination, but I See. I See your strength of character, your capacity for love, and I See more compassion in you than I See in any other three people."

"What else do you See?"

"In you? Pain and loneliness and some anger." She paused. "Loneliness. Loneliness and loyalty are two characteristics all six of us share."

"Really?" Harry was surprised. "Hermione and the Weasleys are lonely?" He could understand why Luna and Neville might feel that way.

"Really. It's not hard to be lonely in a crowd, Harry. I don't know the details of what happened to Ginny during our First year, but it was caused by loneliness. Ronald. . . ."

"Why do you call Ron 'Ronald'?" Harry interrupted.

"Ginny had a crush on you; I had a crush on him since Muggle primary school, and that's what the teachers called him," Luna admitted, blushing slightly. "I guess it's just habit, now."

"Why is Hermione lonely?" Harry asked.

"She's not, but I can still see the scars. How were stodgy brains, the teachers' pets, treated in your Muggle school by the other students?"

"Not well," Harry admitted.

"Why do you think she can so easily stay with you and Ronald? Her parents love her, I'm sure, but they are afraid of our world. She is attracted to Ron physically, but she loves both you and Ron with such a deep loyalty and need that it charges her aura. I could see why Cho was jealous of her. You were attracted to Cho, but you were never even infatuated with her, let alone in love with her. Hermione will always mean more to you than any casual relationship could ever mean."

"And how do I feel about you?" Harry asked in a whisper. He hadn't been sure what 'Seeing' meant before today, but he had to ask, if only because he wasn't certain himself how he felt.

"You have walls around your heart, Harry. You like me, because I can see the real you, and because you feel a little sorry for me, and have become attracted to me. You see how I am treated, and you remember how you were treated." She paused. "Remember, I can only See how you feel, I can't See the details."

Harry nodded. She went on. "Please don't pity me, Harry. I really like you, and I am attracted to you. Learn to see the real me, and if we fall truly in love, we will."

"Can you read people easily?" Harry asked.

Luna shook her head. "No. I only See you five so well because of our close contact over the last year." She squeezed his hand. "Physical contact helps."

Luna giggled. "Down, Harry!" she whispered, as she felt a wave of passion swept through him.

Harry blushed. Most people, he knew, would feel violated by Luna's Seeing. For some reason, he did not. It gave him comfort that someone could finally know him, and apparently accept him as himself. But. . . .

"What's worrying you, Harry?"

"I'm just wondering if I can give you what you need," Harry mumbled.

"Does my Seeing upset you?" Luna asked.

"Can't you tell it doesn't?" Harry asked in turn.

"Exactly. Do you think I'm . . . odd?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, but I don't think that's a bad thing. And I can't lie to you, can I?"

"No," Luna said, "not while we hold hands, at least. But you can lie to yourself, you know."

"True," Harry admitted.

"If we decide we can love and accept each other, then yes, you will be giving me what I need," Luna told him, her voice more serious than usual.

Harry turned to face Luna directly, and the two embraced.

"Oy!" Ron called out. "None of that, mate!"

Harry looked over Luna's shoulder. "Are you really **sure** you want to make those the rules, Ron?"

Ron looked puzzled, then glanced at Hermione. Ron's ears turned bright red, which set Hermione blushing and Ginny laughing so hard she almost dropped her pumpkin juice. "That's what I thought," Harry said, making Ron fully blush.

Harry released Luna, but kept holding her hand. "Lunch is at noon. Let me show you to your rooms. After lunch, I think we need to fill the new trio in on the adventures of the old trio."

"So," Hermione said, "we're a sextet?"

"We hadn't better be," Ron blurted, giving Neville a dirty look and then blushing again. "Ow!" Ginny and Hermione had both slapped his upper-arms.

"It just means a set of six, you git!" Hermione admonished him.

"What parts are you going to leave out?" Luna asked.

"Parts of last year," Harry said. "We can't tell you everything until we get permission. It's not our secret." Hermione and the Weasleys understood that meant the Order of the Phoenix. "In fact, we'll just do my first four years tonight."

Starting with Harry and Ron's first meeting on the Hogwarts Express, the trio told their stories. The others, especially Ginny, told their viewpoints. By the end of the evening, they were sitting in couples on sofas. It was a new sensation for all six teens, and none were quite certain what they should do, so each went back to their room, pondering possibilities.

Tuesday, July 30, 1996

Tomas appeared early the next morning, before any of the teens were down for breakfast. The four who had never seen Occlumency were fascinated to see it in action. None took to it like Harry had flying or Hermione had creating fires, but Zoric detected some spark of talent in all of them, especially Luna and, surprising everyone, Neville. Testing them on the Imperious curse, however, all failed, although Luna showed some signs of resistance.

During the short break, Harry asked Tomas about telling Neville and Luna about the Order of the Phoenix. Tomas thought about it, and told Harry he could tell them about the Order, but not reveal any members other than Dumbledore and himself and not to reveal the location of the headquarters. He would tell Dumbledore himself about his permission.

After dueling practice, Harry told Hermione and the Weasleys about Zoric's decision. The entire group then went off to fly for forty-five minutes. Hermione and Neville weren't thrilled by the idea, but Zoric convinced them that they did not want their lack of flying time to hinder the others, should it ever be necessary.

After flying, Zoric sent them off to shower and change for lunch. He stayed for lunch himself, and gave the group a short history of the Order of the Phoenix, without of course mentioning anything that the others weren't to mention. After lunch, and after Zoric left, they spent the afternoon rehashing the previous year from their different view points. That night, they discussed Harry's options.

Before Zoric left after lunch, however, Harry met with him.

"What is on your mind, Harry?" Zoric asked stiffly.

"I was wondering," Harry asked, somewhat shyly, "what real difference it might make if you're my tutor or if I'm your apprentice?"

"Master/apprentice is a closer, relationship, with familial and sacred elements," Zoric replied, trying to understand what all the implications were to Harry's question. "It would allow me to more closely monitor your classes, which, to be honest, mostly means Potions. It would mean you almost definitely would not have to go back to your Aunt's."

"Those are both advantages. . . ."

"I hear a 'but' in there somewhere. Just spit it out; I won't be offended."

"How much authority does that give you over me? How much authority does Dumbledore have over you?"

That second question gave Zoric the clue he needed. "I believe I understand your concerns," he said. "How much authority does Dumbledore have over me? Not as much as he would like. However, I am bound to keep his secrets. What you are really afraid of is taking on an obligation which may limit your freedom of action. Like any sixteen year old, you believe yourself equally capable, if not better able, than Dumbledore or myself in making decisions for yourself, because you now have the mental maturity, although little of the experience, to make those decisions."

"Granted," he went relentlessly on, "you have been trapped into having what amounts to the final responsibility. Granted, you will likely be manipulated by Voldemort into at least one

more confrontation, and dislike the idea of being manipulated by your own side as well. Have I summed up your position?"

"Yes," Harry said tersely.

"All I can say is I will act the same towards you in that respect as your tutor and mentor -- I can tell you dislike the term 'master.' I shall not abandon or punish you if you disobey. I shall try to be as open with you as I can, and I shall be much more available to you to ask advice from than Dumbledore can be."

"How will you tutor my friends?" Harry asked.

"At the very least, I shall tutor you all in Occlumency, and if possible, I will help build up their resistance to the Imperius curse." Zoric looked at Harry for a moment. "If you are my apprentice, and you desire it, I shall act as their tutor in any subject I am knowledgeable in. Does this help?"

"A little," Harry said.

"I take it your friends have also declared themselves your followers, and you are determined to do what is right in your opinion?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said firmly.

"Will you promise to take Dumbledore's, Remus', and my advice into account, as well as your friends'?"

"Yes, that I can promise," Harry said. "I have no intention of being manipulated like last June."

"Then I am content."

Chapter 07

Wednesday, July 31, 1996

Harry awoke the next morning to a gentle rapping on his bedroom door. "Who's'it?" he mumbled. They had all been up late, celebrating Neville birthday with cake and one bottle of spumante.

The door opened a crack. "Hermione," came the whispered response.

Harry frowned and sat up in bed, saying, "Yeah? Something wrong?"

Hermione came in, already dressed, except for her shoes and socks. She shut the door. "What's wrong?" Harry asked again, although more clearly.

"Harry, do you really like Luna?" Hermione asked, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Yeah, I do. I mean, I'm not really madly in love with her or anything, I think, but I really like her, and maybe, well, you know, we might. . . . Anyway, she means a lot more than I ever felt for Cho. Why?" Harry managed to find his glasses and put them on.

"So, you won't mind if, well if. . . ."

"Ron and you?" Harry asked. Hermione nodded.

"You don't need my approval, you know," Harry said.

Hermione chewed her lower lip, a habit left over from when her teeth had been larger. "I feel that I do, Harry. In a way, I love you and Ron both. And I am attracted to you almost. . . ."

"Hermione, we talked about this already. We like each other, and if Ron wasn't around, you might want to date me. If Luna wasn't around, I would want to date you. We care about each other." He looked at his friend. "You aren't trying to say that you prefer me to Ron, are you? The truth, Hermione."

"No," Hermione said slowly. "I know it's silly. It's just that I care for you both so very much. As much as I enjoy. . . ."

"Snogging Ron?" Harry teased.

"Exactly," Hermione agreed. "As much as I like kissing Ron, I guess I was hoping that I never would have to make the choice. That we could stay as close as we were."

"Luna might share me with you but I don't think Ron would share you with anyone, especially with me," Harry teased, making Hermione blush.

"That's not exactly what I meant," Hermione protested.

"I know. I don't want our love lives to split us apart either. I realized something the other day, when we talked."

Hermione's curiosity was aroused. "What's that?"

"You've never let me down. And even though I've fought with you, you've never really fought with me. You've never lied to me or misled me."

"Luna hasn't either," Hermione pointed out.

"True, but you've known me a lot longer. Everyone else I've either trusted or who should have been looking out for me has deceived me along the way, even if in very minor ways: the Dursleys; Dumbledore; Ron and really all the Weasleys, well, the brothers, not Ginny, except for the Chamber of Secrets, which wasn't her fault; and even Remus and to some extent Sirius deceived me for my own good. The worst you've done was the broom, and at least you were totally honest about that. You're always totally honest with me. In return, I've yelled at you and hurt you, and you keep coming back to help. Thank you, Hermione."

Hermione smiled, both at what he said and at how cute he was when he rambled, her eyes glistening. "You're welcome, Harry."

"You really are my twin sister, aren't you?"

"Sister, yes, but why twin?" she asked puzzled.

"An older sister would lie to protect me, like Sirius and Remus, or pick on me. A little sister would treat me more with a combination of contempt and respect, like Ginny does Ron. But a twin may treat the other as they wish to be treated, and that's how you treat me."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said softly.

"I'm sorry I've treated you so badly."

"I know" she whispered. "I believed you the first time."

Harry smiled. "Step outside for a minute, and let me run in the bath and get dressed. It's early enough I can still ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

Hermione smiled and patted Harry's cheek. "I'll be right outside."

"What did you want to ask me?" Hermione asked a few minutes later. It was only 7:10, and none of the others seemed to be stirring, let alone down in the dining room.

"What do you think about my doing Muggle Studies? I know I said I'd likely take it, but what do **you** think about it? What do you think about Medicine? And I was thinking I might have enough to do without a second extra course, especially if we do the DA again."

"Do the Muggle Studies and Basic Medicine -- I'm taking that, too. They will probably do you more good in the long run than History or Divination. And I agree, you have enough to do without a seventh course." She looked at him. "**Are** you going to be running the DA again?"

"If we do, it will be **we**, Hermione. As in you and me. Ron is my best mate, and Luna and I might get serious, but **you** are my. . . ." He looked for a word.

"Lackey, minion, aide, adjutant, first mate, number one or two, researcher, lieutenant. . . ."

Harry smiled and raised a hand to stop her. "Start thinking about it. Outside the group, there will be Dumbledore, Zoric, Remus, and maybe some of the Order or faculty. In the DA, there will be me, then you, then Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and maybe two others as a group. We'll also split the group itself into two parts, sort of a general group and then an inner group recruited from the general group. I don't think you should use 'first mate' or 'partner' for you, though. Ron will be jealous."

Hermione smiled at that as she pulled out a note book and jotted some symbols down.

"Muggle short-hand," she told him. "I doubt if many in the wizarding world would know it."

Harry smiled. "I was thinking about asking Ron to take control of physical fitness. I'm hoping Neville will be willing to ask Sprout for some space in one of the greenhouses we're not usually allowed in, to grow anything we might need that Hogwarts might not supply. You'd be research and development, with Luna working on more general research."

"And Ginny?"

"Intelligence."

"She is plugged into almost every gossip network there is," Hermione admitted, "even more than Lavender. What's the difference between research and research and development?"

"If we need something researched in general, that would be Luna -- her marks in History and Runes are as high as yours -- and if we need something made or created, including charms, that would be you."

Hermione frowned. "What are her extra courses, besides Runes?"

"Divination and Muggle Studies. Obviously, if it's something to do with Arithmancy, it would go through you. If it was pure runes, and important, hopefully the pair of you could work together."

"Sounds reasonable," Hermione admitted. "It's almost as if we're creating our own Order."

"We are. We're the Independent Junior Order of the Phoenix."

"So we're the Hatchlings, huh?" Ron said, coming into the room, Luna right behind him.

"That's right. Where are Neville and Ginny?" Harry asked, making Ron's cheek twitch a tiny bit.

"In the gardens," Luna replied. "I believe they were watching the sunrise."

Ron's cheek twitched again. "I thought she hated getting up early even more than me," he grumbled.

Luna merely shook her head and said "Ronald," in a voice slightly more mournful than dreamy. Hermione shook her head at Ron as well. Harry and Ron looked at each other and shrugged.

"Move it," Ginny told her brother from behind. She pushed Ron aside, dragging Neville by the hand into the room. "What did we miss?" she asked.

Luna smiled, while Harry and Hermione laughed and Ron frowned. "Sit down," Harry finally said. "Let me explain an idea, and see what you all think."

"What kind of physical fitness?" Ron asked a few minutes later, puzzled.

"General conditioning, at the very least. I was thinking of a jogging club. I'll write Dumbledore about maybe creating a gym, and asking Mister Zoric if he could make some recommendations about equipment and training."

"For all of us?" Hermione asked, a bit petulantly.

"All of us," Harry said firmly. "And group flying Sunday mornings, after the jogging. Does anyone need a decent broom, besides Hermione?"

Ginny and Neville raised their hands, which made Ron frown. Luna said, "I have a Nimbus 1500. It's in very good shape."

Harry looked at Ron. "What?" Ron asked.

"Is a Nimbus 1500 good enough for what we need?" Harry asked.

"If it's really in good shape, yeah," Ron said.

"I can afford a broom, I just never thought about it," Neville said. "If I can borrow Hedwig, I can write Grandmother today."

"Harry. . . ." Hermione started to say, but Harry cut her off with a smile.

"I've never bought you a decent birthday present," Harry said. "Neville, why don't you ask your grandmother to pick up two Clean Sweep All-weathers? Those are supposed to be good, stable brooms. I don't think either of you would want to deal with racing brooms."

"True," Hermione admitted.

"Ginny?" Harry asked, "Shall we get you one like Ron's?"

Ginny, seeing the look on Ron's face, merely said, "That sounds great."

"Who exactly is 'we'?" Ron demanded.

"I learned in early July that I inherited part of the Black Trust, and the way it's set up, I have access to a lot of the cash, although not the property and such until I'm seventeen. I plan on using the cash to finance anything that we need. Hermione, I know those fake Galleons ate up all your ready cash last year. The Fund, as we'll call it, should reimburse you unless you got the money from some one else?"

"No," she admitted, "I paid for those." Ron looked stunned.

"So, that's who will pay for the brooms. Will you also act as treasurer, by the way?"

"Of course."

"Neville. . . ."

"Harry, one of my uncles told me he would buy me a broom, maybe because he thought he'd never have to. Let me put the bite on him first."

"Okay," Harry said simply. "We're going to go to Diagon Alley at some point. I have the paperwork ready to start of a group of accounts. First, you each will have a personal account . . . none of you has one yet, do you?"

They all shook their heads 'no.' "Alright. Each account will start off with fifty Galleons in it, and one Galleon a day will be deposited. Other than that, it's all up to you what you do with it. It's yours, although you might have to charge small items for your use in the DA from it. Second will be a supply account, what the Muggles call 'petty cash.' This will always have a thousand Galleons in it, but none of us can withdraw more than forty Galleons a day from it. Only use it for small items that the DA needs. There will also be a more substantial account, the War Chest, which Hermione or I can draw on, and we'll pay for Ginny's broom from that, and Neville's, if he needs it. The vaults will all be paid up for ten years, which is also how long the accounts are valid. After that, it's up to you if you keep your personal vaults."

"How big are the vaults?" Ginny asked.

"The War Chest is the size of your family's," Harry told her. That was about a quarter the size of his father's. "The others are all pretty small, about the size of a closet. I got the larger size for the War Chest in case we need to store anything there."

Everyone looked at Ron. He blushed slightly. "Alright," he mumbled. "Sounds good."

"We'd better eat," Neville commented. "Mister Zoric will be here soon."

"He'll probably be early," Harry said.

"He is early," Tomas said from the doorway, startling everyone in the group. "Sorry about that," he said, although with his expressionless voice he really didn't sound very sorry.

"I was interested in your plans, but I do apologize for eavesdropping, even if this is my house." He came and sat down, pouring himself some orange juice. "I approve of everything you have planned, and I will not inform Dumbledore without your permission."

"You heard about the accounts?" Harry asked.

Zoric nodded. "A fine plan. What about physical training?" He had been there the entire time, invisible, but wasn't going to advertize that.

"Ron?" Harry asked.

"What?" Harry, Hermione, and Ginny all gave him a dirty look. "Oh!" Ron suddenly realized what 'being in charge' of something entailed. "Harry wants me to run physical training for the DA. Jogging at the least. Do you think we could get some sort of gym? And maybe someone to teach us self-defense?"

Zoric looked at them, obviously thinking, although no expression crossed his face. "Excellent ideas," he finally said. "You two are Fifth years, yes?" Ginny and Luna nodded. "Are any of the rest of you taking Astronomy?" They all shook their heads. "Then I may be able to work things out. Now, I want you all to change into school robes. We are going to Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, with perhaps a few other stops. Here are your school letters. The Aurors and I have spoken with Snape about the auror potions class. You three, make certain you give that letter to the apothecary. Your potion ingredients have been pre-packaged, and pre-paid."

"By whom?" Ron growled.

"I paid for Harry and Mister Longbottom, your brother Bill and I paid for yours." He turned to Harry. "As I said, an excellent idea about the accounts. I was going to do the same for the next three years, although I was starting you all off with twenty-galleons and five a week, and yes, I can easily afford it. I shall merely add that into all your accounts."

Harry was about to object, but decided that would just set Ron off. "Sir? I've decided to ask you for the apprenticeship. Can we sign that today?"

Zoric nodded. "We may."

"What do I call you?"

"'Master' might not be a great idea," Zoric admitted. "I shall think on it."

"Why not?" Hermione asked. "If it were 'Master Tomas' it might not be too bad."

"We can try it," Harry said doubtfully.

"We can," Zoric agreed. "We can adjust it if it grates. Come, my young apprentice and students."

None of the teens were thrilled by their first stop -- the Ministry of Magic. "It's just a place," Zoric lectured, "often a very silly place at that." Somehow, delivered in his expressionless voice, it was funny.

Harry noted with distaste that the fountain had been restored as if nothing had happened. While all the others had to surrender their wands, Zoric managed to convince the guard that he and Harry needed theirs. Zoric led them to a small waiting-room within the Department of

Magical Education, where a very elderly witch by the name of Ipswitch waited with them. Arthur Weasley came in within a few minutes and talked quietly with Zoric. A few moments after that, Remus Lupin and Professor McGonagall arrived.

"Who are we waiting for?" Hermione asked.

"Someone from the Minister's Office," Zoric replied. "Ah, here he is now."

It was a very harassed-looking Percy Weasley.

"About time," Ipswitch complained, giving Percy a very dirty look. "Strange that the witness with the least amount of distance to travel comes last!"

"We're very busy. . . ." Percy started.

"Don't you know June through August is our busiest time, boy?" Ipswitch scolded as she led the group into her office, where two much younger officials were waiting. "And Arthur here is one of the busiest men in the Ministry! Now, stand there and be quiet!"

Ipswitch turned to Zoric. "You have the papers?" Zoric handed her a stack of parchment. "Standard Ministry form for the most part, good. Hate to mess around with amateur attempts at drafting. Although I must say it's been sixty years since I've done one of the full ceremonies. I hope you don't mind if these two youngsters watch?"

Zoric shook his head, "No, no problem."

"Good. Let's see, the page of addendums seem fine as well. I see you already have the Muggle guardians' permission. Muggle notarization, that's acceptable. Still. . . ." She sat at her desk and looked up at Harry. "Harry James Potter?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Madam Ipswitch," Hermione whispered.

"Madam Ipswitch," Harry amended.

She smiled. "Good lad. Have you read, do you understand, and do you agree to these terms of your own free will?"

Harry had read them on the way to the Ministry. Zoric had driven part of the way to give Harry the time to do so.

"Yes, Madam Ipswitch, to all three questions."

"Do you, Tomas Radoslav Zoric, agree to these terms as well?"

"I do, Madam Ipswitch."

"Sign." Zoric and then Harry signed.

"Mister Lupin, Mister Weasley, I understand you share magical guardian rights, with the death of Sirius Black and the resignation of Albus Dumbledore?" They acknowledged that they did, and signed when commanded. Asking later, Harry discovered that Dumbledore had been his magical guardian after Sirius' conviction. That Dumbledore could have allowed him into Hogsmeade his Third year was another small grievance.

"I understand you are empowered to sign for Hogwarts?" Ipswitch asked McGonagall. Since Harry would continue at Hogwarts despite being an apprentice, those terms had to be agreed to as well. McGonagall agreed and signed.

Ipswitch signed, followed by Percy. When he tried to flee the room, pleading work, Ipswitch held him back. "You have to witness the ceremony and sign again, boy! Don't you know the procedure?"

Percy grumbled and stood near the door. Harry knelt and surrendered his wand to Zoric, asked Zoric to accept him as an apprentice, and bowed his head. Zoric helped Harry to his feet, handed him back his wand, cast a shield spell, and proclaimed that Harry James Potter was his apprentice, and under his guidance and protection. Harry's wand took on a slight dark green cast.

Since no one had objected, Percy and Ipswitch signed again, and Percy was allowed to flee. Ipswitch would issue the necessary decrees, including one that lifted Harry's ban on underage magic. It was now up to Zoric to make those rules, not the Ministry. After receiving congratulations for his birthday and apprenticeship from Mr. Weasley and Professor McGonagall, Zoric led the teen group, plus Remus, back to his car. Because of London traffic, he had to drive them to Diagon Alley.

A quick stop at Gringotts set up the accounts Harry had talked about earlier than morning. The next stop was at Madam Malkins. The group all needed new Hogwarts robes, and most needed new House blazers as well. Since dark green was the traditional color of an apprentice, Harry got not only bought regular school robes, he was given some which were such a dark green as to almost be black. His Gryffindor ties now also had one thin dark green strip in them as well. A dark green blazer would be sent along later. The rest of their shopping went quickly (since Zoric steered them well away from the twin's shop), and they had lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. Remus left them after lunch, again wishing Harry a happy birthday.

It took half an hour of driving before Zoric could portkey them to Hogsmeade. There, he sent them into Gladrags to choose dress robes, although they would be re-measured before such time as they might need them. Zoric took them into several shops and opened small charge accounts for them, since only Luna had any. He had made certain that the students could charge their vaults (not all accounts allowed that).

It was close to 6:00 when they returned to Zoric's northern island.

Chapter 08

Wednesday, July 31

"A word please, Miss Granger."

Hermione hung back from the rush upstairs to the bedrooms. Everyone had supplies, robes, books, and other packages in their rooms (or would as soon as the elves moved them from the magically expanded boot of the car).

Tomas guided Hermione into the sitting room. "Harry thinks very highly of you, Miss Granger. He has a distinct habit of not taking advice from anyone, but you probably come closest."

Hermione merely nodded. She was not easily intimidated, but the stoic Tomas Zoric came close.

"I do not know you well, but I believe I know you well enough to know that you will never betray Harry's trust. I do ask that you come to me with any problem you deem necessary. You, better than anyone except perhaps Remus Lupin and soon Miss Lovegood, can understand the pressures on Harry. I also believe you are understanding enough to be told that I believe Harry has been, and almost certainly still is, dealing with a mild form of depression."

"I'm not overly surprised," Hermione managed to say.

"I have little doubt that if he had spent the entire summer with his relatives, it could easily have slipped into something even more serious. As it is, he's been riding a peak since shortly after we met. This means he could also crash. You are the person most likely to see it for what it is. I expect you to let me know if that happens. I am trying to keep his life interesting without being overwhelming."

"But having to face down Voldemort, to have to kill or be killed, is enough to overwhelm anyone," Hermione said drily. "Even someone as strong as Harry."

"Exactly. So, expect momentary flashes of melancholy. Those will be normal to someone of his condition and situation. Inform me if there is anything more than that."

"Very well," Hermione agreed.

"The other thing is more . . . personal," Tomas said, very glad he had his non-emotional mask on. "You and Harry are the two people the other four respect. There may be many opportunities for each of the three couples to be . . . alone." Hermione blushed.

"Exactly, Miss Granger. Probably Harry and Miss Lovegood make the shiest couple, but they are still a couple. Miss Weasley and Mister Longbottom are currently the least attached couple. However, I believe Miss Weasley may be the most . . . impetuous of the six of you. Try and contain yourself, and the others, over the next few days. I shall be giving you all a proposition for the next few weeks, which may seem to force choices upon you. Try and

guide your friends, no matter what happens, to make careful choices, no matter what their final choices might be."

Hermione merely nodded.

"You will find a box wrapped with green paper. In it, you will find various Muggle and magical . . . items. Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley probably already know certain . . . magical consequences for a certain act. Perhaps this is covered at Hogwarts now; it wasn't twenty years ago. There are several pamphlets; please read the one from the Division of Medical Magic, and then give it to Harry. I trust you to dole out the other knowledge wisely." Tomas bowed deeply, and fled the room in the most dignified manner he could.

Hermione rushed upstairs, and of course opened the green-wrapped box first. Inside were instructions for anti-conception spells and Muggle condoms and lubricants. Hermione blushed at some of the instruction booklets also included, and hid everything, except the pamphlet, called Why it's Important for Witches to Wait, away in her trunk. Zoric obviously hoped nothing would happen, but if it did, he wanted things done right and with full knowledge of the consequences. She would read the pamphlet, and give it to Harry a few days later.

Harry celebrated his birthday that evening. His only presents were small ones from Remus and Hagrid, as he had said he wanted no presents from his friends that year, other than their company. After the ice cream and cake that followed the light dinner, Tomas brought them into the sitting room.

"It is unlikely Harry will ever return to his Muggle relatives. He will certainly not be returning this summer. The question therefore arises, where shall he stay for the rest of the summer, and who will stay with him?" All six teens were on the edge of their chairs in anxious anticipation. They had not been promised anything past the next few days at most.

"If it were just Harry, or perhaps Harry and Neville, then there would be no problem staying here. However, I can not be here to supervise at all times, especially at night, and I rather believe the combination of Harry and Ron might prove . . . mischievous. And I'm sure at least two sets of parents would disapprove of the girls staying here alone with you lot, if they knew." The Weasleys and Neville all blushed.

"As some of you may know, I am married. We have four children, one of our own and three orphans we are in charge of. Our son left Hogwarts a few years ago, the two girls will be starting their Fifth year."

"Virginia Driver and Georgia Anderson," Luna said in her 'dreamy' voice. "Hufflepuffs. Virginia had a crush on Ginny our Second year, on Cedric our Third, and alternated between Harry and Ginny last year. She takes Creatures and Muggle Studies. Georgia had a crush on Cedric until he was killed, even though she likes to flirt with Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, and Padma Patil. She also worked on Cedric's memorial in Hufflepuff's common room most of last year. She takes Divination and Arithmancy. Both seriously thought about joining the DA, but Zacharias talked all the younger Hufflepuffs out of joining."

Luna frowned, then looked at Harry. "Harry, you should have a talk with . . . what are their names now? . . . Justin and . . . Ernest?"

"Ernie Macmillan," Harry said. "Why?"

"They and Zach are competing for dominance of Hufflepuff," Hermione answered.

"And Zacharias will incline the House towards neutrality," Luna stated. "Being friends with me, and the incident with Marietta, will tend to throw many Ravenclaws towards neutrality as well. Hogwarts is not just a minor front in the War with Voldemort. It represents the future as well. Gryffindor may lead, but it can not be a straight Gryffindor/Slytherin rivalry. One other House must strongly stand by Gryffindor, and draw a number of students from the other. Only then will some of the Slytherins feel safe enough to move away from neutrality."

"Aw, who needs any Slytherins?" Ron demanded.

"We do," Hermione stated firmly. "We can't just throw away a quarter of the students. People like Malfoy could play havoc with the wards during the day simply by inviting people across them. The more students, especially Slytherins, can keep an eye on Malfoy, Nott, and the others, the less Dumbledore, and we, will have to worry about."

"Probably less than half the Slytherins give any real support to Voldemort and his ideas," Harry mused. "We have to at least keep the majority of them neutral, if not working with us."

"All true," Ginny said, "but that's getting us away from the point Mister Zoric was trying to make." She looked at Tomas. "I think we'd all like to stay with Harry." The other four nodded, giving Tomas their attention.

"We own another, smaller island, as well as this one, in the Adriatic. My daughters, my wife, and I holiday there. It is fairly safe."

"I didn't pack my swim suit," Hermione complained.

"Well, actually, now that peace has come to the area the Muggle tourists are back, albeit in smaller numbers. Still, recent local Muggle custom at that set of islands demands . . . no swim suit," Tomas said delicately. "While there are repelling wards to keep unauthorized people off the island, it is visible to the many holidaying Muggle tourists, and swim suits on the beach would actually draw more attention than . . . nothing."

All six teens were blushing. Ron looked likely to explode from terror and embarrassment. "Not a good idea, I take it?" Six heads shook in terrified near-unison, even Luna's. "Then I shall think on the matter some more. I shall do my best to keep you all together. I should add that I have permission from all your parents, or grandmother, to do what I think best with you, provided that you owl them at least twice a week. Write tomorrow; we shall see how things go. Let's see if I can trust you."

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday saw a routine work itself out. Neville, Harry and Hermione would wake up first, and while Neville pattered around the garden for half an hour, Harry and

Hermione would talk about possible ideas for the DA. A little before 7:30, Neville would come in and pound on Ginny and Ron's doors to wake them up and then go get cleaned up. Luna would have just finished getting dressed and would join Hermione and Harry.

At 8:45, Zoric would show up (or at least finally show himself), and the group would practice dueling for 50 minutes at 9:00. They would then practice Occlumency at 10:00 and flying at 11:00. After a quick clean-up, they would have lunch. Now that all the Sixth year students had chosen their courses (Hermione Runes, Basic Medicine, and Arithmancy; Ron Creatures and Herbology; Harry Muggle Studies and Basic Medicine; Neville Herbology and Basic Medicine), 1:00 to 3:00 was study time. Part of it was devoted in coaching the two Fifth years for their O.W.L.s, the rest was spent with general study. Generally, the last fifteen minutes was devoted to Luna and Ginny going over what they had covered in Muggle Studies to help Harry catch up with the actual material. Zoric had petitioned the Department of Education for permission for Harry to take the O.W.L. the following June, although he would be studying for the N.E.W.T. the following year.

Zoric would appear to leave around 3:30, and the teens would hurry back to their rooms to shower. From just before 4:00 until 6:30, they would spend time together as couples. All of them, even Hermione and Ron, were still getting used to the idea of being together as couples.

At 6:30, they would come in for dinner. After dinner, they spent their time until 10:00 or so as a group, playing games, listening to the wizarding wireless, and talking. Since August 1 was Luna's birthday, they tried dancing to the wireless, but none thought that particularly successful.

From 3:00 to 3:15, however, Tomas would take Harry aside and drop his mask. He encouraged Harry to talk about anything he felt the need to talk about. Each of the three days, talking about his upbringing with the Dursleys, Harry didn't make it more than 5 or 6 minutes before breaking down, crying.

After their session Saturday, Tomas put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I know you dislike exposing yourself like this, Harry. I really think, in the long run, it is good for you to let these feelings out."

"I suppose," Harry admitted. "It's embarrassing to, well, act like this." He knew, however, he had a lot to work out, a lot to vent.

"It can be," Tomas agreed gently. "I don't think any less of you, though. You've endured a lot of pain, Harry, more than was good for you, more than anyone deserved. It would have crushed most people, and it has scarred your soul as much as that curse scarred your forehead. Going over that pain won't get rid of the scars, but it will help them fade."

"Alright," Harry said squaring his shoulders, "if you can listen to me whing and whine, I'll keep at it."

Tomas patted Harry's shoulder and smiled. "Good man. Now, can I trust you folks to keep the daily schedule you seem to have established for yourselves?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Alright. Then I shall leave you to it. Tomorrow, however, I need you all present in front of the manor at Five. Nice clean shirts, shorts or skirts for the women, et cetera. You'll be joining us for dinner in the Adriatic."

Harry paled.

"I assure you, everyone will be dressed, Harry," Tomas teased. "My wife is quite accomplished in Muggle Studies, Arithmancy, and Runes, and she will be living with me at the Castle, at least part of the time. She'll be coaching you during the year with Muggle Studies, and probably helping out with Arithmancy and Runes with the girls, if they need it."

And so the schedule continued through most of August. The group only left the island for Sunday dinners. Harry continued to work through his pains: those created by the Dursleys, the deaths that surrounded him, his encounters with Voldemort, his fights with Snape, and his disappointments with Dumbledore. Each still hurt, especially the loss of Cedric and Sirius.

As Tomas had warned Hermione, who had then talked to Luna, Harry often had short periods of melancholia. The friendship and support of the entire group, the affection given him by Hermione and Luna, the love quietly growing between himself and Luna, all helped get him through those spells, and prevented him from sliding further into the true depression he had been entering since Sirius' death.

The only frequent visitor had been Remus Lupin, who had shown up six times. Both he and Tomas had been impressed by the skills the group was showing, and were truly shocked by Harry's progress. By the end of the summer, Hermione was operating around the E-N.E.W.T. level in Transfiguration and Charms. She, Ron, Neville, and even Luna were probably at the A-N.E.W.T. level in practical Defense, with Ginny just a short way behind, although they all would need more time to learn the theory. Neville had quickly shown that there was nothing even the elves who took care of the gardens could teach him about Herbology, and he was tutoring Ginny and Luna for their O.W.L.s. Tomas was not teaching them potions directly, but had gone over their techniques, and concentrated on their knowing the ingredients, including the advanced ones they would be needing to know, better.

By the end of the summer, Luna was immune to the Imperius curse, and could deflect a Legilimency attack with ease. The other four could fight an Imperius curse, but still had great difficulty operating while fighting it. They could also detect even the subtlest Legilimency attack, although they had difficulty deflecting most of them.

Harry, however, was now fighting at Auror levels, even if his general Transfiguration work was around the same level as Ron's. Imperius curses affected him almost as little as they did Luna, and Harry could not only deflect Legilimency attacks, he discovered he could direct them directly into the scarred parts of his psyche, so deep that nothing but his pain could be felt. When he did that, he only let the pain burn his opponents for a fraction of a second, more than enough to discourage Tomas or Remus. Tomas wasn't sure how Harry could do this, but accepted it as a plus.

Dumbledore and Snape came on the 18th of August to see the groups' progress in Defense. Snape had given Zoric and Lupin a twisted leer when they had invited Snape to fight with Harry -- anything except deadly hexes and the Cruciatus curse allowed.

Snape hadn't been smiling in any way five minutes later as Harry started battering Snape's shields down. Harry's had already withstood the worst Snape could throw at him. In desperation, Snape finally called, "Legilimens!"

Severus Snape had lived a hard life to that point. He had endured cruelty, neglect, and many many disappointments. He had dealt with these abuses to his soul by burying his pains so deeply they rarely erupted, except in anger. Harry's raw pain flowing into his mind, however, triggered the release of all his own buried pain. Pain even greater than Harry Potter had suffered over-whelmed him, and Severus Snape passed out.

Harry walked over to look at the fallen man, who had enjoyed torturing him for the crimes of his father. With an expressionless face, and an expressionless voice that would have been a credit to his Master, Harry simply said, "I win."

Harry turned and walked over to the stunned Dumbledore. "Sir, have you made any decisions as to the official status of the DA?"

Harry's tone had left no doubt that the DA would continue in some form if Harry had anything to say about it. As he had said to Ron a few days before on the subject, "If you won't let me fight alone, I'm going to have a bloody army."

"Officially, it can exist as a tutoring club for students, Fourth year and above, who wish practical practice with Defense outside of class. You are in charge of it, although a professor or Mister Zoric should be present at official practices. I might add that Mister Zoric will be given the title and responsibilities of a professor once the term starts, since he will be acting as Professor Lupin's substitute when necessary. You may accept or refuse any student."

"And unofficially?" Harry asked, looking straight into Dumbledore's eyes.

'Those eyes,' Dumbledore thought. 'How they burn with justice. I can feel his power, and his cause -- the burning fire of justice, instead of the cold ice of hatred that Grindelwald and Voldemort projected.' "If it is not official, then I need say nothing about it," Dumbledore said with care. Seeing a flash of disappointment and anger, he added, "I shall be giving you and Miss Granger my passwords as they change. If there is something you feel the need to report, you will get word to me." The disappointment was still there, but the anger was turning into sorrow. "And of course Mister Zoric will be fully briefed, and I expect he will share most of it with you."

Harry looked puzzled. "It may seem as if I am still avoiding you," Dumbledore said, "but that is not so, I promise you, Harry. You must be kept better informed these next two years than you have been in the past. Once you leave, of course, you may be a full member of the Order. However, it is still best that we not be seen as being too close. At times, it may even appear as if your Mentor and I are at odds. That will just be a ploy, making us seem weaker than we are."

"Shouldn't we try to appear stronger than we are?" Harry asked.

"No," Dumbledore said. "That will not stop Voldemort. He will have some successes, alas, and we shall have some as well. If we appear strong, that will magnify his successes. If we appear weak, that will magnify ours. We must win, Harry, but that does not just mean your defeating Voldemort. . . ."

"Killing Voldemort," Harry corrected.

"Killing Voldemort," Dumbledore agreed. "We must also show his followers that their goals can never be achieved, that supporting a Dark wizard will always fail, no matter how powerful he appears to be."

"I see," Harry said. Just being told the reasons for anything without having to beg too much eased a small part of Harry's pain. "Are you sure you weren't in Slytherin, sir?"

"Like yourself, the Hat took its time, trying to place me in Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Like yourself, I believe it made the correct choice in the end." He looked over Harry's shoulder. "Ah, I see Professor Lupin and Miss Granger have revived Professor Snape. I think a visit to Madam Pomfrey would be in order. Well done, Harry, well done."

'I wish I could stay angry at him,' Harry thought as Dumbledore guided the shaken Snape away. 'I wish his approval didn't matter so much.'

The only other visitor was Mrs. Weasley, who visited twice. She was startled the first time to see that the teens had paired off. Fortunately, Tomas managed to reassure her they were well-supervised without actually lying to her. She was glad to see that all the students looked well and happy (or, in Harry's case, well and happy for him).

She had always approved of Hermione (except when she had thought Hermione had been playing games with both Harry's and Ron's hearts in their fourth year), and was glad Hermione and Ron were together. She was a little disappointed that Ginny and Harry weren't a couple, but other than that, she was glad Ginny had found herself a devoted, reliable boyfriend. While Molly had always thought Luna a bit eccentric, she seemed to be making Harry happy, and that was a very good thing.

Coming back on August 20, Molly Weasley was even happier. She had never seen Harry in such a good mood or good physical condition, and her approval for Luna went up another notch. She was not to know that Harry's good mood came from having taken his revenge on Snape two days before and from Dumbledore's tacit approval of Harry and Hermione's plans for the DA. For the first time since before the Second Task, Harry felt he had some control over his life.

In fact, Harry and Hermione had spent most of Saturday afternoon planning together, and then planning with the rest of the group after they returned from the Adriatic the previous evening.

It was time to send out the first feelers to see if they could truly create an army.

Chapter 09

Friday, August 2, 1996

"Oy, Justin, wake up!"

Justin Finch-Fletchley grunted. He rolled over and hit a wall. That made him open his eyes. While a younger son, he still had a large private bedroom in Fletchley Manor, a house that in its present form dated from the Restoration, and sat on an estate the family had acquired during the Dissolution of the Monasteries a hundred and thirty years before the current house had been built. The family's house in London had rooms nearly as large and had a large bed. His bed at Hogwarts was equally large.

No walls should be near his bed.

"Oh, right," he muttered, remembering. Every summer since the one before his Second year at Hogwarts, he had spent the first two weeks of August with his friend Ernie Macmillan. Then Ernie would spend a week with him at Fletchley Manor, and then the rest of the summer at Finch House in London.

Ernie's Lowland Scots family was neither as rich nor as aristocratic as Justin's. Justin's gentry ancestors emerged from the late medieval commercial classes 19 generations before him, in the 1470s, as opposed to the first known magical Macmillan, nine generations before. Still, the Macmillans had prospered in the wizarding world, conveying supplies created by Muggles (food stuffs, furniture, etc.) into magical Scotland, especially Hogwarts and the various stores in Hogsmeade (the magical world was much more dependent on Muggle supplies than most Pure Bloods were willing to acknowledge). While the Macmillan country house was decent-sized, Justin slept on a cot in Justin's room when visiting.

Satisfied there was a reason for a wall to be next to his bed, Justin closed his eyes.

"Justin!"

Justin rolled over, careful not to roll off. "Sorry, not quite awake."

"Potter's in The Prophet."

Justin sat up, "Is he alright?"

"Aye, he's fine. Read it; I'll get us some tea."

Justin read the paper twice, trying to understand what it said. When Ernie came back, Justin asked, "I don't understand. What exactly is an apprenticeship in the magical world?"

"What do you mean? What does it imply in the Muggle world?"

"Well," Justin tried to explain, "it's something some trades still have. It's nothing derogatory, although it's not really the done thing outside of some crafts and trades. This sounds a lot more prestigious."

Ernie handed his friend a mug of tea. "We have those kind of apprenticeships, too. Sometime after I leave Hogwarts, I'll probably have to do a two year accounting apprenticeship at Gringotts. But this is a magical apprenticeship, not a craft or trade apprenticeship. Harry wouldn't even have to go back to school. Zoric is responsible for teaching Harry how to be a wizard."

Justin frowned. "I don't get it. Isn't this Zoric some kind of detective?"

"He used to be an auror, and now he runs the only magical detective agency I've heard of. I imagine Dumbledore wants him to teach Harry to fight, and keep an eye on people like Snape."

"I have heard that Snape is even worse with the Gryffindors than he is with us," Justin snarled.

"Poor bastards," Ernie said with a grin.

Justin frowned. "Do you think this will mean the DA is more or less likely?"

"More, I hope."

The pair drank their tea in silence for a few moments. "Ernie?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you would have gone with Harry to fight at the Ministry?" Justin asked.

Ernie sighed. "I don't know. I'd like to think I would have, but I don't know. You?"

"I'd like to think I would have, too. We won't know, until we get the chance, right?"

Both teens wanted to become aurors, or at least go through auror training. Both believed there would be a great deal of fighting against the Dark Lord and His followers, and neither were hopeful it would be over by the time they left Hogwarts.

"Frightening, isn't it?" Justin finally said.

"It's going to be a right dirty job," Ernie agreed. "Do you think Harry will let us onto the inside track?"

Justin shrugged. "We haven't asked, let alone done much to deserve it, have we? Somehow, Harry's in the middle of all this. We either back him to the hilt now, or wait until we're done training."

"That's five more years," Ernie mused. "We might be lucky; it might be over by then."

"It might," Justin agreed. "You have your traditions, but I can't give up on mine just because I'm a wizard."

"Which traditions are those?" Ernie asked, curious. He was aware of the Finch-Fletchley's social standing, of their history of service in local and national Muggle government. If

something happened to Justin's older brother, he would become Sir Justin Finch-Fletchley, ninth baronet, upon the death of their father. Ernie knew Justin meant something more.

"Most of my ancestors were in the military," Justin answered. "My father was a naval officer until well after I was born. My grandfather was a fighter pilot during the Battle of Britain. His father and uncles volunteered to fight in the First World War. They didn't wait until they were called to fight, they volunteered. People like Malfoy aren't right about much in this world. . . ."

"That's for certain," Ernie said firmly.

"But they are partially right about one thing. In this world, you're either a leader or a follower. What Malfoy forgets is that being a leader isn't about having people follow you. Being a leader means taking the initiative; being a leader means leading by example."

"Which am I?" Ernie asked.

"Both, just like I've been," Justin retorted. "And on this issue, we've both let Zach steal a march on us. We shouldn't have let him talk the younger students out of joining the DA. You're the prefect; you're the tenth generation Hufflepuff. For that matter, you and Susan shouldn't just be the leaders of our year, but considering the new Seventh years, you two should be leading the House! Zach's family are all over the place, including Slytherin. He's going to play the percentages."

"You agreed with me at the time!" Ernie pointed out.

"I know," Justin said sadly. "I was wrong. I was wrong to talk you out of pushing harder."

Ernie sat on his bed. "No, you didn't talk me out of anything, you just agreed with me. I didn't stand up to Zach. I was so proud of myself, boasting about believing Harry, but I didn't argue with Zach."

"Do you think Potter will give us another chance?" Justin asked.

"He's always played fair," Ernie pointed out. A thought occurred to him. "Weasley will something to say, no doubt."

"He always has something to say," Justin agreed. "Of course, if he says it, then Potter doesn't have to."

Ernie smiled. "I doubt that crosses either of their minds. They're not dumb, but they aren't subtle."

"Yeah, and we are so known for our subtly," Justin said drily.

"True," Ernie admitted. "Still, I'd say we are compared to Weasley, and Harry for that matter."

"Not compared to Granger, though," Justin pointed out.

"There is a real mind," Ernie said admiringly. "The Ravenclaws really are jealous of her, aren't they?"

"If most of the Gryffindors rally behind Harry, and you and I can get a fair number of Hufflepuffs, do you think many Ravenclaws will come around?" Justin knew Ernie usually had a better grasp of school politics than he did.

"I don't know," Ernie admitted. "Cho is pretty ticked off that Harry dumped her, not to mention what happened to that sneak Edgecombe."

"It says something about Ravenclaw that they're more upset with Granger than they are with her!" Justin nearly spat in his anger.

"That plus they couldn't figure out how to get rid of the spots," Ernie pointed out with a grin. He frowned. "I wonder why Flitwick couldn't get rid of them, though?"

"Because she didn't just rat on Potter, she ratted on Dumbledore," Justin stated firmly. "She needed to be taught a lesson."

"True. Turpin and Goldstein will probably pull for Harry. Maybe Patil and even Boot, too." Ernie chewed his lip. "I wonder if the fact that Loony is rumored to have gone with them to the Ministry will help or hurt him with the other Ravenclaws."

"Hurt," Justin stated. "Padma told me just before we left that Loony's dorm mates, and some of the other girls, keep hiding all her stuff. This year, she said that the prefects had to threaten to go to Flitwick before they returned everything." Justin looked about to go on, then stopped.

"What?" Ernie said, as Justin seemed to have had a thought that had robbed him of speech.

"We know that Granger and the two Weasleys went with Potter, right?"

"Right. Longbottom, too."

"Really? I hadn't heard that."

"The older Fan told me." That was the Hufflepuff term for the two Creevy brothers. Ernie smiled. "He was jealous, of course. He also said there were five people with Harry. Two Weasleys, Granger, and Longbottom. The fifth one wasn't a Gryffindor. We know it wasn't a Hufflepuff, and it sure as hell wasn't a Slytherin. So who was the Ravenclaw?"

"So, if Loony was with Harry. . . ." Justin started.

"What?" Ernie demanded.

Justin looked at his friend. "What's the one thing, personality trait that is, about Harry Potter that we Hufflepuffs should most appreciate?"

Ernie shrugged. "He's honest, faithful, and fairly hard-working."

"Faithful, exactly. If Luna Lovegood was with Harry, and if she helped his good friends get out of there alive. . . ."

"If she did more good than harm, you mean," Ernie said.

"Exactly. If Loony, err Luna, stood up for Harry, what will Harry do?"

"Harry will stand up for her," Ernie said simply.

"Exactly."

Ernie sighed. "I don't get it. So what?"

"Would Harry rather have one person working with him he knew he could trust, or all of Ravenclaw? Or Hufflepuff?"

"Ah," Ernie said, understanding. "He will stare down the entire House if he has to."

"So I guess we'd better stop calling her Loony, just to be on the safe side."

Wednesday, August 27, 1996

Finch House, off Eton Square, London

Ernie and Justin had just returned from an afternoon's shopping in Diagon Alley. They hadn't needed to buy very much, having made two previous trips, but this would be their last chance to shop until the first Hogsmeade weekend, traditionally the weekend before Halloween, this year meaning the 26th and 27th of October. Ernie had been given a magical trunk the previous Christmas (students were not allowed them until their Fifth year), and Ernie had a 12 by 12 foot storage room available in addition to the normal trunk space. The boys were determined to fill a nice chunk of space with 'needed supplies' (butterbeer, candies, and even some canned fruit, plus other, less reputable items, including Muggle and wizard 'men's magazines'; they had also made a stop at Weasleys Wizard Wheezes).

"There you are," Justin's younger sister Joanna said with a sneer. She had had a crush on Ernie two years before, and, since he had not returned it, Joanna had decided she hated everything to do with her brother's life.

"Is there a problem?" Justin demanded.

"There's a parcel for you. I'm surprised, I must say. Do you have normal friends, or has one of your kind condescended to act in a mundane manner?"

"I don't know," Justin drawled back with an equal sneer. "Perhaps if you would tell me where it is, I can determine the sender."

"Front parlor," Joanna snapped, striding away.

"She's never going to forgive me, is she?" Ernie said as they went into the front parlor. While Ernie had nothing against Muggle-borns, as witness his friendship with Justin, he felt he could not risk actually falling for a Muggle.

"Oh, in twenty or thirty years, she might consider it," Justin said, picking up the thick envelope. "No return address." He took out a pocket knife and slit it open. Inside was another envelope and two sheets of parchment.

"Who's it from?" Ernie asked. He was stuck holding the bags, and wanted to unload them. Ernie was startled to see the serious look on his friend's face.

"Let's put this stuff away." He stuffed the contents back into the original envelope, and dragged Ernie up the stairs.

"What?" Ernie demanded when they got to the guest bedroom he was sleeping in. "What?" he demanded more insistently as Justin dragged the trunk over near the south window.

"Open the trunk. We'll need some light."

"Alright, be mysterious." Ernie opened the trunk and the pair walked down the stairs inside the trunk. "Now, what's so bloody important and secret?"

"It's from Granger and Potter."

"Ah. And they didn't send it by owl because?" Justin merely offered Ernie the parchment.

"You have the sun," Ernie said, so Justin read it aloud.

THE STUDENT DEFENSE ASSOCIATION

Dumbledore's Army

Harry Potter, Coordinator & Commander
Hermione Granger, Coordinator

Dear Justin

If I remember correctly, Ernie Macmillan spends the end of August at your parents' London home. If he is there with you, please share the contents of this note with him. If he is not, please wait until you can be assured of total privacy and open this with him then.

You and Ernie believed that Voldemort returned a year ago, and that he was responsible for the death of Cedric Diggory at the end of the Tri-Wizard tournament. The entire wizarding world learned he was back after the tragic events of last June, when Harry, myself, and four other students confronted a number of Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic, and Harry confronted Voldemort yet again, which was witnessed by several ministry officials, including the Minister.

"Like we thought, four others," Ernie said when Justin stopped for breath. "I bet the fourth was Lovegood."

Justin merely nodded.

Last year, both of you were willing to join the DA. You did this in part because we had such a worthless Defense instructor, and in part because you were convinced, with Voldemort back, you would need to know more than theory.

"I wish she's stop throwing that name around," Ernie grumbled.

Only you can know which factor was the more important to you. This year, as you probably know, Professor Remus Lupin will be returning.

"Good," Ernie stated firmly. "Werewolf or not, at least he knows what he's doing."

Justin nodded again.

However, the second factor is still valid. Voldemort is still out there. Sooner or later, the attacks will begin. Unless we are lucky, he will still be out there when we leave Hogwarts. It is possible that he may even attack Hogsmeade while students are there, or even attempt to attack Hogwarts itself.

Harry and I have permission to restart the Student Defense Association, to tutor students in Defense and allow students to practice outside of class. We will also be sponsoring physical training and self-defense (Ron Weasley will coordinate that). Fourth years and above may apply for membership. We hope we can count on the two of you to vet any Fourth and Fifth year Hufflepuffs who may wish to apply. All comments will be kept confidential.

Ernie made an 'hrrumph' sort of noise.

We also both hope the two of you would be interested in a subdivision of the Student Defense Association. It's purpose? I'll be honest with you. 1) to give Dumbledore a student auxiliary to use if necessary, should Hogsmeade or Hogwarts come under attack; 2) the next time Harry confronts Voldemort and his Death Eaters, there will not be five students to help take on the Death Eaters, there will be a group of well-trained students who can fight the Death Eaters, leaving Harry with the hardest job of all, but at least he won't have to fight two battles at once.

Are you interested? If so, open the enclosed envelope. Are you content to wait upon events until, if it is still necessary (or perhaps, if it is still even possible), you can join the fight in five years? If so, I know I can trust you both to destroy the inner envelope and its contents unopened and unread.

Hermione Granger

"Well," Ernie said after nearly a minute of silence. "This is it, isn't? We have to decide if we're serious or not."

"I know what my duty is, Ernie," Justin said. "Like I said a few weeks ago, the reason to have leaders is to lead, not to have power. That means you embrace a system or a cause because it's the right thing to do, not because it's the easy thing to do, or the convenient thing, or what's in purely our self-interest. I am a wizard. I chose this life. I either have to serve Voldemort, or I have to fight him, and I think it's better to fight early than late."

Ernie looked at his friend. He hadn't been this animated since before he had been petrified back in their Second year. "In our own ways," Justin went on, "we both believe in tradition and heritage. It's been made pretty clear that my blood-line means nothing to most Pure Bloods, but that is my heritage. We won wealth and a little prestige and power along the way, but most of us fought more for the principle. The Fletchley's lost the manor lands during the Civil War, and struggled to get it back after the Restoration. If I have to fight, I will fight. I sure as hell plan on being ready."

"You're right of course," Ernie said. "Commander Potter?"

"We can't all be the general," Justin said with a grin.

"Or the commander," Ernie agreed. "You know if we open this, and then change our mind, we'll probably be hexed worse than Edgcombe, right?"

"I know," Justin said. "But once we've given our word, it's good."

There was another letter, and another envelope.

THE STUDENT DEFENSE ASSOCIATION

Dumbledore's Army

Dear Justin and Ernie:

Thank you for joining us. I know this wasn't an easy decision for either of you; this could be life or death for you and your families. Part of our jobs this year will be to keep an eye on the other students, not to take points or to harass those we don't like or whose opinions we disagree with (like the Inquisitorial Squad did last year), but to insure the safety of Hogwarts and those students who haven't realized that they will have to choose sides sooner or later.

Let's be frank; most of the students who would welcome an invasion of Hogwarts (many of the wards can be breached during the day through an invitation, after all) will be from Slytherin. However, we can't be certain that ALL the students who might feel that way are Slytherins. I know for a fact that the current Death Eaters include a Gryffindor, a Hufflepuff, and two Ravenclaws. More difficult will be those who believe that neutrality is the best policy, and will try to frustrate our efforts in the belief that active resistance will cause more problems than it will prevent. To be active will mean leading life at multiple levels -- working with members of your House who might be against our joint goals. None of us can expect that the mere fact that we have known someone for years and consider them a friend will mean that they will not betray us, actively or passively, even if they do not actively support Voldemort. Marietta Edgcombe was a good example of that.

If you are still certain, both of you place your right hand on the remaining envelope, state your name, and say, "I swear my loyalty to Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore." One of you should be the Captain of Hufflepuff, the other the Adjutant. We leave it to you to decide which.

Hermione Granger

PS Please note our Battle Cry:

LONG LIVE CEDRIC DIGGORY!

Justin looked up. "Shall we do it, Captain?"

Ernie looked back. "Are you sure?"

"You have the badge, you have the magical heritage, you have the talent."

"Let's do it."

Chapter 10

Sunday, September 1, 1996

Zoric had sent the sextet home the previous Thursday, with Harry going to the Burrow with Ron and Ginny. Saturday evening, they came back together at the Leaky Cauldron. Sunday morning, Zoric picked them up (early of course) in an enchanted mini-van, his three daughters and their gear already present. They all noted that he 'had his mask on.'

"Daddy's going to ride with us," Irena said after Harry, Ron, and Neville were introduced to the three girls (Hermione already knew Ginny and Georgia) and Irena was introduced to the sextet.

"Lupin and I will be on the train," Tomas acknowledged.

"Just a precaution?" Hermione asked.

"Originally," Tomas acknowledged. "The Death Eaters attacked the homes of four Muggle-born students last night, and Voldemort himself led another attack on Azkaban. Wait until I can park this thing, so I can explain the results."

The nine students sat nervously for another fifteen minutes, before Tomas was able to park. Tomas turned around. "Dumbledore will announce this tonight, so you will all have to keep the details quiet. It will be in The Prophet tomorrow. Voldemort was able to free most of his imprisoned Death Eaters. Nine of the twenty-four guards were Kissed, three were apparently either working for Voldemort or under the Imperius curse. One was tortured to death, because when he saw Voldemort would win, he started killing and cursing the prisoners. Three were killed, and at least six were seriously cursed. The only one you probably need to know about now is Lucius Malfoy. Best evidence is that he's seriously injured."

"Draco will be pretty torn up, then," Hermione mused.

"While the homes of four students were attacked, in part as diversions to draw people away from being able to reinforce Azkaban when the alarms went off, it was actually just three homes. Three Gryffindor homes; four Muggle-born Gryffindor students."

"Mum!" Hermione almost shouted.

"Your home was attacked," Tomas acknowledged. "Both your parents are safe, and Rastaban Lestrangle was seriously injured and the Dementors driven off."

Ron put his arm around the shaking Hermione.

"Who else?" Harry said stonily. Luna put her arm around Harry's shoulders, which made him relax slightly.

"Dean Thomas and the Creevy brothers, and they and their families, did not survive. The Creevys actually managed to stun some of the Death Eaters attacking them. Crabbe and Goyle senior were captured, and several more Death Eaters were positively identified."

Tomas surveyed the upset and angry Gryffindors. All looked ready to cry as well. "This is war," he said simply. "This was a defeat. In a war, there will be losses. Accepting those losses should never be easy, but there will be many more losses. If you let the losses crush your spirit, then you will lose the war. This is not an easy lesson to accept." His mask slipped a bit, something his daughters had rarely seen. "I'm very sorry for your losses."

Harry looked at his mentor, his face set. "Master Tomas, you know my plans for the students, Fourth year and above." Tomas nodded. "I'll need to try to recruit the new prefects."

"Of course."

"And I need to recruit as many Fourth and Fifth years as possible in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw."

Tomas was stunned, although it didn't show. Having as many prefects as possible were needed for Harry's plans, but they would also be on the forefront should any fighting come to Hogwarts, or even Hogsmeade. Ginny Weasley was one new prefect for Gryffindor (Colin Creevy was supposed to have been her counterpart). But the DA would be right next to the prefects. And so would the trusted Fourth and Fifth years.

"Daddy," Ginny Driver said softly. "I think I should join the DA."

"No," Georgia Anderson said, very firmly for her, "we both **need** to join the DA. We should have last year." She looked at her adoptive father. "I hope we have your blessings."

Tomas nodded silently.

"And I suppose I have to just sit and watch," Irena grumped, pouting with her arms crossed.

"No," Ginny Weasley said.

"Miss Weasley!"

Ginny held her hand up. "We don't know which House you'll be sorted into. No matter where, you'll keep your ears open and your mouth shut. Sometimes older students don't notice First years. Anything you hear, you tell one of us, but you will NOT go snooping without permission."

Tomas nearly gritted his teeth in anger, but knew Weasley was right.

"Any chance she'll be Sorted into Slytherin?" Harry asked.

"Not much," Tomas said, in a slightly strained voice, "but it's always possible."

Harry turned on the little girl with such a look of concentration she almost squeaked in nervousness. "During your actual Sorting, just keep thinking, 'Anywhere but Slytherin.'" Irena nodded her agreement.

"Let's go," Hermione said.

"One more thing," Tomas said. "Malfoy and Parkinson have been replaced as prefects." All the Gryffindors smiled broadly at that. "Blaise Zabini and Tracy Davis have replaced them. The official reason was the abuse of power while some Slytherin prefects were members of the Inquisitorial Squad. This move will both make Malfoy less annoying yet more dangerous. Watch your backs, but do not antagonize him. Don't give him any excuses." They all nodded.

Tomas' three daughters shared a compartment, and Harry, Neville, and Luna sat with them. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny had been told to sound out the prefects from the other Houses, and the Head Boy and Girl, for their attitudes to the DA that year. Just before Harry had gone into the compartment, Justin had walked by and just said, "We're both with you." Harry had merely nodded and smiled. Justin understood, smiled, and moved on.

Harry was unsurprised when Draco and his two stooges showed up. He had figured they would before the prefects' meeting broke up. His wand was at the ready when he saw Draco start to open the compartment door.

"Well, Potty, this is a different group for you and the squib. A weirdo, a dyke, a slut, and a baby."

Before Harry could even think about reacting, Draco was bent over in agony. Georgia had hit him full force, with a back-handed upwardly-traveling perfectly-manicured fist right in the testicles. Ginny Driver's sensible boot then hit Draco right in the nose, breaking it and throwing him back into Crabbe. "Call us that again, and you'll be a soprano the rest of you life," Georgia snarled.

"Uh-uh," Harry warned, pointing his wand at Crabbe and Goyle. "Drag him back to your compartment, and keep him there."

They looked at each other, and decided that was probably good advice. They dragged the gagging and gasping Malfoy away, while Harry looked at the two Hufflepuffs. "I thought we weren't supposed to antagonize him?"

"I'm rather hoping Father meant it for you and your five friends," Georgia said, examining her knuckles for damage.

"I take it he taught you self-defense?"

"Actually, he had us taught," Irena piped up. When the others looked at her, she smiled shyly and snuggled back into her corner.

"I expect we'll help Ron Weasley with the DA physical training," Ginny said stoutly.

"I'll let him know," Harry said. "Just one thing, Ginny."

"What's that?"

"Could you and Ginny talk and decide something?"

"Having two Ginnys in the DA might get confusing, huh?"

"It could, and Ginny can't go just by Weasley."

"I'll go by Gin, how's that? Half the people in Hufflepuff call me that anyway."

"Sound's good."

The door opened again. Tomas Zoric was looking at them. "Do you happen to know why Malfoy has a broken nose?" he asked Harry.

Five of the students gave him a weak smile. Luna, who had picked up her Quibbler after Crabbe and Goyle had dragged Malfoy away, said, "It would probably be best for all concerned if it's put down to his tripping by accident."

"Harry?" Tomas asked warningly. "How did he break his nose?"

"I didn't touch him!"

"I did, though," Gin confessed. "He called me a slut, and Georgia a dyke, , , ,"

"And me a baby," Irena added.

"Why do I have to be the dyke?" Georgia demanded. "You're the one who wears all those ugly boots and shoes!"

"That's just a stereotype, and they're comfortable. . . ."

"And how was his nose in a position to be kicked?" Tomas broke in. He knew his two daughters could argue like this for hours.

"That would be because I hit him in the privates first," Georgia confessed.

"I admit I was surprised," Gin said. "I would have sworn he had lost those years ago, assuming he was born with any."

Tomas looked at them, then at Harry. "I have a feeling you're a bad influence, Harry," he said. "Leave your door open; he's two doors down. You might as well enjoy this."

The group listened. Luna even lowered The Quibbler.

After a few seconds, they heard Zoric. "Don't be a baby! Stop whining and let me straighten that, so I can heal it!" Draco screamed.

Neville smiled and shut the door gently.

As the five Gryffindors sat in the great hall, they were smiling at the retelling of Malfoy's misfortunes. They were smiling, that is, until Seamus Finnigan sat down. "Have any of you heard from Dean? He wasn't on the train."

Parvati and Lavender found their new seats as well -- by tradition, except for the Fifth year prefects, the students sat more-or-less by year, and the higher the year the further they sat from the teachers. The Fifth year prefects, and sometimes their friends, sat near the bottom of the table to keep an eye on the First years (and the Seconds, although that was rarely mentioned).

"The two pests were missing, too," Lavender said, referring to the Creevy brother. The smiles were wiped from the face of the five friends.

"What's happened?" Parvati asked.

"We're not supposed to say anything until after Dumbledore makes the announcement," Hermione said. "We don't know any of the details, anyway," she added.

"But something's happened," Seamus stated, a note of panic in his voice.

"Missing your better half?" Andrew Kirke, the Seventh year prefect called down jovially.

Harry looked at Andrew, whose smile quickly faded under Harry's anger. "Kirke," Harry said quietly, "we don't know the **details**, but it isn't something to laugh about."

Andrew paled. "Oh, shite," he whispered.

"Exactly," Harry said. "Now, we are all going to shut our mouths, and applaud the new students. Then, after we send the Firsties and Seconds to bed, we'll talk. All right?" He surveyed the group. "All right?" he repeated. More than a dozen pair of very wide eyes looked back, and their heads nodded in agreement.

In a few moments, Dumbledore called for silence, and the 42 First years marched nervously in. A few looked angry, and were giving Irena dirty looks. She gave them right back. Even McGonagall looked upset.

Usually, the Firsts spread out fairly but this time there was a break. Irena and a platinum blonde stood some four feet apart. Three others stood to the blonde's left, all the others stood to Irena's right. The two looked at each other with near-hatred.

"Does Malfoy have a sister?" Harry wondered to Hermione.

"He might, from the looks of it," Hermione acknowledged.

The Sorting Hat again sang a song pleading for unity. It did not get what it asked for that night.

It was by far the longest Sorting anyone could remember, even Dumbledore. Most of the students were seen moving their lips, as if arguing or pleading silently with the Sorting Hat.

In the end, there were only five students Sorted into Slytherin: Mark Bulstrode; Maurice Flint; and Andrea Pucey (the three students who had stood to the right of Bellatrix Malfoy); Malfoy herself, and a not-overly happy Edmund Zabini. There were nine Sorted into Gryffindor (including Irena and Sudipta Patil), twelve into Ravenclaw, and sixteen into Hufflepuff.

The students cheered Remus Lupin's return, and applauded Tomas Zoric politely. The students then took the news of the three student deaths mostly with a stunned silence, although Harry could see Draco Malfoy wore a smirk until he met Harry's eyes. Then he looked away from Harry's glare.

As the students got up to leave, McGonagall called Harry over for a brief discussion, then Harry ran to catch up before the First years reached the common room. Colin would have been the second Gryffindor Fifth year prefect. Leo Wood, Oliver Wood's cousin, reluctantly took his place. Before they could send the First years to their dorms, Harry asked Irena, "What happened between you and Malfoy before the Sorting?"

"One of the girls was worried about what House she might get Sorted into," Irena said simply. "I told her to ask, and she said she'd ask for Hufflepuff. Malfoy made a nasty comment about Hufflepuffs, and I said every House was better than Slytherin. She said that only those loyal in Slytherin would survive the Dark Lord's rise to power, and then Sudipta started shouting at her."

"She's a spoiled little brat!" Sudipta stated firmly. "So I said we should all say we don't want to go to Slytherin." She looked at Parvati, a bit embarrassed. "I know one of our cousins was in Slytherin, and none of that lot are evil, but Malfoy just looked so . . . blood-thirsty!"

"Like sister like brother," Ron muttered.

"And I said everyone should all say what you told me, Harry. 'Anywhere but Slytherin,'" Irena said proudly.

"We were all chanting that when Professor McGonagall came back," Marvin Budd said, still a bit frightened. "She wasn't . . . happy with us."

"Well, I guess it worked," Harry said, letting it go.

The First years were sent off to bed, and each of the other years selected a person to organize a memorial service for Dean and the Creevys. The Second and Third years were sent off to bed soon there after.

Jack Sloper, the Seventh year beater who was interested in both art and photography, and who had therefore been fairly friendly with Dean and Colin took the floor first. "Potter, we did the DA last year because we had an incompetent teacher. With Lupin back, that no longer applies. But tell me straight, Harry," he asked, calling Harry by his first name for the first time, "because you probably know. Are the Slytherins all talk, or are some of them likely to do something like trying to let Death Eaters into the school?"

"I think half of them are more or less okay," Harry answered. "Some of them would sabotage Hogwarts if they are asked to. More of them would probably tell the really active sympathizers anything they learn, without being willing to do anything themselves."

The group grumbled.

"The DA will continue as the SDA, the Student Defense Association, along the same lines as last year, plus some physical training, including self-defense and running for conditioning," Harry went on.

"And beyond that?" Lavender asked, looking very unlike her normally-fluffy self. "We could be attacked. If He-Who. . . ."

"Say the name, Lavender," Harry said firmly. "Call the bastard by his name, Tom Riddle, or by the title he made up for himself, Voldemort, but say it."

"Riddle?" she asked. "You know what His real name is?"

"We've met," Ginny said. For the first time, she told an abbreviated version of her first year run-in. Harry then told them, again for the first time, what happened after the Third Task and at the Ministry.

When he was finished, there was silence for a moment. Then Harry spoke again. "Look around this room. There are Thirty-six of us. I hope all of you will join the SDA. Some of you want to do more. Look around again. What are Gryffindors supposed to be?"

"The Bravest of the Brave!" Joyce Cooper, a loud Fourth year stated firmly and loudly.

"Does Voldemort value bravery?" Harry asked. That was met with stunned silence. "Does he want brave followers? Of course he would. What are Hufflepuffs? Loyal. He wants loyal followers. Ravenclaws are intelligent, and he would like some intelligent followers."

"What are you saying?" Andrew Kirke asked.

"Look around again," Harry said. "I don't know of any one of us who would likely be an active supporter of Voldemort. I have never heard the word 'Mudblood' in this common room. But how many of us are pure or mixed-bloods, both our parents were magical, even if one was Muggle-born?" Thirty students raised their hands. "How many are Pure-bloods, at least the third generation?" Twenty-one kept their hands up.

"Ask yourself honestly; you all know everyone at least a little. Do you trust everyone here with your life and the lives of your friends and family? I am not being dramatic; I am not being silly. That really is the question. Think about it for the next two weeks or so. Tell me before then, who do you trust with your life? Not just in Gryffindor, but the rest of the school. Not who don't you trust. I don't think any of us in the room have done anything to generate mistrust."

"And what will you do with that information, Harry?" Parvati asked.

"I intend for Hogwarts to be as safe as possible for at least the next two years. If the war is still going on as each year ends, I want you able to decide if you want to actively join in or

not, and I want to be able to tell people who they can trust, and who they can trust absolutely. Beyond that," Harry said with a shrug, "we'll see."

William Lloyd, a Fifth year, walked forward. "You all have an idea who I am. I'm as Pure-blooded as they come, and I've said so. I'm proud of that heritage, and some of you probably think I've said that too often! My mother was a Slytherin, and I had hoped I'd be in Slytherin, or Ravenclaw, like my Father. My parents would never use the term 'Mudblood,' but they don't like the Muggle-born any more than they like You-Know-Who. I'm not sure if I like the idea of Muggle-borns coming in and diluting our culture, but that's a lot different than saying they aren't worthy to be part of the magical world, and a hell of a lot different from that people like . . . Riddle believe. But, well, Colin Creevy was my mate. He made an effort to fit in, even if in some ways he was still as Muggle as they come. He didn't hate our culture, like I thought all Muggle-borns did before I came here." He looked at Hermione, tears in his eyes. "And you. You proved my parents wrong, too."

He looked at Harry. "My best mate is dead. Tell me your plans, don't tell me your plans, I don't care. After all, my sister is a Fourth year Slytherin who's pretty friendly with some of the nastier types over there. But I tell you this, Harry Potter, I am with you, no matter what." He turned and left the room.

The Gryffindors stood there for a moment, stunned, then Lavender Brown stood up. "Everyone sit down," she ordered. They did. "You all know me, too," she went on, "I've never known why I was put in Gryffindor before tonight. I've always thought I should have been in Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, like the rest of my family. I'm not a fighter by nature, but Dean Thomas was a good friend of mine, and I'm mad as hell!"

She looked at Harry. "I know I've got the biggest mouth in Gryffindor. Don't tell me anything you don't want me to accidentally slip and tell. But I say to you, Harry Potter, it's time to fight, and I am yours to command." She fled up the stairs.

Parvati Patil stood up. "It's getting late. It's certainly too late for everyone to play 'giving testimony.' If any of you outside our year want to pledge allegiance to Harry, do so on your own time. I just want to say something to a few of you." She fixed them all a hard gaze. "Look at the people accused of being Death Eaters. Look at Slytherin. What won't you see?"

She paused. "You won't see a non-European face. I grant you, there have been a few non-European Slytherins, but not many and none are there now. All the ones I know of since we've been here were transfers."

She looked around the room. "My paternal ancestors have been magical for some eighteen hundred years. One branch of my maternal lineage can be traced back, through magi that came in with Persians twenty-five hundred years ago, to ancient Babylon almost five thousand years ago. And still Draco Malfoy has called me a 'wog,' and Pansy Parkinson has called me 'nigger.'"

Parvati's pretty face suddenly looked very dangerous. "Pure ancestry is something to be proud of, but it's far from the beginning and end of what it means to be magical. Hermione is a greater witch than I am in most of the ways that count. He-who, well, Voldemort, is about bigotry and power, not Pure-Blood culture, and I won't stand for it any more! The next person that calls me a wog or worse gets walloped! The next time I hear any of you called a Mudblood or worse. . . ." She slapped one hand sharply against the other. "One small segment

of the Slytherins has been running wild for at least five years. Last year, they showed their true colors. I say, we stand together!" The students cheered. "Harry Potter, I am your to command."

Seamus stood, and just said to Harry, "I decided last year, when I finally joined the DA, that I had made up my mind to follow you. I haven't changed my mind." Seamus went up the stairs, gripping Harry's shoulder as he passed by.

Andrew Kirke, the Seventh year prefect, then said, "I'm sure we know where Granger and both Weasleys probably stand." All three nodded. "Longbottom, how about you?"

"Neville, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny are all officers of the SDA," Harry answered. "Does that answer your question?"

"Yeah," Andrew agreed, "It does. Hold on a second." Andrew and the other three Seventh year boys (Sloper, Andrew Hooper, and Abdul Hassan) conferred for a few seconds. "We're with you, Potter."

"So are we," the Seventh year girls chorused. The other students assured Harry of their support, and went to bed, leaving just Harry and the other SDA officers.

"That was . . . interesting," Hermione said to the stunned Harry.

Harry roused himself. "Tell Lavender to feel free to spread any gossip she wants to that is not about the SDA or similar topics. All the gossip she gets in return, have her tell Ginny."

"Right," Hermione said gently. She kissed Harry on the cheek and Ron on the lips, and said good night. Ginny kissed Harry and Ron on the cheek, Neville on the lips, and followed.

"I'd better go to bed, too," Neville said nervously, as Ron glared at him.

"Don't we get a kiss, too?" Harry teased, which made Ron laugh. Neville decided Harry was giving him a good excuse to escape.

Chapter 11

Monday, September 2, 1996

There had obviously been some late-night planning done in the girls' dormitories the previous night after the boys had retired. At 6:50, the Sixth year boys' room was invaded by Ginny Weasley. "ALL RIGHT, YOU SLUG-A-BEDS! EVERYONE UP!"

"Mum!" a very frightened Ron Weasley squealed.

"No, it's not Mum!" Ginny stated firmly. "However, you'll wish it was if every one of you is not out of this room, and down in the common room, fully dressed, in fifteen minutes!"

"Why?" Seamus asked with a yawn.

"Because last night we all, at least the Fourth years and above, swore to follow Harry. We might not do this every morning, but by Merlin we go to breakfast as a House **THIS** morning. **NOW ROLL OUT OF THOSE BEDS!**"

"Frightening, isn't it?" Harry asked Neville and Ron with a grin.

They managed to get down the stairs by 7:10. The last drifters, from the Second year, were there by 7:15. Lavender Brown walked to stand in front of the entrance, but this was a very different-looking Lavender than the usually well-made up and coiffured fashion-plate. The older boys noticed with shock that none of the girls were wearing make-up, none of them had their hair done up. Those with longer hair all had it pulled back in knots or braids, even Hermione.

"Outside these walls," Lavender proclaimed, "our world is at war. We hope that by the time most of us have left Hogwarts, there will be peace. But that might not happen. And until we have peace, we DON'T have the time to paint our faces and varnish our nails and do our hair every morning."

"Tough luck there, Finnigan," Sloper teased Seamus. Lavender had varnished his toe nails green once two years before, and none by-passed the chance to tease him.

"Well, that's a sacrifice I'll just have to make for the cause," Seamus retorted.

Lavender smiled as the rest of the group laughed. "If you want to do those things on your own during the rest of the week, fine," she said in a more normal voice, "but one day a week, we all go together like this. To make up for it, for now Saturday mornings, from Seven-thirty through Nine, is beauty time." She went on, "Hair-cuts and styling, nails, facials, the works. Boys who want to experience the beauty regimen are invited." That brought more laughs.

"Today, we're going to breakfast as a group to show our unity. Mondays are the hardest day to do this, so every Monday we will go like this. Starting later this week, the jogging club will be

operating, but Mondays are for House unity! We go by years." She turned to the First years. "Sara Parker and Andrew Kirke, the Seventh year prefects will lead, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, the Sixth year prefects, bring up the rear, Ginny Weasley and Leo Wood are between the Second and First years."

The House started to line up. Sara Parker turned to Harry. "We're the prefects, Potter, but you are now the Leader of the House. Shall we go?"

"Actually, we should let Ron and Hermione lead, with the First years right behind," Harry said. "That way we can march right into our seats. We don't want to march around and look either stupid or too militaristic."

"Right," Sara said. "You heard the boss!"

"The CHIEF!" Four Fourth years yelled.

"And leave seats for Dean and the Creevys!" Harry ordered. "We won't forget them!"

"And yes, we do want to look a little militaristic!" Hermione called out from near the exit, to everyone's surprise. "It's not everyone's style -- many Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs, and even the odd Slytherin or two, are going to be just as committed as any one of us. But they will act and react different. That's one of the strengths to the Student Defense Association and Dumbledore's Army! We must play to our strengths as individuals and the group! We are the warriors!"

"**WE** are the Defenders of the True Ways of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" Ginny Weasley declared, taking up the call to arms and making Ron stare at her in shock. It was like seeing his mother as a teenager, still with all her fire and drive. Ron was not used to thinking of girls like Ginny, Hermione, or Lavender as steely warriors, rather than cuddly objects, but here they were, leading the charge. "The True Ways are Ways of culture and knowledge, not of power and blood! Down with Riddle and Death Eaters!" While of course having no desire to cuddle his sister, Ron realized that none of the girls were play-acting this morning, and they had not been merely posing the night before. He also noticed that Lavender, Parvati, and a number of other girls, who normally sported long nails, had filed them down, leaving sharp points.

Harry ignored the oblivious Ron and stood on a chair, swept up by the moment and the cheers that had greeted Ginny's speech. "Remember, we are a group, a family, not a mob!" he warned. The group quieted down a little. "And we are never acting for ourselves! Remember the Battle Cry of the War; we will say it every Monday before sitting for breakfast! **REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!**"

"REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!"

"And never forget our House response! **'AND REMEMBER THOMAS AND THE CREEVYS!'**"

"AND REMEMBER THOMAS AND THE CREEVYS!"

Harry jumped down. "Let's go!"

It was a sight that had never been seen in the 1000 years and more that Hogwarts had been in existence -- an entire House on the march, as if for war.

The march created a magical synergy of its own. No orders were given to march in step, but by the time they hit the first set of stairs, the 66 Gryffindors were in lock-step. Suits of armor snapped to attention and presented arms. The somewhat confused First and Second years were caught up with the excitement, but all the others were deadly serious. They would explain later to the youngsters who Cedric Diggory had been, who their own House martyrs had been, and if necessary, who Harry was.

Peeves took one look at the group and fled screaming in terror. Filch took one look, and decided it was time to at least consider retirement. Nick and the Bloody Baron stopped their argument and stared, and then to everyone who noticed surprise, the Baron raised his sword in tribute. Harry saluted back. Students from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw that they approached either rushed ahead or pressed back against the walls.

As was usual, one of the two doors in the great doorway was closed. It swung open on its own accord. Ron led his column down the left side of the table, Hermione down the right.

As the door swung open, it drew the attention of everyone in the great hall -- all the staff except the Divination teachers and Binns, and 3/4's of the students were already there. When the marching Gryffindors entered the room, still in perfect time, the staff stood, not in tribute, but in a combination of amazement and even a little fear. The same could be said of the students of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

The fear factor was higher at the Slytherin table, at least amongst a select group.

As the Seventh year prefects stopped in front of their seats, Harry, Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender screamed, "REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!"

And the entire House responded, "**AND REMEMBER THOMAS AND THE CREEVYS!**"

In the stunned silence that came after, Severus Snape's voice was clearly heard. "What the HELL was that!"

Remus Lupin's voice was also clearly heard, "That, my dear colleague, was the beginning of the end of the Dark Lord."

The first class most Sixth years had was N.E.W.T. Charms on Mondays from 8:00 to 9:20, with 27 of the Sixth year taking the class. Seamus was the only Gryffindor not taking it, taking the vocational 'Practical Charms' instead.

Flitwick was known as an excellent and fairly easy-going teacher. He stressed, however, the importance of discipline in learning the more-advanced Charms and the theories behind them.

When he told the class to divide into threes, most were shocked to see the Trio not working together. While they would study together, Harry had already asked that they work with students from other Houses where possible. He wanted the Houses to integrate as much as they could reasonably be expected to.

Harry therefore teamed up with Susan Bones and Lisa Turpin from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw respectively; Ron teamed up with Ernie and Justin and Hermione teamed with Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst. Parvati and Lavender teamed with Su Li, a devoted follower of Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecombe, figuring that would be one way to keep an eye on the pair, and hopefully help Harry by dropping nice hints about Luna (a favor Hermione had asked them to do wherever possible). Neville paired with Hannah Abbott and Megan Jones, two students he knew well from independent work in the greenhouses.

Harry was glad to see that Malfoy was not taking this class. When the Gryffindors compared notes later that week, they discovered Draco was taking just 5 N.E.W.T. classes: Potions; Transfiguration; Defense; Runes; and Arithmancy.

The first meeting was basically organizational, and as they were let out early, Flitwick called Harry over. "Go on," Harry told the others. Ron had the N.E.W.T. Creatures class at 9:30, Hermione had the time free, and Harry had the N.E.W.T. Muggle Studies class (he would also attend the 1:00 Monday and Friday sessions of the O.W.L. Muggle Studies class, to make up some of the material, although he would have to skip Wednesdays).

"Quite a demonstration this morning, Mister Potter," Flitwick said.

"Yes, sir," Harry answered in a non-committal tone.

"I see," Flitwick mused. "Any way, the Headmaster would like to see you, and just you, at Eleven forty-five. The password is 'pumpkin pie'."

"Yes, sir, thank you," Harry replied. Harry stopped in mid-turn. "Professor Flitwick?"

"Yes, dear boy?" When Harry hesitated, Flitwick said, "I understand. Talk with the Headmaster, and then see me some time after he approves. We'll talk."

In part because of the coaching Hermione, Luna, and Ginny had given him, and of course because of his own background, Harry wasn't too far behind in Muggle Studies. The O.W.L. was basic culture and technology, the N.E.W.T. was politics and advanced technology. He didn't know any of the six girls well who were in the class with him (Mandy Brocklehurst, Su Li, Morag McDougal, Padma Patil, Eloise Midgen, and Sally-Ann Perks), although Padma Patil was one of the three Sixth year Ravenclaws Hermione had selected to be the seed members of the DA.

The girls seemed more interested in Harry's reasons for being in class than in anything, and he went over his reasons for the class. All six were Pure-Bloods of at least three generations standing, and Padma, backed up by Mandy and Morag, declared that he would be a valuable resource for the class. Su Li looked rather more doubtful.

Harry presented himself at the entrance to Dumbledore's office well-before 11:45. He had gone back to his room at 11:00 and dropped his books, so that he could go directly to lunch. Harry hesitated, and took his invisibility cloak. He slipped the cloak on, and went and watched the entrance. Harry knew the most likely reasons for the odd time was either that Dumbledore had a previous meeting, or he wanted other staff to be present.

Sure enough, at 11:40, Snape and Remus Lupin approached the gargoyle from different directions. Snape snarled a bit at Lupin, then the pair gave the password and went up to the Headmaster's office.

"Take that silly thing off and come along," Tomas Zoric said from behind Harry.

Harry jumped, but didn't say anything. He slipped the cloak off. "How did you know?"

"Various ways, which we will discuss sooner or later in your training," Zoric told him as Harry folded the cloak up and slipped it into the empty main pocket of his bookbag. "We will do our sessions Tuesdays and Thursdays, starting at One."

"Alright. I was hoping you'd be here, by the way," Harry said while his mentor said the password.

"I hope you think so after we're finished," Zoric said, hopefully teasingly, although Harry couldn't be certain.

"Come in!" Dumbledore called. "Harry, Professor Zoric, please sit." McGonagall was also present.

"Now. . . ." Dumbledore started, when he was interrupted by Snape.

"What the hell were you doing this morning, Potter? Trying to start a war?"

"Severus. . . ." Dumbledore started again.

"In case it has escaped your attention," Harry told Snape coldly, "there is already a war going on, Professor Snape! Now, I'm sure you won't believe me, but I had nothing to do with what went on this morning, except that I refused to try and kill it. What you saw is how the House of Gryffindor, at least the Fourth through Seventh years, feels."

"And you admit you did nothing to stop it!" Snape accused.

"That's right! We are not machines! We are not toys that you or the Headmaster or the Order of the Phoenix, or the Ministry can turn on and off! The feeling is there! Clamp down on it now, and it won't be there when you need it!"

"We cannot not allow a paramilitary group of any kind in Hogwarts! I will not be dictated to by the students!"

"I didn't see you complaining, let alone helping the rest of the students, last year when all of Umbridge's storm troopers came from your House . . . sir!" Harry snapped back.

"I . . ." Snape yelled, standing up and turning rather red in the face. "I . . ." He realized he had no defense he could proclaim. He had tried to reason with the students, told them not to join the Inquisitorial Squad, and he had failed. He was not about to admit to a failure in front of Potter.

"Now, we are not going to be the Order of the Phoenix's version of the Inquisitorial Squad," Harry said firmly. "I will not stand for intimidation along the same lines they used, and I wouldn't want us to have the same prefectural powers they used and abused. We, and I don't just mean Gryffindor, have to be prepared to fight. What will happen if Death Eaters attack here, or Hogsmeade while we're there? We will be organized and ready. And if Voldemort. . . ."

"Don't say his name!" Snape demanded.

"If Tom Riddle Junior," Harry said in a very sarcastic voice, "is still active as we all leave Hogwarts, we will be ready to join in the fight, either through the Ministry or the Order or both."

"The SDA will NOT have prefectural powers," Dumbledore said quietly. "I will not allow intimidation of any kind, by either side. However, Severus, I think you must admit that we have failed with some of the students, especially in Slytherin."

"Draco Malfoy was leading a minor Death Eater mission this summer," Tomas stated. "I would not be surprised if he already has the Mark."

"I don't believe all the Slytherins are bad, let alone that they would all back Riddle," Harry said to Snape, now in an almost pleading voice. "Help us work with the Slytherins that will help in the fight."

Snape looked torn.

"This isn't the way we operated in the last confrontation," McGonagall said softly, "but I think we all have to admit that we didn't fare terribly well then, either. I will keep an eye on the Gryffindors. Professors Lupin and Zoric will keep an eye on all the members of the SDA."

"Harry is right about one thing," Zoric added. "If we try and clamp down on the feeling of revulsion that created this militant feeling, we can never recapture it. I think it's a good thing. We will just have to keep a close eye on it."

"I will not forego my objections," Snape declared, "but I will not press them for the moment." He turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, if I am no longer required?"

"Sir?" Harry asked.

"What is it, Potter?"

"That's Mister Potter," Zoric growled.

"What?" Snape demanded.

"You and my apprentice have a bad history. I am trying to break him of the bad habit of not calling you Professor Snape; it would help if you addressed him properly as well."

"Very well, what is it, **MISTER** Potter?"

"We would welcome any information you might have for us."

Snape's breath was taken away at Harry's audacity. Dumbledore finally said, "We shall discuss that and let you know, Harry."

Snape fled.

"Shall we lunch?" Dumbledore asked those remaining. "Harry can then fill us in on his plans."

"And perhaps I can be told some things as well?" Harry suggested.

"Such as?"

"Such as what staff I can consult?"

The SDA would meet Monday evenings. This first Monday, however, the group meeting was smaller. Harry and the five who had gone with him to the Ministry were meeting with Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Susan Bones, and Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff, and Lisa Turpin, Padma Patil, and Anthony Goldstein from Ravenclaw.

"First of all, I'd like to thank you all for coming," Harry said. "I know we can count on you."

"To do what, exactly?" Anthony asked.

"We plan on two interlocking groups," Harry answered. "The SDA is open for all students, Fourth year and above, along the same lines as the DA last year. We'll even encourage Slytherins to join, although we won't allow the more obvious bigots and pro-Death Eaters in. We would allow them, even Malfoy, to join the jogging club."

"The DA will be those we feel we can really trust and who are really committed to fighting both Voldemort and his influence. The six of us are already committed, and we're hoping you will join us."

"You already have Justin's and my answer," Ernie said.

"That's right," Justin said. "I hope that doesn't mean we parade with you every morning, though."

Harry smiled. "No. As Hermione said to us this morning, in a sense the Gryffindors are more militaristically inclined than the other Houses, although individuals may vary. We are going to march every Monday morning. Each House will have to find its own way."

"That's good," Padma said, "I don't see us marching in step."

"Are you more than interested?" Hermione asked. "Remember, fighting Voldemort can be deadly."

"If you want a blood oath, I'll give you one, Potter," Ernie said.

"I'll do it," Justin said.

"So will I," Susan Bones stated firmly.

"And I," Hannah Abbott said.

"I don't think that should be necessary," Harry replied.

"And what is Loo . . . err, Lovegood's position?" Anthony asked.

"Luna and Neville are on the Executive Committee, along with myself, Hermione, Ginny, and the House Captains," Harry stated firmly.

"I'd like to talk with my two colleagues here," Anthony said.

They came back a few minutes later. "We're interested. Go on, Harry," Padma said.

"Each House needs a Captain," Harry said. "We think it should be a Sixth year. Hermione is the over-all coordinator. Ron will be the Captain of Gryffindor. Ginny is in charge of intelligence."

"Well, you should know our problem," Padma said. "There are two more people we need if we can even try and approach House unity, or at least prevent a great deal of problems."

"The easier one to convince would be Terry Boot," Lisa told them.

"I don't think Cho would be particularly interested," Luna said in a detached manner, "especially since she's dating Michael, who claims that the Dark Lord isn't as dangerous as everyone says he is, and she is even closer to Marietta than she was last year."

"Luna is probably right," Lisa said. "I don't think Ravenclaw, as a House, can be as supportive as Hufflepuff, let alone Gryffindor."

"Julia and Mark will support Cho," Padma said, referring to the Head Girl and Seventh year prefect. "Mitch will come along with us; I'm not sure about Maureen." Those were the Fifth year prefects.

"Well, why don't you work things out amongst yourselves," Harry said. "Lisa and I can talk after the auror's potions class."

Everyone agreed to that.

"What about us?" Susan then asked. "What do you have planned for Hannah and me?"

"Well," Hermione answered, "Hannah is supposed to be the best potions brewer in our class. . ."

"Even Snape admits that," Hannah said with a grin, "and boy does he hate it when he has to!"

"We were wondering if you and Hermione could produce some potions for us, if I can get you the lab space," Harry asked her.

"Sounds great!" Hannah answered.

"And me?"

"You and Lisa have a friend we'd like to explore," Harry answered.

"Tracy?" Susan asked, referring to the new Sixth year Slytherin prefect.

"And through her Zabini and maybe even Greengrass," Harry answered.

"Maybe Tracy and Zabini," Susan said. "I don't see Daphne as an active supporter of You-Know-Who, but her uncle was one of the ones who was arrested last June. I know her father and he don't get along, but she still might be pretty neutral right now."

"Think about it," Harry said. "Lisa and I can talk after class Wednesday and maybe set up a meeting time for more of us. SDA meetings will be Monday evenings. Slytherin has been booked into the Monday night slot all year for all their practices, and none of the upper classes will have Astronomy practicals Monday nights."

"Alright then," Ernie said, "I guess we have our assignments!"

They all noticed that Harry walked Luna back to the Ravenclaw common room.

Chapter 12

Wednesday, September 4, 1996

"Don't know why we have to be down here so blasted early," Ron grumbled, barely coherent, as the group moved into the dungeons. "Why did we have to leave so early?"

"Is he always like this in the morning?" Lisa Turpin asked.

"I'm afraid so," Harry answered. "At least he won't be demanding any early morning Quidditch practices."

"This isn't the pitch," Ron mumbled as Neville steered him away from hitting a wall -- again.

"I hope someone is watching where we're going," Harry said as he helped Neville steer Ron.

"Why **are** we going so early, anyway?" Neville asked. "I mean, I know the schedule said we had to show up an hour and fifteen minutes early for the first lesson, but why?"

"Snape is going to have to teach this class at the same time he's doing the Sixth year N.E.W.T. class," Terry Boot answered. "They're from Eight to Ten-Fifty, we're 10 to Ten-fifty."

"That's going to be tricky," Justin commented.

"Exactly," Lisa answered. "So, given the choice of spending class time with us or the N.E.W.T. folks. . . ."

"We show up early, so he can get us started," Ernie finished.

"OR so he can early an early start yelling at us," Harry grumbled. "Where are we going?"

"The regular potions lab and the N.E.W.T. potions lab are in the parallel corridor," Lisa said. "Our's must be an adjoining lab, which should be around this corner," she added as they reached it.

"Very astute," Snape said with his usual sneer as he stood outside the closed door. "Weasley! Awaken!"

"I'm awake!" Ron almost yelled, startled into consciousness.

"Good! Now, as Miss Turpin astutely said, this lab is next to the N.E.W.T. lab. One door leads to a storage room that lies between this lab and that, while the other leads to my offices. As with the N.E.W.T. lab, we will be accessing ingredients and making potions that are NOT to be taken from the lab without permission. That also means that access to this lab will be limited. This block," he continued, pointing to a white slab in the wall, "is a recognition block. When I tell you to, you will place your right hand on it and state your name, then I will close the recognition. Boot, you first. Key Terry Boot."

Terry placed his hand on the slab. "Terry Boot."

"Authorized." The door opened. "Go in and shut the door. If more than one person tries to enter at a time, they will be frozen in the doorway until I or the Headmaster release them." He quickly worked through the students.

The lab was a mess, to say the least. Not a jumble, or a wreck, but incredibly dusty and with little equipment. "You have until Ten am next Wednesday to have this lab totally clean. To answer your first question, you may use magic."

"Now, by the end of next year, you will have a list of seventy-five potions memorized, and will have made them each correctly at least once. You will be making six of those potions as the practical portion of your aurors exam, and answering questions about the others, and their ingredients, for the other portion. There are no further techniques than you will have to learn, you all have the basics required for these potions and for the auror exams."

Snape paused, but no one asked any questions. "Three of the potions will take a great deal of time and effort. All the potions you will memorize are described on that stack of hand-outs on the teacher's desk. Aurors must be able to act as a team, as well act as lone agents. Many of these potions will test that ability." He waved his arm around the room. "Those shelves are yours. These are where you will leave your bottled potions for testing. You have free access to the storage room. There are twelve potions marked which you shall NOT attempt to brew without supervision. You will decide together when you will try any of those, and inform me two weeks ahead of time."

He surveyed the group. "I shall assign partners. By now, I know your abilities fairly well. You may choose your own work tables, one pair per station. When you are doing the larger team potions, you may use the teacher's desk. I suggest you choose a coordinator; that will likely work better than if I assign one. So, Longbottom/Bones, Weasley/Finch-Fletchley, Potter/Turpin, and Macmillan/Boot. Good luck." He turned to go through the door to his offices, but stopped. He turned to Harry. "Provided your other work is ahead of schedule, this lab is also open for experimental work. If there are any N.E.W.T. students you feel you would like to work with, let me know, and I shall key them in." He left in a swirl of black robes.

The eight teens stood there, jaws open, except for Ron, whose eyes were closed. "Now what?" Lisa asked.

"Well," Terry started, but Ernie raised his hand. "What?"

"Tell me, Boot, would you feel the need to become an auror, if it wasn't for, well, Voldemort?"

Ron's eyes shot open, and everyone looked at Ernie. "It's a name," Ernie snapped. "If I'm going to face his people, I have to at least try to say the bloody name. Now, I have a nice family firm to go into if I want. But I decided I have an obligation, too. Since I think I can do this, I should do it."

"The same with me," Susan said. "I mean, I always intended to go into the MLES, but I didn't decide until last year it should be as an auror."

"What's this got to do with cleaning up this lab?" Terry demanded.

"I think they're trying to tell us they consider this class an extension of the SDA," Lisa said, looking at Harry. "That means Harry Potter is in charge."

"Is that true, Potter?" Terry asked.

"If that's what you all agree on," Harry answered. "That wouldn't mean I should run things in the class."

"You'd be in charge, but not run things? That doesn't make any sense."

"Harry is the over-all boss, he's not a dictator," Justin said quietly. "That means he delegates authority, and pulls his weight in class."

"I take it you two agree?" Terry asked, turning to Ron and Neville.

"That's right," Neville answered, before Ron could. Ron nodded.

"I agree, too," Susan said.

Terry scratched his head, not because he really disagreed, but because this was an unexpected twist. "They're right," Lisa said softly.

"A moment with my associate," Terry said, moving over to a far corner.

"What's your problem?" Lisa hissed. "We talked about this. If the SDA, let alone the DA, is going to do anything this year, if we're going to get out of the Ivory Tower and put our galleons where our mouths are, then Harry is the person to follow."

"It's not going to be an easy sell, if he's friends with Loony," Terry argued. "And why does that mean this class?"

"It's worse than that," Lisa said, amused and ignoring the second question, "they're dating."

"WHAT!" That drew closer attention to the pair, and Terry dropped his voice. "How can we sell that!" he whispered fiercely.

"Did you know she was with Harry and the other Gryffindors at the Ministry?" Lisa asked.

"She told us Sunday night. Granger told me Monday, and Ginny Weasley told the Fifth years that it was not only true, but she put up the best fight after Potter!"

"You're having me on!"

Lisa shook her head. "Padma and I are talking with the girls. Luna is, well. . . ."

"Loony," Terry said firmly.

"Eccentric," Lisa supplied. "If Harry Potter and Hermione Granger trust her, if Harry Potter likes her, who is he going to trust and support? Luna or all the rest of the Ravenclaws? Even assuming that everyone else would rally to us," she added bitterly. "There's a chance that

You-Know-Who will at least attack Hogsmeade, if not Hogwarts. Do you want to cower in the common room? Because I certainly don't!"

"So, we make nice with Loony, I mean Luna, and try to rally the House to Dumbledore and Harry?"

"Exactly."

"What about the girls in her year? Padma has been trying to stop them from harassing her for years. And some of our year and the Seventh years have been helping."

"Marietta and Su Li, egged on by Cho, no doubt," Lisa said bitterly.

"Cho's always disliked Luna, and now she's been down on Potter since they broke up or whatever, **and** has had it in for Granger even before Marietta turned us in. Harry dating Loony-a, err, Luna could make that worse."

"Did you know Maureen was called to talk with Professor Dumbledore Monday morning?" Lisa asked, referring to the Fifth year prefect.

"No, but what's that got to do with Luna?"

"He told her that her position as prefect in part depended on the treatment Luna got from the Ravenclaw girls. When she asked why it was necessary to change now, Dumbledore said he had hoped that the childishness would have ended by now, but since it hadn't, he felt compelled to defend an officer of the SDA."

"An officer?" Boot shook his head, as if to clear it. "I didn't know there even were officers, except Potter and maybe Granger."

"And the two Weasleys, Longbottom, and Luna. And, I suspect, Macmillan is going to be in general charge of Hufflepuff."

A wave of ambition crested in Terry Boot's heart, but he drove it down ruthlessly. "Does that mean Luna is going to be in charge of Ravenclaw? Because if it does, who would follow her?"

"Cho has already rallied the Seventh years to neutrality," Lisa answered. "As for our year, Anthony, Padma, Mandy, Morag, and I have decided to go with Harry, even if that means following Luna."

"And when did you all decide this?" Terry demanded.

"In a series of one-on-one meetings Monday and yesterday," Lisa answered. "We decided to wait until this morning for me to talk to you."

Terry stood in silence for a moment, but decided that it wasn't helpful. He looked up. "Potter! I mean, Harry, may I have a talk with you?"

"Sure," Harry said coming over.

"Is it true that Loo, err, Luna Lovegood is an officer of the SDA?"

Harry nodded.

"May I ask why?"

"Because she had the bad luck to follow me to the Ministry last June, and she proved there that despite her seeming disconnected to the everyday world, she is very capable and deserving my, and the Headmaster's, trust." Harry looked at Terry. "No, it's not because we're dating, even though we are."

"I want to stay part of the SDA, and I'd like to help with the new DA," Terry said carefully, "but I hope you'll understand that, for those of us who have known her awhile, that it's not easy to believe that she's that . . . helpful."

"I know that," Harry replied. "We talked about who should be the lead person for Ravenclaw. Ernie is for Hufflepuff, so we thought it probably should be Goldstein or Padma. They both said they would do it, but suggested you or Lisa." Harry turned and was facing Lisa. He turned back to Terry. "If Lisa accepts, will that make things easier for you?"

Boot thought about it. He wanted to be a leader, but knew he wasn't the most popular member of his year by any means. "Easier for me, and for us to recruit in the Fifth and Fourth years," Terry answered.

"Try to at least get everyone involved in the jogging club, Harry said.

"How will that work when Weasley can't wake up?" Lisa teased.

"Oh, we'll get him dressed at 6:30, and just push him at 6:45," Harry said. "He'll run like a robot for half an hour." The two Ravenclaws smiled.

"About the lab," Terry then stated, bringing the rest of the group into the discussion. "What do you suggest . . . chief?"

"Who's the best in Potions from your group?" Harry asked.

"Lisa," Terry and Ernie both said.

"Do you want to be the straw boss?"

Lisa smiled. "As long as that doesn't mean I have to do all the cleaning, yes."

"Cleaning, no; scheduling, yes," Harry answered.

"You'll get me copies of everyone's schedules?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Then yes."

"One more thing," Harry added to the whole group, now very serious. "There are four pairs of us, but twelve work tables. We need to clean everything, of course, but I'd like to set five tables off in one corner by themselves. Hermione and Hannah, and maybe some others, will be working on DA potions here. It's none of our business what they're doing, and it's nobody's business, not even other members of the DA, that they're here. Three tables are for them, one will be for Hannah's experiments, and one will be reserved for any later DA use."

"The need to know?" Justin said.

"Exactly."

"What's that?" Terry asked.

"We don't need to know everything that's going on. We just need to know what we need to know," Justin stated. "The less we know about other DA members' activities, the less we can let slip."

"Probably about half the Slytherins are active or passive supporters of Voldemort," Harry said, ignoring the wincing that caused. "Do you want to swear on your life that there aren't any passive members in all three of the other Houses? Anything we say in public can get back to someone like Malfoy, who could send it on."

"A point of information," Terry said. "I know you and Malfoy don't like each other, and of course his father is a Death Eater. Does that make him an active or a passive supporter, or a possible informant?"

"What?" Ron demanded.

Harry stopped Ron before he got carried away. "I can't tell you how I know, but I know he's active. I don't know if he got the Mark yet, but he's active enough to have been on at least one mission for Voldemort. Any member of the Inquisitorial Squad will be classified as at least a passive supporter of Voldemort. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle are the only ones currently classified as active." The group nodded their understanding. "One more thing. Every student Third year and under is to be considered a possible informant, if only because we all tended to chatter too much at that age. Listen to them carefully, look out for them, especially if there's any recent Muggle ancestry, but don't talk in front of them about SDA business. That will apply to Gryffindors as much as any one else."

Everyone looked thoughtful. It was clear they didn't like it, but understood the necessity.

"Just one more thing, or rather two or three people." Harry looked Terry in the eye.

"Edgecombe, Corner, and Chang?" Terry asked, a little nervous.

Harry nodded. "Those three, and Zach Smith, are the only members of last year's DA I'm really worried about at all."

"Tell me, if you trust me that is, who do you trust in our year, and who don't you trust?"

Harry looked Terry in the eye. "I'll tell you what. Let's get this place cleaned, and I'll think about it. By Friday afternoon, I'll use that chalkboard over against the far wall and have a

preliminary list. We'll probably be partially wrong, and some people will be justifiably upset if they hear about it, but we'll work on it. In return, you'll evaluate each of the Ravenclaws, Third year and above. Not as to how much you like them, but can you trust them with your life. Alright?"

Terry nodded. "I understand."

After the class time was over, Neville went off to Herbology. Ron hesitated, and then followed Harry. Harry, who had forgotten Ron was taking Herbology, had asked Ron to come with him. "Where are we going?"

"To see Dumbledore," Harry answered. "Come on. I've got an appointment."

"But. . . ."

"Come on!"

Harry led Ron to the stone guardian. "Spring Surprise."

"Ah, Harry, Mister Weasley," Dumbledore was genial once they entered the office. "To what do I owe this appointment?"

"Well, sir," Harry said, "you got my note yesterday about splitting the DA into the general SDA and the DA, and the detailed plans you wanted Monday?."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. I believe you are proceeding on the presumption that I will agree?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said firmly. "What I do not know is if you will provide us with access to an area we can use to meet and plan."

"What do you need besides the Room of Requirement and the potions lab?"

"Are we going to get a gymnasium?" Harry asked.

"Madam Hooch is working with Professor Zoric on that. We should have someplace set up for you all by the end of the month. What else?"

"The Room of Requirement is easily breached. Some place down in the disused dungeons might work better. I'd also like a largish room that can be fairly well secured, like a disused classroom. We'd use it as a research room. Ideally, we'd have a smaller room available for the officers to meet in, also secured."

"Who are your officers, besides the group who went to the Ministry?"

"Right now, Lisa Turpin and Ernie Macmillan as the main two, with a few other sixth years."

Dumbledore nodded approval. "What would you need for these rooms?"

"Mats and padding for the dungeon practice area. For the other two rooms, library tables, chairs, file cabinets if there are any available, pigeon holes if they are not. And, if there are any spare movable chalkboards, that would be great."

"Yes, I believe that is all reasonable and doable," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. We need to have accurate information on each student. If you or the other staff know or believe they have information on their reliability, we need it. If there is someone working for you that you don't want us to know about, then of course you should keep it from us. However, we need to know who we can't trust."

"I understand, Harry. I shall start the process. There is one thing, however."

"Yes, sir?"

"No offensive actions, Harry. That is too dangerous a path for your group at this time."

Harry sat back and thought a moment. He could see some of the paintings peeking at him, trying to pretend to be sleeping. Finally, Harry asked, "Does that include intelligence gathering?"

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to think hard. He then said, "Inside the grounds and castle only; Hogsmeade only on Hogsmeade weekends. No penetrating the Slytherin common room or dormitories until further notice."

"No penetrating Slytherin by non-Slytherins at this time," Harry amended.

Dumbledore nodded. "That is what I meant, of course. Like you, I hope many of the Slytherins will see sense before long. Is the potions lab satisfactory for outside-of-class needs?"

"If Professor Snape leaves five of the work stations alone, yes. We will, of course, reimburse the potions budget for anything we use."

"That will be satisfactory. Is there anything else you would like, Harry?"

"No sir," Harry said. "Unless you know of some way to simulate a dementor. I rather think that might no longer be my greatest fear, so finding a boggart wouldn't help."

"Dementors are easy to simulate in form, but not in effect," Dumbledore mused. "You are right; the Patronus is one of the most important things for the students to practice. I will look into the possibilities."

"Thank you, sir."

As Ron and Harry went off for an early lunch, Ron said, "I must say, that was weird!"

"Why do you say that?"

"It was so, tense," Ron answered, looking at Harry worriedly. Harry shrugged. Ron didn't want to say anything, but it was more like the bargaining between two equals rather than Headmaster/student.

Chapter 13

Friday, September 6, 1996

Harry and Hermione arrived at the Auror potions lab at 7:45. They were right on time, as Snape came out of the door. He was there to key Hermione in.

After he did so, Snape turned to Harry. "Have you talked with Miss Turpin about the arrangements for the class, Potter?"

"No, sir," Harry answered. "She and Boot should be here around Ten. We're going to talk then."

"Very well." Snape looked at the two of them with a scowl deeper than usual. Finally, Snape turned to Hermione. "Are you sure you want those ingredients, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir."

Snape seemed to repress a sigh. "Very well. It is against my judgement, however the Headmaster wishes you . . . accommodated." He gestured them into the room and shut the door, then turned to Harry and handed him a piece of parchment. "You will destroy this completely, **BEFORE** Boot and Turpin arrive. Neither of you will ever mention this to **ANYONE**, other than the Headmaster. You will not mention the obvious details outside your command structure. You will never even mention its source directly to each other. Understand?"

The two amazed students quickly agreed. Snape turned on his heel and stalked from the room.

"What is it?" Hermione asked quietly as Harry opened the note and glanced at its contents.

"It's an evaluation of each of the Slytherin students, and some leads on some of the others," Harry said in amazement. He looked at it again, holding it so that Hermione could read it as well.

"It doesn't change our evaluation of the Sixth years, does it?" Hermione said, looking at Harry's stunned expression rather than the note.

"Except for these names," Harry said, pointing them out.

"Oh, dear," Hermione said. "Good thing we don't like them much, let alone trust them."

"True. I'll have to adjust the list."

"Don't change it much now," Hermione warned. "We'd have to justify it. We can rewrite it later."

"True. I'll write the list, more or less like we agreed, out for Boot; you jot down the general info -- without the details, of course."

"Of course," Hermione agreed. "Then we shall destroy this together, in case we're asked."

"Are you certain you want to see this?" Harry asked Terry.

"If we have to rate our House, I need a little feedback," Terry retorted. "The others say they don't, but I rather gather Lisa might have more access than I will." Lisa shrugged.

"Alright," Harry said. "I hope you'll keep it quiet. Something like this can cause a lot of hard feelings, not to mention problems if someone we don't trust right now actually turns out trustworthy."

"True," Terry admitted. "I won't ask for up-dates; I won't tell anyone about this list. I'll trust you to get any needed information to me when needed."

"Well, just walk around that portable chalk board if you still want to see," Harry said. "Just don't get in Hermione's way."

Terry hesitated, but his curiosity got the better of him, and he looked. Lisa went with him. The names were arranged in six groups of various numbers, running across the chalk board on the wall. All the current Sixth year students were listed.

1

Harry Potter
Hermione Granger
Ron Weasley
Neville Longbottom
Ernie Macmillan
Lisa Turpin

2

Susan Bones
Justin Finch-Fletchley
Padma Patil
Anthony Goldstein
Hannah Abbott
Seamus Finnigan

3

Morag McDougal
Terry Boot
Parvati Patil
Lavender Brown
Sally-Ann Perks

4

Eloise Midgen
Wayne Hopkins
Megan Jones
Charlie Moon
Kevin Entwhistle

Mandy Brocklehurst
Zach Smith
Blaise Zabini
Tracy Davis
Stephen Cornfoot
Michael Corner
Su Li
Marietta Edgecombe
Daphne Greengrass

5
Millicent Bulstrode
Pansy Parkinson
Theodore Nott

6
Vincert Crabbe
Gregory Goyle
Draco Malfoy

Terry studied the list closely for nearly a minute. "Alright, I get numbers One, Five, and Six," he said. "What are the differences between Two, Three, and Four?"

"Twos and Threes are people we are fairly certain we can trust," Harry answered. "We know, for example, that Parvati and Lavender would never do anything to deliberately betray us, like Edgecombe did last year. They are natural gossips, though. Justin tends to boast a bit. You seem to have your own agenda that's running with ours right now, but might not later. Fours are either people we just aren't certain about, or doubt without proof, or who we think might be just plain neutral. Megan Jones, for example, claims to be a pacifist, but is said to be really shaken by Dean's murder."

Terry nodded his understanding. "You're right; I'd never give you away, but I'm not ready to commit to the Gryffindor militia yet."

Harry refrained from an angry retort. "We're not going to be wearing special uniforms, let alone asking you to wear one," he said instead. "Our group dynamics are just different than yours. The point is, we all have to work together, and play to our strengths."

"I know, I'm just trying to process it all," Terry admitted. "I really think Kevin Entwhistle and Mandy Brocklehurst might be movable to the Threes at some point, by the way."

"I hope so," Harry answered. "We hope to eliminate all the Fours, in one direction or the other. It would be great to know for certain about everyone, but all we can do for anyone, even ourselves, is our best guess."

"What do you mean?" Lisa asked.

"If Voldemort had just killed your father and tortured you and your mother, would you tell him where someone was hiding? It doesn't matter who -- me, or Hermione, or Terry here or anyone. Would you come back to Hogwarts and spy on us all, to save your mother more pain and humiliation? We can never be certain, until it happens."

"You're right; I hate it, but you're right," Terry admitted. "And while I feel I should defend all my House-mates, I think you have Corner, Cornfoot, and Edgcombe about right. I don't think any of them are potential Death Eaters, but Marietta is still very resentful about last spring, and Cho backs her to a greater degree than I thought she would. And since Cho backs her, so do Corner and Li, and the Seventh year girls. And Cornfoot backs Corner."

"It's a pain, not having the Head Boy and Girl on our side," Harry admitted.

"Why did Dumbledore give it to Collins and especially to Higgs! I mean, a Slytherin!" Terry complained.

"A Slytherin who argued against the others joining the Inquisitorial Squads," Hermione piped up from where she was crushing a large batch of lacewings. "He was the only Slytherin prefect to do so, so Dumbledore rewarded him, just like he stripped the other prefects for joining. I think we can trust Higgs to at least **act** neutral, until it comes down to the crunch."

"Should have docked them all their points and put the lot of them on detention for all this term," Terry growled. "Better yet, every member of the Squad should have been expelled!"

"Not politic," Hermione stated.

"We'll get them," Harry said. "At least the active supporters."

Terry looked at Harry for a few moments, then said, "There is one other, well, matter."

"Terry, no!" Lisa hissed. "I thought we all agreed. . . ."

"I still have to say something!"

"What about?" Harry asked.

"Well, you are dating Luna Lovegood."

"I am. And yes, I trust her." Harry looked straight into Terry's eyes. For a moment, Terry wondered if he was looking at Harry or a green-eyed Snape, or perhaps a green-eyed Dumbledore. It was damned intimidating, in any event.

"Then we'll try to make things a little easier for her, Harry," Terry said in a strangled voice. He had never witnessed the pure power of Harry's personality, and never wanted it directed against him again.

"Thank you, Terry," Harry said with a somewhat faux-thankful tone. "I would at least hope no one steals her blankets; Neville said all the signs are pointing to a harsh winter."

"We'll take care of it," Lisa said.

"And don't worry about anyone stealing Luna's new quilt," Hermione said. "Mrs. Weasley and Ginny made her a new one this summer. Mrs. Weasley did the temperature charms, and I arranged permission to put some strong protection hexes on it myself." She looked at Lisa. Hermione's voice went very cold and nasty, very much unlike her usual 'posh' tones. "You

might want to mention that last part. We don't want anybody branded 'thief' by accident. Unlike Marietta's mark, this one could easily be permanent."

Lisa and Terry both paled.

"Snape told me you had worked out the schedules with him?" Harry said after a moment.

"Oh! Well, yes we did. Snape didn't really have seventy-five different potions that we had to totally memorize or whatever it was he said. There are really twenty-four potions we have to produce over the next two years, and we have to memorize the basic formulas for eighteen." She grimaced. "All the rest are variations that we might be asked questions about on the Auror's exam, so we still have to understand them, but not memorize them."

"Well, that's not good, but it's not nearly as bad as we thought," Harry said with relief.

"No, it's not. And only two of the long potions really need to be done." Lisa smiled and looked at Hermione. "Looks like one there."

"Is the alternative formula to this one, the one that can be stored indefinitely if the bicorn horn hasn't yet been added, a option?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, it is."

"Then you should ask Snape if that can be the group's first project," Hermione stated firmly. "That and the basic strengthening potion. We might never need this, but we're going to be prepared."

"I'll put it up to him," Lisa said. She and Terry left shortly afterwards.

"Did you really hex Luna's quilt?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded as she measured the crushed lacewings into six cauldrons.

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

"Harry," Hermione said after she started the low fires under the cauldrons, "I still think Luna is a bit . . . eccentric. But her heart's in the right place, even if her mind doesn't always seem to be. And, most of all, you care for her, she cares for you, and she helped to save our lives. Two hours of setting some hexes spread over a few days is NOT a big deal."

"Thank you, anyway," Harry said.

Hermione stood up straight and stretched. "You're welcome. I want to look at the situation room Dumbledore assigned us. We should start the lists."

"No problem," Harry said easily.

"Do we accurately list the, well, the information that we got this morning?"

"I think we'll have to," Harry said. "The leadership needs to know that we have nine marked Death Eaters in the student population, six in our year alone. We just can't let it get out, and we NEVER mention the source."

Harry only had his two Muggle Studies classes on Friday. After the second one, Ron and Harry joined Katie Bell, the sole chaser from the teams of the last five years, to discuss Quidditch.

"Well, Harry, I hope you'll have time for Quidditch this year," she said. Dumbledore and Tomas had secured the lifting of his playing ban from the Ministry.

"I should, especially if you or Ron is the captain," Harry replied.

"Me?" Ron asked, surprised.

"McGonagall asked me about that," Katie replied. "Usually it goes to the most senior player, but that could be either you or me." Katie had started her Second year, which had been Harry's first. "I think I'll have more than enough to do training the new chasers and getting ready for the N.E.W.T.s. You don't want it?"

Harry shook his head. "I know how to catch the snitch and fly. That's not enough to be a good captain. I don't think it's a good idea for the seeker or the beaters to be captain anyway; very few pro-teams do. It should be a chaser or the keeper; they can direct traffic without worrying about the snitch."

"Well, Weasley?" Katie asked. "If you don't want it, I'll do it, but I'd rather it was you. And Harry's right; he'd make a mediocre captain at best."

"Really?" Ron asked.

"I wouldn't have met with you both if I hadn't hoped it would work out this way," Katie pointed out.

"But tradition says it should be you or Harry," Ron protested feebly.

"Well, if you prefer tradition over what's best for the team," Harry said in a pseudo-innocent voice.

"I'll take it!"

"Now, it's not official until we talk to McGonagall," Katie warned.

"Wait," Ron said, "what about Kirke and Sloper? Shouldn't they have a say?"

"No, they both came on after you, just like your sister," Katie said firmly. "I wouldn't mind replacing the beaters, but they did get a little better by the end of the season."

"We need to select some reserve beaters," Harry said, "as well as a chaser and some reserve chasers."

"You mean choose chasers, plural," Ron stated.

"Ginny is a chaser and the reserve seeker," Katie said firmly.

"Either that, or she's the seeker, and I try out for reserve seeker and beater," Harry said, equally firmly.

Ron sighed.

"I did reserve the field late tomorrow morning," Katie said. "Shall we go inform McGonagall?"

Ron squared his shoulders. "Yes, and we should have a team meeting right before dinner."

"Anything you say, Captain," Harry said, clapping Ron on the back. Ron had a very silly grin on his face.

Watching Ginny play chaser the next morning, Ron had to admit that she would have been chosen no matter what. Natalie Macdonald, a Third year, made the team as the third chaser. Most of the Second years turned out to be good flyers, and supplied the reserves, other than Ginny as reserve seeker.

That afternoon, the seven Sixth year Gryffindors met in McGonagall's classroom. "I've called you all here to see if there's anything we can do together as a group," Hermione said. "To tutor each other, or to help others."

"We are a group," Harry added, "not just seven people who share a House year. And we're all working together on the DA, if you'll join us."

"You mean the SDA," Lavender said.

"You're already all members of the SDA," Harry agreed. "The SDA is committed to practicing Defense. The DA is committed to helping Dumbledore fight Voldemort."

"Are you sure you want us?" Parvati asked nervously.

"We are," Hermione assured her.

"We'd like you to join us, but you don't have to," Ron told her.

"I know we like to tease you two about gossiping and chattering, but you know the difference between gossip and letting important information slip," Harry said. "And Seamus, if you want in, we'd like you, too. We trust you all."

"Thank you," Seamus said. "I'd like that."

"So would we," Parvati said, while Lavender nodded.

"We should call ourselves something silly," Lavender said. "That would deflect a lot of suspicion."

Ron smiled, "The Sixth Year Chocolate and Study Club. We spend an hour every Saturday we're not playing Quidditch or going to Hogsmeade eating chocolate, and Hermione helps us plan our study schedules for the week."

"Why me?" Hermione demanded.

"You do it anyway," Parvati answered. "This way, you set a time for it, and that will save you from chasing us down like you always have."

"We all take turns buying the chocolate," Harry said, "except Hermione. And, if we just happen to discuss other things. . . ."

"Good plan," Seamus said. "And I just happen to have four big bars of Cadbury's almond."

"Okay, share it out," Hermione said. "Let's see if I have everyone's complete schedules: we all have Defense, which should be easy, since we already done the practicals for the DA, and there's very little theory this year. I have N.E.W.T. Potions. Harry, Ron, and Neville have Auror Potions, and you three are in Household Potions."

"Right," Lavender said.

"Seamus is in Practical Charms and Transfigurations, and the rest of us are in N.E.W.T.s. . . ."

"Right," Seamus said.

"Keep a close eye on Crabbe and Goyle in all your classes with them," Harry said, "but be careful!" Seamus nodded.

"I'm alone for Runes and Arithmancy." When Hermione saw Harry about to say something, she added, "I'll watch out for Draco. Padma, Anthony, and Mandy always sit around me." Harry nodded.

"Harry is alone for Muggle Studies, Ron is alone for Creatures. Ron and Neville are in Herbology together, if Ron doesn't skip any more. Parvati and Lavender are together for Divination."

"Who else is in there now?" Harry asked.

"Eloise and Pansy-the-Pug," Lavender answered.

"I hate to ask it, but try and work with Eloise at times," Harry said.

"Why would working with Eloise be bad? Acne scars aren't contagious," Lavender said.

"Because that means we also have to work with Pansy," Parvati spat. "Why?" she asked Harry.

"Does anyone really like Eloise?" Harry asked.

"No," Lavender admitted. "Not that we dislike her," she hurriedly added.

Harry started to explain. "If Pansy is always working with her, she'll either be her usual pig-self, in which case Eloise will just suffer a bit. But, if Pansy has half a brain. . . ."

"Pure speculation," Seamus said.

"But if she does," Harry persisted, "she might be able to recruit Eloise. I don't want anyone drifting into the Dark side by default."

"Well, we might do Tarot with Pansy, but damned if I'll touch her greasy paw," Lavender said.

"We're mostly doing advanced star charts by ourselves," Parvati said, "but I'll make certain we include Eloise."

"Good."

"And aren't you two taking Astronomy as well?" Hermione went on.

"We are," Lavender admitted.

"Seamus and I have History," Hermione then went on, "and Harry, Neville, and I have the Basic Medicine. If everyone can give me a note every night about your assignments, what you've been given and what you've finished, I can work out some study plans."

"Great!" Harry said. "I want us ready to face everything! And I think we can do it, if we work together."

"We will," Parvati said firmly. "And Lavender and I will make certain the House keeps up its enthusiasm!"

The Sixth years toasted each other with chocolate.

Chapter 14

Sunday, September 8, 1996

After dinner Sunday night, Harry escorted Luna out of the common room. Most of the students and staff watched them leave, as only a few students had already made their way out.

"Astronomy Tower, do you think?" Ivy Sprout speculated.

Professor Sinistra sniffed. "If so, I shall catch them soon enough. I am resolved to keep most of the Tower clean of such goings on this term! Perhaps one of the nicer greenhouses?"

"Even I never thought of the greenhouses as romantic, or even usable! except perhaps in late May and June," Sprout retorted.

"I just hope they stay away from the dungeons," Snape sneered.

"Severus, even the most devoted Slytherin potion-maker stays away from your section of the dungeons when planning an evening's diversion," Madam Hooch said with a smile. "Perhaps the Quidditch stands? It's a very pleasant night."

"Now, now," Flitwick said, reproving them lightly, "I have always found Miss Lovegood to be a fine, if somewhat eccentric, **lady**. There is no need to believe they are off for anything more than a nice walk."

While some softly jeered, one voice rose above the others. "True," Snape agreed with Flitwick, surprising all of them, "and as arrogant as Potter is, he is very unlike his father in the romance department. I had thought he might actually graduate unknissed."

"I must agree with Filius," Dumbledore said, standing. "We should not speculate about any of our charges in this manner." As he edged out, he leaned over Remus Lupin's shoulder, whispering, "You did give Harry an extra copy of the Map?"

Remus blushed, for the first time in many years. "No, sir," he admitted, equally softly, "I thought he should have the original. I did make the three copies. It was just as easy to enchant a copy to update the others as it would have the original."

"Fine, fine," Dumbledore said softly, patting Remus on the shoulder. "Then I am certain Harry will come up with a more original, comfortable, and secure, trysting place than our colleagues were suggesting."

Unaware of this by-play, Harry and Luna slowly walked the rest of the way out of the enchanted hall, hand-in-hand by the time they went through the doorway. "Mister Potter, sir?" a small voice said.

Harry looked around, and saw the speaker was a First year Gryffindor, Ieuan Caradog. "You can call me Harry, Ieuan," Harry said.

"I . . . I got a letter from home, and, well. . . ."

"And your parents don't want you to play with Potty?" a familiar sneer stated from the doorway behind them. "Wise advice, little piggy. I take it they aren't Mudbloods, at least, just the usual Gryffindor trash?"

Before Harry could say anything, the small chubby dark-haired boy, his dark blue eyes flashing, stood up straight and looked right into Draco Malfoy's shocked eyes. As usual these days, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, and Bulstrode were backing Malfoy up, and they looked surprised at the small boy's actions as well.

"I am Ieuan Caradog, descended from Druids and kings long before the Romans came to these Islands. If such things matter, the Muggles are much closer to **YOUR** bloodline, you Norman scum."

"Why you little. . . ." Malfoy reached for his wand.

"**MISTER MALFOY!**" A roar of multiple voices stopped Draco before he could actually pull his wand and curse the small boy.

As a group, the Slytherins slowly turned and looked behind them. Professors Lupin, Zoric, and Snape were looking at them. "Five points from each of you," Zoric said, "Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, and Bulstrode."

"One detention for each of you as well," Lupin said. "As for you, Mister Malfoy," he started.

"I shall take care of that, Lupin," Snape said. "Mister Malfoy, you are confined to the Slytherin common area, from Six thirty at night until Seven fifteen in the morning every morning; and Tuesday through Sunday evenings until further notice. Monday evenings, you have until Eight, to accommodate Quidditch practice. Every minute you are outside the area, you will be docked one point. Tonight, however, you all have ten minutes to make it to the common room. I suggest you are all in the common areas before I arrive. Now go, all of you!"

It was rare for Snape to turn his anger on his own House, but Draco and his followers knew better than to argue. They fled, under Snape's stern gaze.

Snape turned to Harry, and curled his lip. He nodded to Harry, and said, "Miss Lovegood, Mister Caradog." Remus and Tomas also nodded to Harry and the others, Remus warmly and Tomas rather stiffly.

"Watch yourself, Ieuan," Harry warned. "Malfoy is a sneak, and he bears a grudge."

"Thanks, Harry," Ieuan said. "I'll keep an eye on him for you."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Now, what was it your parents wrote?" Harry asked.

"Never mind, Harry," Ieuan said. "I don't think it matters anymore. I am marching with you. No one insults my family or me."

"That was quite impressive, Severus," Remus said as they entered Severus' office.

"What do you mean, Lupin?" Snape demanded, while wondering what Zoric's sudden wand motions were meant to do.

"Three years ago, you would have yelled at Harry and taken points from him, not the Slytherins."

Zoric jotted down a note and handed it to Snape, who read it and showed it to Remus. Snape then wrote a few words and handed it back to Zoric. "I would have preferred giving Potter and that smart-mouthed First year a detention, but it was too obvious that Malfoy was in the wrong. I don't know what's wrong with the boy! I warned them not to back Umbridge, that she couldn't last. This year, he's worse!"

"If they stay as blatant as they were tonight, we might start disbelieving you when you claim they are not active supporters of Voldemort," Remus pointed out.

"If you think the Dark Lord would long tolerate followers who act as openly as they did tonight, then you deserve your job even less than I thought! I have little doubt that if they were His followers, and He learned about their stunt tonight, he would have them disemboweled."

"Who has easy access to your office, Snape?" Zoric asked.

"No one, except . . . why are you asking?"

"There are two Listening Orbs concealed behind Chameleon Charms, and a tendril of a Scribe Plant in this office, over amongst that medicinal moss. As the Muggles would say, you've been bugged."

"WHAT!"

In a closet deep within the dungeon labyrinth that made up the Slytherin common and dorm areas, a Third year given the job of listening in that evening, said, "Oh, shite!" and went to warn Draco.

"It's a very nice mirror, but why are we here?" Luna asked.

Harry stepped up to the mirror, and said, "Show me what lies behind the reflection." The mirror slid aside. Harry gestured, and Luna went in, followed by Harry.

The mirror slid shut, and a line of magical torches lit up. They showed a small landing, and a set of stairs leading down. Harry held his hand out, and Harry and Luna went down the stairs together. Two floors down, they were on a wider and much longer landing.

"The stairs keep going down," Harry said. "They used to lead to a tunnel that went all the way to Hogsmeade, but that collapsed about five years ago. I checked it from both ends two years ago, and the cave-in might be as much as a hundred yards long. This side is certainly undisturbed; I checked this morning. You can see from the arch here that this used to open out onto the second floor, near the classrooms. I think some of the staff must have lived in Hogsmeade at one time, and commuted this way in bad weather, or even stayed over-night."

"This is quite a long landing," Luna said. "How did you find all this out? From that Map you told me about?"

Harry nodded. "Professor Lupin gave it back to me. He did say that there were three copies made. He has one, Professor Dumbledore has one, and Professor Zoric has one. They'll know we're here, but no one else will."

"But why would we want to be here?" Luna asked, puzzled.

"Ah!" Harry said with a smile. "I found some things out that the makers of the map didn't know, and neither did the Weasley twins. There are three hidden rooms off this landing. Reveal lavatory!"

A door near the bricked-up former exit appeared. "Inside are two smaller rooms," Harry said. "One with a large tub, and one with a toilet and sink. Reveal parlor!" A door next to the stairs appeared. "A really nice sitting room, two comfy chairs, two large sofas, a fainting couch, tables, bookcases, and a fireplace. One of the house elves told me that it was hooked up to the internal floo system. The floo location is 'The Travelers' Common.'"

"And the third room?"

Harry mumbled something. "What was that?" Luna asked.

"I said, I don't know what it was originally used for, but right now, it's set up as a bed room."

"Oh. Well. . . ." Luna blushed. "I think we can ignore that for now."

"Probably a good idea."

Luna smiled. "Shall we look at the parlor?"

"If you'd like to. . . ."

"I have a confession, Harry," Luna said seriously as they walked into the room.

Harry reminded himself to thank Dobby for cleaning it up for him, and turned his attention to Luna. "What's that?"

"I really wanted to kiss you under the mistletoe last December."

Harry gave her a small smile. "I wasn't ready to appreciate you then. I wish I had been, and that we had. I would have saved myself some heartache."

"Perhaps," Luna agreed, "but you are worth waiting for, Harry."

"I love you," Harry told her for the first time.

Luna smiled and sat on a sofa. "And I you." She held out her hand in invitation.

Monday, September 9, 1996

Since nearly all of the House had been running every morning since Thursday, most of the Gryffindors were a bit more awake on this second Monday of September. They were again lined up at 7:15 for the march to the great hall.

Harry stood on a chair and addressed them. "Is there ANYONE here who is not comfortable with this march?"

"**NO!**" the Gryffindors yelled back.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked, looking right at young Caradog.

"**YES!**"

"Alright! I don't want you to get into trouble with your parents, but I also want you prepared! Who are we?"

"**GRYFFINDORS!**"

"What are we?"

"**THE BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE!**"

"Remember Cedric Diggory!"

"**AND REMEMBER THOMAS AND THE CREEVYS!**"

"Let's go!"

The march took a few minutes to reach even a portion of the magic it had generated the week before. Yet as they marched down the second set of stairs, the air again almost crackled with the magic. If the raw enthusiasm of the previous week was lower, the determination was higher. A lone, elderly half-blood witch had been killed the previous Friday. All afternoon Saturday and all day Sunday, the discussions had rippled across Hogwarts.

The DA leaders, led by Hermione, laid down the party line -- it showed how cowardly the Death Eaters actually were. It reminded a number of students at least that they should realize that the business at hand was serious. Innocent people were going to die. Attitudes that made them wince when mouthed by the likes of Draco Malfoy had consequences in the real world, and some wondered at more moderate versions of Pure-Blooded prejudice expressed or held by some in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

As a consequence, when the Gryffindors strode into the great hall, more than half the Hufflepuffs and almost a quarter of the Ravenclaws stood. When the Gryffindors halted, eight of the Hufflepuffs yelled, "**REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!**"

The Gryffindors responded, "**AND REMEMBER THOMAS AND THE CREEVYS!**"

As the students broke up from breakfast, Draco and his gang approached a small group, but addressed themselves to Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan. "I have never had much respect for your House," he drawled, "but I would have thought Pure-Bloods like yourselves would know better than to follow a half-breed like Potter!"

Just as Ernie was opening his mouth, Harry interrupted from behind Malfoy and his gang. "That's rich, coming from you, Malfoy. You're the slave of a half-blood, after all."

"**WHAT!** No Malfoy is ANYONE'S slave!"

"Of course you are," Harry said. "Voldemort is. . . ."

"**DON'T YOU DARE SAY HIS NAME!**"

"Fine," Harry said with a shrug, "Tom Riddle, then."

"**THERE IS NO SUCH PERSON AS TOM RIDDLE!** That interview was all LIES!"

Harry's face split into a wide grin. He grabbed the startled Malfoy by the arm. "Come on, everyone!" Harry called.

Such was his gleeful enthusiasm that a large portion of the students still eating breakfast got up and followed Harry and the protesting Malfoy. Harry headed straight to the trophy room.

"You claim there was no such person as Tom Riddle, huh? Read that plaque!"

"Leave me alone!"

"Read it!"

Draco glanced at it. "T.M. Riddle," he mumbled.

"Right! T.M. Riddle! Now, look at the list of Head Boys over there. Read it right here!"

"Bugger off!"

"Nott! Why don't YOU read it?"

"Tom Marvolo . . . Riddle," Nott read with a shaking voice.

Harry shoved Malfoy away and drew his wand, causing the crowd to gasp. In large letters of fire, Harry wrote, 'TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE,' and with a touch of his wand, the letters rearranged themselves into 'I AM LORD VOLDEMORT.'

The students all stood there in shock. After a few moments, Harry spoke again. "Check all you want, Malfoy. Check anywhere you want. Tom Riddle was named after his father, his MUGGLE father. His mother was the heiress of Salazar Slytherin, which is how a half-blood got to be in Slytherin. As you can see, he was even Head Boy. That's who opened up the Chamber of Secrets more than fifty years ago."

"No," Malfoy whispered.

"Yes," Harry said firmly. He looked around. "Voldemort once told me that there is no such thing as good or evil. Only power. This isn't about Pure-Bloods versus Muggle-borns, let alone saving wizarding culture! This is about power. The Pure-Bloods have it, and are afraid of losing it. If you believe in fair play, in the rule of law, in justice over power! oppose these people, these so-called Death Eaters! If you don't fight them, if you join them, just remember, there can only be one master in Voldemort's world, and it won't be you!"

"Very passionate, Potter," Snape's cold voice said. "You each have less than five minutes to get to your classes. I would advise all of you to be there!" The students fled.

Finally, there was only Harry and his five major supporters, and Snape. "Go on," Harry said. His friends left him, giving Snape the eye as they passed, even Luna.

"Not going to Charms, Potter?"

"Yes, sir. I thought there might be something else you might want to say to me first."

Snape thought a moment. "Why, Potter?"

"The opportunity arose, and I thought they should know who and what they're fighting for, or against." Harry's voice became very sad. "I wish I could have told them last year, but they would have believed even less."

Snape understood; Harry wished he could have stopped nine students from taking the Mark that summer. Even Malfoy.

"You're going to be late, Potter," Snape said softly. "One point from Gryffindor -- and five for Gryffindor for the intelligent use of an opportunity." Snape swirled around, and left Harry alone.

Harry smiled, and hurried to class.

That evening, after dinner but before Quidditch, nine shadowy figures met in a secret room. Three of the figures seemed very troubled.

"Will you two stop moaning!" one figure finally demanded.

"But what if what Potter says is true," a second voice whined.

"It isn't!" the first voice said petulantly.

"And it doesn't matter if it is," a third voice said simply.

"What!" four voices demanded.

"I don't care about the Master's birth, or his rebirth for that matter," the third voice stated firmly. "What matters is the power that he promises."

"And it does help you and me," a fourth voice mused to the third.

"WHAT!"

"Quiet!" the first voice insisted. "Explain!"

"You in Slytherin have to recruit, we in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw have to calm. We'll encourage the belief that Potter has defused support, that people don't need to join that stupid SDA," the fourth voice said smoothly.

"Of course, it would help us if you would keep your bloody mouth shut," the third voice snarled. "We all know you hate Potter. Get over it! Unless the Master tells you to do so, I think you should leave him alone! Don't attack him, don't attack Loony, don't attack baby Gryffindors, **don't** let him play the hero!"

"You have no authority over me!" the first voice stated firmly.

"True," the fourth voice said, "we don't. But don't forget, we don't take orders from you, either. You follow your chain of command to the Master, and we'll follow ours."

"So go play Quidditch," the third voice sneered. "Try and beat Potter for once." Two figures left the room.

"Blasted peasants," the first voice said.

"Practice?" a fifth voice asked rather stupidly.

"Yeah, practice?" a sixth asked.

The first teen sighed. "Alright. Let's go to practice."

At the same time the nine young Death Eaters were meeting, two others were meeting in equal secrecy.

"Potter."

"Zabini."

The two stared at each other for a few seconds, then Zabini broke the silence. "You wanted to see me?"

"If you're interested in helping us, yes," Harry said frankly.

"My family does not, and never has, supported Dark magic, Potter," Zabini growled.

"True," Harry said, "but your family is the main importer between all the countries in Western Europe. Various ministries have suspected some members of your family of smuggling . . . certain items across national boundaries." This information had been supplied by Zoric.

Zabini frowned, but kept his temper. "Even if I was a smuggler from a family of smugglers, Potter, that doesn't mean I'd be a junior Death Eater."

"True," Harry said. "You do know all of your dorm mates now have the Mark?"

Zabini bit his upper lip. "I don't know if you're right or not, but I admit I wouldn't be terribly surprised. Then you should also know it wouldn't exactly be easy or safe to spy for you."

"True," Harry agreed. "Of course, if they ever did have to open Hogwarts to an attack, you'd be the first person they would have to kill."

"THAT just tempts me to join them," he pointed out.

"Do you think they'd trust you now?"

"It would be to their advantage," Zabini said.

"Tell me, since you know them better than I do," Harry inquired in honest curiosity, "do you think any of them, even Malfoy, would have the brains to figure that out by themselves?"

"Probably not," Zabini admitted, "at least not since Ted gave in." Zabini shook his head. "His father isn't really a Death Eater; it's his uncle that was caught. But I tell you, Potter, it isn't easy. And yes, I think they would kill me."

"I know you can't really work with us," Harry said, "but we're here to help you when you need it."

"Really?"

"I promise we'll at least try," Harry said firmly. "We're not at war against Slytherin."

"Good enough. I might be able to send information through Tracy."

"That would be great," Harry answered. "Just watch out for Bulstrode."

"If guts and determination counted more than breeding and looks, she'd be in charge," Zabini agreed.

"Good luck, to all of you," Harry said.

"Believe me," Zabini said, "we'll need it."

Chapter 15

After the first SDA meeting, and a short DA officers' meeting afterwards, Harry and Luna strolled slowly towards the Ravenclaw common room, hand-in-hand.

Luna was a bit puzzled. Her 'Second Sight' was a combination of many abilities, including some empathic powers. It was rare for her to be able to directly 'read' anyone's emotions, however. Still, as she had told Harry that summer, she could read him when they were in physical contact.

Luna was feeling something in Harry she had never felt before, and it took her a moment to identify it. Once she had, she realized why she had had a difficult time. It was contentment, not a feeling she was very familiar with herself.

Harry was content. This was not because he was in any way unaware of his problems. He was especially aware that the inertia of the depression he had felt over the previous June and July was lurking, waiting to freeze him in its grasp if he wasn't careful. On the other hand, he knew Luna and especially Hermione were keeping a close watch on him, which made him feel like he had a safety net. Just finally realizing that people actually cared for him helped a little.

His first week at school had also helped him keep above the depression. The enthusiasm the Gryffindors had displayed made him think he might just succeed, and even survive. While the Weasleys had accepted him, his new-found relationship with Hermione made him feel more like he had a family. Remus Lupin and Tomas Zoric were much closer to him than any adult had ever been before. Neither took the place of Sirius, but the two made him feel more secure than Sirius had, if not as loved.

In any event, Luna took care of the 'love' aspect very nicely, as far as Harry was concerned.

The gym still wasn't ready, but the jogging club seemed popular, even with the Slytherin Quidditch team and some others from that House. Harry's first two lessons with Zoric had gone very well. On top of everything, the SDA meeting had also gone very well, and was very well attended. Harry and Dumbledore had discussed the meeting place twice the previous week, and Dumbledore had finally decided to assign the SDA a disused part of the dungeons, close to the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, and far from the potions labs.

All thirty-six eligible Gryffindors had attended. Of the forty-five eligible Hufflepuffs, twenty-seven were participating, in large part because of Georgia and Gin's heavy recruitment amongst the Fifth years. Six of the ten Sixth years attended. Eighteen of the forty-five eligible Ravenclaws attended, which was more than Harry had feared, but not as many as he had hoped. Six of the eleven Sixth years attended, but Cho had persuaded all of the Seventh years to boycott. All the Fifth year girls were attending, having decided to back Luna rather than to tease her. No Slytherins had even tried to attend, which did surprise Harry just a little. Harry was more surprised that none of the students he knew or suspected as Death Eaters or serious sympathizers in Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff had attended. That seemed a bit short-sighted on their part, but he wasn't going to complain.

Five members of the staff had attended: Zoric, Lupin, Hagrid, McGonagall, and Flitwick. Harry had explained that at least one would be attending each session. That night, the group had spent an hour on the basic blocking and shielding spells. Everyone wanted to lessen the possibility of injuries. Hagrid, brandishing a new wand, and Harry had acted as demonstrators (although actually Hagrid was learning the basics from Flitwick and Zoric on his own).

As Harry had reminded the students, all curses, spells, and hexes could be deflected. When a Fifth year Ravenclaw reminded Harry that one reason the three Unforgivable Curses were unforgivable was because they couldn't be blocked, Harry had simply raised his bangs. "The Death Curse was partially blocked once, even though it was at a very high price. If it could be partially blocked, it can be totally blocked, we just don't know how. The Imperius Curse may or may not be blockable, but it is certainly defeatable. I'm not the only person who can throw it off, let alone resist it. Aurors and hit wizards must at least be able to resist it." She had merely nodded at Harry's explanation and smiled at Luna.

All the faculty and officers of the SDA were happy with the session, and the students seemed satisfied as well.

As the pair slowly came close to the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room, Luna noticed there were several people standing in front of it. Luna's noticing made Harry notice.

"What's happened?" Harry asked Professor Flitwick. The pair then noticed that the little professor was very angry. The three female prefects (Padma, Maureen Hughes, and Head Girl Julia Collins) stood behind the angry professor.

"This is none of your concern, Potter," Collins said firmly.

"Really?" Padma drawled sarcastically.

"It is his concern to a small degree, Miss Collins," Flitwick said firmly. He looked up at Luna. "While we were at the SDA meeting, someone entered your dorm and destroyed all your property." Flitwick turned to face the Head Girl. "All girls present in the dorms at the time of the incident are restricted to the common areas until further notice. Have them all assembled in the House library in fifteen minutes."

"But. . . ."

"**GO!**" Flitwick ordered. He turned to Luna. "I am very sorry, Miss Lovegood. Miss Hughes, would you go with Miss Lovegood and see what is salvageable?"

"Yes, sir," she said, taking the shocked Luna with her.

"Miss Patil, would you please talk with the SDA students, and see if they've heard anything?"

"Yes, sir," Padma said. She gave Harry an apologetic look and fled.

"I can understand why you are upset, Mister Potter," Flitwick said gently to the shocked and seething Harry. "Normally, Ravenclaw is very tolerant of eccentricity. For whatever reason, Miss Lovegood has never been as accepted as our other eccentrics are."

"And the fact that she's my girlfriend has nothing to do with it?" Harry asked, obviously disbelieving.

"It probably does," Flitwick admitted. "That no doubt contributed to the ferocity of the attack, but not for the attack itself. They were stealing her possessions long before she met you, Harry." He frowned. "I have never seen this type of dislike. I have been searching for a solution for three years. We must try harder."

Flitwick looked up at Harry. "Things have escalated; we will protect her, I promise."

Harry's good mood had crashed.

Tuesday, September 10, 1996

"Harry, wake up!"

"Go away, Ron."

"Harry!"

"Bugger off."

Harry's toneless voice surprised Ron and the others in the room even more than his mild curse. "But, Harry. . . ."

"I just don't feel up to running today, Ron. Go; you can't be late."

"But, Harry. . . ."

"I'll be up by the time you get back. Go on!"

"At least sit up," Neville asked.

Harry sat up and managed to open one eye. "Are you all happy?"

"Get up and get dressed . . . please," Seamus said.

Harry stood, "Go on, don't be late."

"Alright, Harry," Ron said. "Come on, everyone."

Harry managed to get dressed fairly quickly. He started to go down to breakfast, but hesitated -- all the Gryffindors, third year and above, were out jogging. Luna probably would be as well, if she could salvage the right clothes.

Harry had been standing blankly near the portrait exit for some time when he suddenly felt two soft hands hold his. Looking, he saw Sudipta Patil holding his left hand, Irena Zoric his right.

"Hi, Harry!" Irena said with a warm smile.

"Hi," Harry said weakly.

"Will you come to breakfast with us?" Sudipta asked.

"Some of those slimy Slytherins bug us if we go down before the joggers come back," Ieuan Caradog said from behind Harry. Harry turned and saw Ieuan and his mate Marvin Budd both standing there.

"Please, Harry," Irena said in the voice that sometimes bent her parents and siblings to her wishes. "I know you must not feel well, if you're not out running, but if you don't feel too bad, could you please?"

"I'm bloody hungry," Budd stated.

Harry sighed and squared his shoulders. "You four walk ahead; I'll be right behind you. Don't look back, and don't worry."

"Well, well, well; look at what we have here. Four little piggies, far away from their swineherds." 'Nott,' Harry thought.

"Leave us alone," Irena said firmly.

"Oh, I'm so afraid," Malfoy sneered.

"You looked afraid after my sisters beat you up," Irena stated. 'Whoops,' Harry thought, 'she shouldn't have said that.' He moved into the shadows around the corner where he could see what was going on. The usual Slytherin gang was present.

"You little bitch!" Malfoy snarled, raising his wand, starting to pronounce a muting spell at the quartet. Harry projected a group shield in front of the students, but nothing seemed to happen. Instead, the Slytherins stood there, frozen.

From behind the Slytherins stalked Tomas Zoric. "Harry, take these four to breakfast, please," he said in his most emotionless voice. Harry came forward and herded the children in front of him. "Decent shield," Zoric told him as they passed.

"Bulstrode, Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle, five points off each," they heard Zoric say. "Twenty off each for Nott and Malfoy. As for you, Mister Malfoy, let's hear you explain to Professor Snape why you're out a little early. . . ."

"You're not eating," Irena pointed out to Harry.

"Not very hungry," Harry mumbled.

"You look sad," Sudipta said.

"He is," a nasty voice said from behind Harry, "but not in the way you mean."

Harry turned and looked at Marietta Edgecombe. "My, you're looking remarkably *uncolorful* this morning," Harry told her. She looked puzzled for a moment, then flushed and walked away.

"That was uncalled for, Harry," Cho said, Su Li nodding her head at Cho's side.

"It's amazing how well you've always pointed out Harry's faults while ignoring your friends'," Hermione said, walking up to the table.

Cho gave an undignified snort and she and her friend stalked away. "I heard about Luna's possessions," Hermione said. "I'm sorry."

"Did anyone confess?" Harry asked, pushing his eggs around his plate.

"Of course not," Hermione said. "I should have set hexes on everything. Spiteful vixens."

"Flitwick said everything was destroyed," Harry said slowly, "did that include the quilt?"

"Slashed with a knife." Hermione confessed, "I never thought of that one. Professor Flitwick fixed just about everything, including the quilt." She paused. "I never saw him angry before."

"I hadn't either," Harry agreed.

"Why did someone do that?" Irena asked. "She seems so nice."

"Because Luna is different," Sudipta said. "Some people don't like that. And probably because someone is jealous that Harry likes her." Irena blushed.

Harry didn't really pay attention to the First years. "We can guess who did it, but we can't prove anything, can we?"

"No," Hermione agreed, "but some good came out of this."

"What's that?"

"Her roommates are **furious**," Hermione said.

"That's right," Harry remembered, "all of them joined the SDA last night. So they couldn't have done it. That's good, at least."

"No, they were innocent victims, and some of their things were slightly damaged when the person, or persons. . . ."

"Person or persons unknown,' huh?"

"Exactly," Hermione agreed. "Anyway, they threw some of Luna's things about, and that damaged some of the others' things. Some of their books were damaged, too, and you DON'T damage a Ravenclaw's books."

Harry felt a hand on his shoulder, and knew it was Luna's. "Whomever this person was sick," Luna said softly in his ear, "and whomever she was, she must have hated me before last night. This wasn't your fault." She lightly kissed his ear, and Harry sat there blushing, while the First years giggled. A wave of whispers swept across the great hall -- it wasn't unusual to see students holding hands in the hall, but it was more than rare to see one student give even a light kiss to another.

'At least that seemed to jar Harry out of his bad mood,' Hermione thought, 'I'd better keep an eye on him the rest of today, though, at least until he goes off to meet Professor Zoric.'

Meanwhile, Professor Snape was confronting an irritating problem alone in his office. "What in the name of our Master is wrong you!"

"I beg your pardon?" Draco demanded, insolently. He was shocked when Snape slapped him sharply across the face.

"I was forced to disturb our Master the other night to discuss your behavior. He was **NOT** pleased. He told me that you had no orders except to observe Potter and to obey my orders unless He directed you differently. You were **NOT** told to plant listening devices in my office, and you **WERE** told to cause no problems unless directed to; to plan, but not to execute. Are you stupid, or insane?"

"I do not take orders from **anyone** except my father, and from him only until my next birthday. Don't you ever dare strike me. . . ."

Snape grabbed Malfoy's left wrist and twisted it and pulled up the sleeve, making Malfoy gasp in pain. "We both know what's hidden there, boy! You **chose** to obey our Master two years early. You begged your father for permission. You begged against his and my advice. Do you think this a game? The Dark Lord will crush you like a bug if I report one more infraction after today!" Snape shoved Malfoy into a chair.

"If Potter can beat the Half-blood, then He can't be all that powerful," Draco said with great contempt, standing up again.

Snape sat heavily in his own chair, stunned. "Very well, Draco. You leave me no choice."

"I expected better from you, Professor Snape," Draco snapped, and swept out of the room.

"And I expected much more from you," Snape said aloud. Silently, he added, 'I still think Potter did the right thing yesterday morning, but I didn't think the consequences would be so painful.'

With a heavy heart, Snape wrote out a report between classes, and made a recommendation. That afternoon, he took a wooden model of an owl, and touched it with his wand. The owl gripped the report and disappeared -- it was an emergency portkey. Snape then went to the owlery and sent a copy to a contact, who would give it to Lucius Malfoy.

Only then did Snape take a second copy to Dumbledore. He wouldn't like what Snape had done, but Snape knew it was the only chance Draco Malfoy had to live past that Halloween, or perhaps even until the next week.

Harry dragged through the day, although Hermione saw that he wasn't really depressed. While Harry was having his lessons with Zoric (he was still working on Occlumency and dueling), Hermione sought out Luna.

"I thought he was looking rather melancholy this morning," Luna said. "Not to mention his failure to run with us this morning."

"Ron said they could barely get him out of bed," Hermione told her.

"Then it was very wise of Ronald to at least force him to go to breakfast. Don't forget to praise him."

Hermione flushed. She had forgotten. "Thanks," she managed to say. It was sometimes hard for Hermione to acknowledge help or good advice.

"It's rather . . . unstatistical that four of the six of us are only children, isn't it?" Luna said suddenly.

"I suppose it is," Hermione acknowledged. "Why?"

Luna's face was frowning in concentration. "What is that Muggle term. . . . Ah! Dysfunctional. Harry, Neville, and I are all from rather dysfunctional households, especially Harry. The Weasleys are hardly dysfunctional, but they are so numerous that Ginny's needs were sometimes lost in the shuffle, and Ronald was just plain lost in the crowd at times. You were raised to disbelieve in everything we take for granted, and I would imagine your parents still have a difficult time accepting magic."

"And your point?"

"It should not surprise any of us that we six cling together, as a group, as couples, or that you, Harry, and Ron form your own trio. All six of us, even you, although you are the most stable, need these supports. Don't feel shy in bringing Harry's problems to me. Or your own. You

can't be the rock for all of us without some help." She held out her hand. "May I See, Hermione?"

Hermione hesitated, bit her lower lip, and gave Luna both her hands. Hermione felt a magical warmth, as Luna concentrated on her for over two minutes.

Finally, Luna spoke. "You love Ronald as romantically and at least as sensuously as I love Harry, but you are too shy to show it often. You are a bit afraid of your sexual nature, which is warm and very passionate. You love Ronald and Harry equally in every other way, and as I love Harry. If Harry is your twin brother, Ginny is your little sister, and Neville your little brother."

Luna opened her eyes. "You don't know what to make of me. Well, Ginny has become more my sister than just my casual childhood friend this past year. Maybe you and I can be friends, real friends."

"I'd like that," Hermione said, shyly.

"I think you should find Ronald and praise his wise move this morning," Luna said.

"You know, he really hates being called Ronald," Hermione pointed out.

"I desire a lover, a sister, and a close friend," Luna said. "Ronald would try to be my big brother, and order me about as he tries, so unsuccessfully, with Ginny. I called him that for a while, because it was habit; I call him that now to keep that slight distance between us."

Hermione smiled. "Fine, I'll go praise Ron; you go and comfort Harry."

Luna released Hermione's hands and smiled her enigmatic smile. "Until later, then."

"Where are we going?" Harry demanded. "It's been a long day."

"I have a surprise for you," Luna said, taking him to their 'secret place.'

"Err, Luna. . . ." Harry said nervously as she took him to the bedroom.

"No, Harry," Luna said softly yet firmly, "neither of us is ready to take things to that level, in any fashion." Harry was mostly relieved, although a little disappointed.

"Take off your blazer and shirt," Luna instructed. Luna wasn't wearing her blazer, instead she had on her work robe. She slipped that off, and then kicked off her shoes, and waited for the blushing Harry to finish.

"Take off your shoes and that vest, too," Luna added, rolling up her sleeves. "Lie on the bed; on your stomach, Harry!"

"Why?" Harry asked, complying, removing his under-vest.

"I thought a nice massage might restore the proper flow of your positive energy," Luna said, taking some scented oil in her hands. "And if it doesn't, it will still feel nice."

"You're looking better, mate," Ron said as they sat down for dinner.

"Thanks, I'm feeling better," Harry replied. "You're looking pretty chipper, for that matter."

"I guess it was just a decent day," Ron replied, spooning a tiny amount of green beans on to his plate. Hermione always scolded him if he didn't take some veggie. Ron hesitated. "Err, Harry. . . ."

"Yeah?"

"No offense, but is there some reason you smell like lavender?"

Lavender, Parvati, Seamus, and Ginny all gave Harry very strange looks. Hermione merely smiled.

"Luna likes the scent," Harry growled.

Chapter 16

Wednesday, September 11, 1996

The nineteen Sixth year students entered the Defense classroom and found their seats quickly. "Look at Malfoy," Hermione whispered to Ron and Harry.

"I wonder why he's rubbing his wrist?" Ron said softly.

Harry and Hermione rolled their eyes, and then Harry jerked his head at Ron. It would look less obvious if Hermione whispered in Ron's ear than if Harry did it. "He's a Death Eater, remember? That's where the Dark Mark is. Riddle must be causing it, somehow." Ron flushed, but nodded his understanding.

Remus Lupin strode briskly into the room, setting a crate in a far corner. "You may remember three years ago, our first lesson was with a boggart." A wave of giggles swept the room, as they all remembered Neville's solution. Even the Slytherins had found that funny.

"You're all older, and your greatest fear has likely changed. You really need to know what that fear is. You can be caught by a boggart unawares if you don't. And you may be better able to face that fear in general if you know what it is."

He looked around the room. "Why might this be more difficult than three years ago?" He waited until a hand went up. "Yes, Mister Zabini?"

"Three years ago, our fears were things like mummies or zombies, or other things which we could recognize at some level weren't really there. I mean, I still might run into a mummy, but I have been trained to fight them to some degree, and have an idea of where I am likely to run into one. Our greatest fears now are more likely the death of ourselves or a loved one, or perhaps their being hurt. How can we make the death of someone we care for, or our own, funny?"

"Exactly," Lupin agreed. "In large part, it depends on the details. If you fear the death of a relative or friend, they will usually be shown to you merely laying there. Imagine them sitting up and rolling their eyes, or something equally silly. Imagine little cherubs singing around their heads. There is nothing inherently funny about any of the terrors of the mind; laughter destroys the boggart, but to break loose of its power, we merely have to recognize the situation as unreal. The power of a boggart is that they catch us unawares."

"There are sign-up sheets on my desk; you will all visit the boggart. On the one hand, by now this can be an intensely personal experience, and therefore you do have the option of facing it alone. On the other, it is easier and safer to face them when someone else is with you. The second and third options are to face it with just me or friend, another is to go as a group. If you witness someone else's boggart, they may watch you face yours. Take the next ten minutes to sign up for a time. If you schedule another time, please take a free period. Or, you may stay and face it as part of the class."

When Hermione started to stand up, Harry asked her to sit. Malfoy and Bulstrode quickly signed-up and walked out. Zabini, Moon, and Smith did the same. The SDA members, catching Harry's eye, milled around a little, but didn't sign up.

"Are you all staying?" Lupin asked, surprised.

"May we confer, Professor?" Harry asked.

"Of course, Mister Potter."

"What's the plan, Harry?" Seamus asked.

"I don't want any of us to face the boggart alone," Harry said. "We are a group, hopefully of friends as well as allies. Believe me, I understand this can be a very personal experience. If you don't want everyone, or anyone, to see, I understand, but like I said, please consider sharing with at least one other person."

"So this is a suggestion, not an order," Terry Boot stated.

"Exactly," Harry said.

"And you feel it's your place to offer such suggestions?" Boot asked.

"You must as well," Harry replied, "since you're here."

Boot frowned mightily. "I see your point, but I would prefer to expose my humiliation in front of as few people as possible."

"If no one else will go with you, I will," Harry said, "although I'd prefer to go with the larger group."

"I'll go with you," Anthony Goldstein said. He led Boot over to the sign-up sheet.

A few minutes later, Lupin moved the group to the corner near the door. "Who's first?"

Harry started to stand, but Ron held him back. "Sometimes, you have to send a scout," Ron said.

Lupin magically flipped the crate open, and Ron strode towards it.

Suddenly, Harry was in the corner, passionately kissing Hermione. Ron turned bright red, and barely managed not to turn to make certain the real Harry and Hermione were still behind them. He set his jaw. "Riddikulus!" Boggart Harry's robes billowed over his head, and his pants fell down. The resulting laughter made the image blur, and Ron quickly moved to a neutral corner, not looking at anyone.

Parvati moved into the embarrassed scene. Hermione and Harry, who had gone back to kissing, blurred and suddenly her parents were laying dead on the floor. "Riddikulus!" Mrs. Patil suddenly started complaining about how her sari was badly draped on the floor and how her husband was laying in exactly wrong position for a wizard of his caste. Parvati backed up.

Lavender marched forward, and the two Patils shimmered and were replaced by a hugely obese woman, not really recognizable as Lavender herself. "Riddikulus!" The fat fell away, revealing a svelte Lavender in a string bikini. Lavender smirked and walked away.

"Down, Seamus!" Parvati commanded.

Lisa Turpin passed Lavender, smiling grimly. She was confronted by Terry Boot and Anthony Goldstein arguing and then wrestling each other to the ground in a vicious fight. "Riddikulus!" The two boys started kissing.

"Down Seamus!" Ron teased, moving back to join the group.

"Git!" Seamus said, walking forward. The two boys kissing turned into Parvati and Lavender, dead. "Riddikulus!"

"Oh, Seamus," Boggart Parvati moaned.

"That was wonderful, but exhausting!" Boggart Lavender cooed.

"Great revenge!" Ron said, earning himself a sharp elbow from Hermione.

Justin marched forward, and was confronted by himself, crouching, cowering, and crying in fear. Justin swallowed, and managed to say a shaky "Riddikulus!" and Boggart Justin's tears of terror transformed into tears of laughter.

"Come on back, Mister Finch-Fletchley," Lupin urged, since Justin did not seem to want to walk back, worried the others might think he was retreating too quickly.

Harry strode forward, and the laughing Justin disappeared. Nothing took its place. Harry stood looking at the empty space, puzzled. He looked over at Lupin.

Professor Lupin was gone.

Harry looked back.

Everyone was gone.

A moment of panic swept over Harry, thinking it might be some plot by Voldemort, laid by Malfoy before he had fled the room. He was about to bolt from the room, when it hit him.

His current greatest fear could simply be being alone. He thought of a scenario, turned back to the corner and proclaimed, "Riddikulus!"

The walls of the classroom were suddenly hung with banners proclaiming 'Harry Potter Survives!' and confetti streamed down. The boggart exploded.

"What happened?" a puzzled Neville asked.

"Yes," Lupin asked, equally puzzled, "nothing seemed to happen."

"Exactly," Harry said. "There was nothing there, and when I looked around, you were all gone, or at least invisible to me."

"I don't get it," Ron said.

"His greatest fear is being alone," Hannah said simply. "Harry, we don't know each other very well, but I can promise you one thing; you will never be alone again in this life."

"That's right," Parvati said. "You will always have a place with all of us."

"Exactly what kind of place might depend on a lot of things," Lavender said in her most seductive voice, "but we'll work something out." She, Parvati, Hannah, and Susan all laughed at that.

"Shall we go on?" Lupin said. "I collected a fair number of boggarts last summer."

"Let's get this over with," Hermione said firmly.

"Anticipation will only make things worse," Susan agreed.

"I'll be right back."

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, who were standing next to each other, but seemed very far apart. Harry walked up to Ron, whose ears went very red. "Now watch, Ron," Harry said, and to everyone's shock, he gathered Hermione gently in his arms and kissed her deeply.

Hermione was startled, but then returned Harry's embrace and kiss. After a very long moment, Harry and Hermione broke apart. "That was great, but I still prefer Luna."

"Let's see," Hermione said, wrapping her arms around Ron and pulling him down. "Come here, my bean pole of love," she managed to say with a straight face.

The shocked Ron leaned down, and soon they were in a passionate clench. It was the first time any of the group, other than Harry and Neville, had even seen them hold hands or share a peck on a cheek. Even Harry had only seen them share a brief kiss once.

"Hem Hem!"

The pair broke apart, Hermione for once blushing as much as Ron.

"That's okay, Professor," Seamus said, "she was just teaching Weasley how groundless his fears are."

As everyone smiled, Lupin asked, "Who wants to go first?" Another crate opened.

Ernie took a deep breath and walked towards it. Justin's sister appeared, in very revealing Muggle clothing. Ernie stood there, stunned as she slowly and sensuously moved towards him. She smiled seductively, revealing a set of fangs. She was a vampire.

"Riddikulus!" Her fangs fell to the ground.

Susan stepped past the retreating Ernie, and the figure shimmered, and became a snarling Umbridge. "Hem Hem!," the faux girlish voice went. "I understand now who has been sending those evil reports to the Ministry! This new quill will carve every bit of flesh off your bones, Bones!" Umbridge laughed, and Susan dropped her wand as her left hand covered the scar on her right. Gryffindors hadn't been the only victims of Umbridge's quill. Harry reflexively looked at the scars on the back of his own hand.

"Riddikulus!" Ron called out. Two tiny ponies appeared, clip-clopping towards Boggart Umbridge, who screamed and cowered even more convulsively than Justin's boggart had. Justin and Ernie pulled the sobbing Susan away. and Neville walked forward.

Boggart Umbridge transformed into Boggart Neville. A mindless being, much like his parents on some of their worst days. The boggart merely sat and rocked. Neville hesitated, but no one moved, because he seemed to be thinking. Finally, Neville said, "Riddikulus!" and he turned the boggart into a Canary Cream version of himself.

Hannah moved ahead of Hermione. The canary turned into the nude, tortured body of Hannah herself, huddled in a fetal position -- burnt, bleeding, and bruised all over the body. She contemplated it in thoughtful horror. "Riddikulus!" she finally cried, and the body was covered in her magical clown baby blanket, the clowns tumbling around in a comical manner.

Hermione set her jaw and approached the boggart. Dead bodies littered the floor. Her parents, Weasleys, the SDA members, the staff, and most prominently, Harry. McGonagall stood up, bleeding from multiple wounds. "You're late, Miss Granger," Boggart McGonagall hissed. "If you had finished your research, all this would have been avoided. IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!"

"RIDDIKULUS!" Boggart McGonagall's torn bloody robe was changed into the tartans of a Scottish sword dancer, and she started to dance a jig while wearing fuzzy pink bunny slippers.

Lupin approached the boggart, and it changed into the full moon. He guided it back into the box. "Two points each for all of you, for having the courage to show your fears to the group; two points each to everyone but Miss Bones for successfully fighting their boggarts. One point off collectively from Mister Weasley and Miss Granger for kissing in class; two points for Mister Weasley for his assistance to Miss Bones."

"I just couldn't think of anything!" Susan complained.

"How about her talking as a bass, instead of with that silly falsetto?" Harry asked.

"I'll try to remember that," Susan said. "Could you turn around, Professor Lupin?"

Puzzled, he did. Susan kissed Ron and Harry on the cheek. "Thank you, both."

"I heard that!" Lupin said, which made the group laugh.

"Off with you!" Lupin commanded as they quieted down.

"May I speak with you for a moment, Professor?" Harry asked.

"Of course. Go on, all of you." Lupin turned to Harry. "What may I do for you, Harry."

"Do the Fifth years have to do this?" he asked.

"If I can keep enough boggarts intact, I want to do everyone above the Second year," Lupin said. "Why?"

"If she wants, could I be with Luna when she faces hers?"

Lupin opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He thought and tried to speak again, stopped, and then he finally said, "If she wants. Don't pressure her, Harry."

"I won't, sir," Harry answered.

Friday, September 13, 1996

The rest of the day, and Thursday, and Friday morning were all quiet, although Malfoy's wrist was obviously giving him a great deal of trouble. Most of the DA were keeping an eye on him, and Friday morning, Blaise Zabini told Tracy Davis, who passed it on to Susan, who told Harry and Hermione, that Malfoy had kept the Sixth year Slytherin boys awake with his moans of pain.

Harry accompanied Luna to the Defense classroom for a 12:45 appointment, so that she could face her boggart.

"Any ideas what it might be?" Harry asked.

"Not really, or maybe there are too many," she said. "I could see Mummy's death again, or Daddy's, or yours, or someone's torture." She shrugged. "Since I don't know what my greatest fear is, I should find out."

They paused outside the classroom. "Remember, I love you," Harry said.

She smiled. "I know." She opened the door and they went in. A rather dazed Blaise Zabini exited past them. "Good luck," he muttered. "I HATE those things."

Lupin smiled from near the chalk board. "Are you ready, Miss Lovegood?"

She walked calmly forward. "Of course, Professor Lupin." The lid came off, and Boggart Harry appeared, making fun of her and saying hurtful, spiteful things.

Luna looked confused. "I'm supposed to be afraid of a mass of translucent purple and green hair?"

"WHAT do you see?" Lupin demanded.

"A mass of translucent purple and green hair, about six inches across . . . oh, and some yellow tentacles."

Lupin walked towards it, and the yelling Harry was replaced by the full moon. "Now what?"

Luna shrugged. "Nothing has changed. Why?"

Lupin guided the boggart back into the box and looked at Luna. "We saw a version of Harry appear and scream insults at you. When I approached, it turned into the full moon."

"Why didn't I see it, then?" Luna asked, puzzled.

"You didn't see the visions, because you saw the boggart," Harry said. "Your Second Sight helps you see things as they are."

"That must be it," Lupin agreed. "Interesting."

Luna looked at Harry. "I am surprised my greatest fear is being rejected by you. I know you would never do that."

"It's difficult even for you to believe everything you see. Perhaps you're sure of Harry's love, but fear desertion, probably because of your mother's death, and Harry's leaving you is the greatest manifestation of that fear right now," Lupin guessed.

"That makes sense."

"One point, for facing your fear, then, and one for Harry for his assistance."

That night, just before 11:30, Blaise went into his dorm room to sleep. Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle were sitting in the desk chairs, looking at the floor. Hearing him, they looked up. Seeing who it was, they looked back down.

"Where's Malfoy?" Blaise asked. All four shrugged their shoulders in far too casual ways to be believed.

"Where is he?" Blaise demanded.

"Go to bed," Nott said.

Blaise stared at the trio.

Nott stood up. Crabbe and Goyle stood as well. Blaise stared back at them.

"This is none of your concern," Nott said simply.

"You know I have to report this," Blaise said.

Nott appeared to think about that. He finally reached a conclusion. "You can't report what you don't know." He closed the curtains around Malfoy's bed. "You came in, we all had our curtains closed. When you wake up, and he's back, there's no harm done."

Blaise gave Nott a dirty look. "I promise you, no harm done," Nott said firmly, at least for him. "If he's not back by the time you all go jogging, **then** you can report it."

"Alright," Blaise said, "I accept your word. Nothing until Six-twenty." That was when Malfoy's alarm would go off to wake up the four joggers.

The four Slytherins went to bed, but of the four, only Blaise Zabini managed to fall asleep easily, and slept well that night.

Saturday, September 14, 1996

1:05 am

Others were restless that night as well.

"What's wrong with her?" Merry Bishop asked Maureen Hughes softly.

"I don't know," the Ravenclaw prefect said. "Looks like a bad nightmare.

"I don't know how those two can sleep through it," Deborah Smith said.

"I don't know either, but let me make certain they do." Maureen cast a silencing spell over the two furthest beds.

"Do you think we ought to go get Collins or Patil?" Merry asked nervously.

"Not Collins," Deborah hissed. "She'll just take points and tell Chang so she can laugh."

"We laughed once, too," Maureen reminded them.

"No more," Deborah said firmly. "She's always been nice to us. It shouldn't have taken Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs to show us what a good friend she can be."

"Merry, go get Padma, but softly. We don't need all the Sixth years in here."

"Right."

"No," Deborah said. "Edgecombe and Li's beds are the first two. They might wake up."

Merry considered. "Edgecombe might not wake up, but Li will. She might already up awake, the little sneak."

Deborah cast a silencing spell on the door. "If not, she won't be." She sat on the bed and stroked Luna's sweating brow. "We're here for you, Luna," she whispered.

One sleeper in Gryffindor was having an even more restless night. Harry had been sleeping better since his Occlumency lessons of the previous summer. It had therefore taken Ron a few minutes to realize what was happening. He had woken up, and just as the conversation in

Ravenclaw had started, Neville and Seamus had stood next to Ron, who was sitting on Harry's bed.

"Do we wake him up?" Seamus asked.

"Should we get Hermione?" Neville wondered.

"This might be important." Ron said. "If something can break through Harry's Occlumency training, we'd better wait and see." Not being Ravenclaw girls, the three boys did not think to cast any silencing spells.

A few moments later, they wished they had. Harry awoke with a blood-curdling, bone-chilling set of screams that echoed throughout the dorms.

In Ravenclaw, Luna's less-intense scream was only heard by her three friends.

"Luna!" Maureen cried. "What is it?"

"Harry!" Luna responded. "Harry's in pain!"

Chapter 17

Saturday, September 14, 1996

"Everyone back to bed," Hermione Granger ordered. "Ginny, get those girls out of here! Leo, get those boys back to bed! Upper years, clear off! Seamus! Intercept McGonagall and then go warn Madam Pomfrey Harry might need her! Kirke, go with him, in case McGonagall needs to send someone to the Headmaster."

She stood, majestic despite her wild hair, thin summer pink pajamas, faded green bathrobe, and fuzzy blue slippers; five foot two of commanding power. **"GO!"** Everyone went -- fast.

She turned and looked at Harry. Ron was embracing him. After he had screamed, Harry had vomited and then seemed to pass out in a cold sweat, struggling weakly. Neville had just finished cleaning Harry, Ron, the bed, and the floor with scouring and cleaning charms.

For the first time, Hermione saw Ron's resemblance to his mother, rather than his father. He was hugging Harry protectively, gently rocking the still-struggling unconscious Harry.

"What has happened, Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked from the door.

"Harry was having a nightmare," Neville answered instead. "Then he screamed, vomited, and passed out."

"Everyone showed up, but I sent them back to bed," Hermione went on, taking up the story. "I sent Finnigan to warn Madam Pomfrey she might be needed, and Kirke there in case you wanted to send for the Headmaster."

Harry starting convulsing more strongly. McGonagall turned to the Seventh year. "Run, Mister Kirke! Longbottom, run towards the Infirmary and hurry Pomfrey along!"

"No, Luna!" Maureen said, blocking the door.

"Harry needs me," Luna stated in a very powerful voice, much different than her usual tones. "Stand out of the way, or I shall have to resort to force."

Deborah and Merry joined the prefect in blocking the door. "I'd like to see you try it!" Deborah stated.

The Headmaster hurried towards the Gryffindor common room. He had sent house elves to fetch Lupin and Zoric. As he turned the last corner to the common room, Dumbledore saw there was a slight figure in nothing but a short white nightgown standing in front of the portrait, sweating and panting from exertion and staring at the Fat Lady.

"Miss Love. . . ." The portrait suddenly opened, and Dumbledore hurried to catch up to the Ravenclaw.

Luna seemed to know her way by instinct. She brushed past the gawking Gryffindors, who retreated behind their doors when they saw the Headmaster running up the stairs behind her.

Luna ran into the Sixth years' room, knocking McGonagall out of her way. "Miss Lovegood!" McGonagall remonstrated from the floor.

Luna looked very un-Luna like, covered in sweat with her fine dark blonde hair streaming in every direction, her wide-eyes even more un-blinking than usual. She then grabbed an open-mouthed Hermione and dragged her towards Harry's bed with one hand and then the equally-startled Ron Weasley with the other.

Madam Pomfrey, who was now tending the now-strongly convulsing Harry on his bed, was also shoved aside and Luna started giving directions. "Ronald, on the bed on the far side; hold Harry. Hermione, hold Harry from this side, make certain you have contact with both Harry and Ronald's skin."

The pair just looked at her. Luna, running on an adrenalin rush, ripped off Ron's pajama top and then picked him up and tossed him to the far side of the bed. She then did the same to Hermione, first throwing open Hermione's robe and ripping the buttons on her pajama top. Ron's eyes went very wide as Luna dropped the squeaking Hermione on the bed. Luna blocked his view as she ripped open Harry's vest, then threw her own nightgown on the floor, and climbed on top of Harry.

"He's under a psychic attack," Luna said. "If you love Harry, think about those feelings you have for him. It will strengthen him."

Dumbledore helped McGonagall and Pomfrey to their feet. "Is it possible, Headmaster?" Pomfrey asked.

"Observe," Dumbledore said. Harry's convulsions had ended, and his struggles now seemed more organized than random. After nearly two more minutes, Harry took a deep cleansing breath, and opened his eyes. "I love you three," he said softly. Luna kissed him gently on the lips, while Hermione kissed him on the cheek. Ron leaned forward, his forehead against his skull. "And we all love you, Harry," Hermione whispered.

Harry struggled to a sitting position, managed to wash his mouth out and take a drink of water, then he fell back and quickly fell asleep. "You may rise, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said.

Hermione adjusted her robe and rolled off the bed. "I don't know how to explain it -- we could feel Harry's struggles, but I don't think Voldemort was in Harry's mind. Harry was in Voldemort's."

"Voldemort and Harry have both been practicing Occlumency," Luna said from the bed, where she was still hugging Harry protectively. "The link between them is always there, only blocked by both of them. For some reason, all of Voldemort's shields fell tonight, letting the connection only flow in one direction. Harry invaded Voldemort's mind. He managed to get a strong hold, I'm not certain how or why. Perhaps it was pure instinct." She bit her upper lip to

think, and then went on. "I think Harry tried to kill him. Voldemort fought back. That's when I somehow became not just aware, but awake."

She paused again. "I've never had Vision like this before. I hope I never have to have it again. Voldemort was injured, but he has had more practice and discipline. Harry started to lose just as we entered the common room. The situation became serious just as we came in here. The three of us managed to support Harry to fight back. I believe he, Voldemort that is, is even more injured now, but I could be wrong about that. I don't think Harry has been harmed."

She looked up. "We should stay here tonight, in case there is another attack. Harry should be strong enough tomorrow to protect himself then."

"You certainly may NOT stay here tonight!" McGonagall cried, "especially not . . . like that!"

Dumbledore picked Harry's robe up and draped it over Luna. "Mister Weasley, you may get up now."

Ron rolled off the bed, and Dumbledore closed the curtain of Harry's bed that faced into the room. "Miss Granger, help Miss Lovegood put her nightgown on. Professor McGonagall, please see if Miss Brown or Miss Patil has an extra dressing gown for Miss Lovegood to wear in the night, if necessary. I shall arrange for her clothes to be brought over. Madam Pomfrey, I believe you know which remedies need to be supplied in the morning."

McGonagall and Pomfrey both nodded their understanding, too shocked to comment.

"Now," he went on, "Miss Granger, you may stay here the rest of the night. I do NOT expect this to become a habit for any of you. I shall have Misters Longbottom and Finnigan sleep elsewhere, and will have notices posted in the four common rooms announcing that the jogging club shall not jog this morning."

He left the room shooping McGonagall and Pomfrey out the door, which he closed. As soon as it shut, Luna opened the curtain. "I need to stay in close contact with Harry," she said. "Just cover us up, please."

"Would it help, if, well. . . ."

"Yes please."

Hermione flushed, but she pulled off Harry's pajama bottoms, then covered the pair up. She turned, and saw Ron holding out his best Chudley Cannons t-shirt, his eyes averted. "Why?" she asked.

"Well, your top. . . ."

Hermione took off her robe and pajama top, making Ron turn the brightest red he had ever turned. "Come on," she said, "we need some **sleep**. It's almost Two o'clock."

"Come along, Poppy," Dumbledore said to Madam Pomfrey. Professor McGonagall had been left behind to settle the Gryffindors down.

"Where are we going?" she asked, slightly out of breath as they left the common room.

"To check on Professor Snape, of course." At that point, Lupin and Zoric came across them, since they didn't know the password, and they were taken along, protesting.

Poppy Pomfrey did not know the details, for there was no reason for her to. She did, however, know that Snape was a fellow member of the Order, and was engaged as a double agent. If He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had let his own Occlumency shields drop to the point where a sleeping Harry Potter could invade and attack his mind, something must have happened to seriously distract the Dark Lord.

Since the revelation that the Dark Lord was a half-blood, the Order had hoped the Death Eaters might rebel at some point. If that had happened this night, Snape might know. If so, Snape might very well be injured.

Dumbledore opened the door to Snape's quarters, and it occurred to him for the first time to wonder how Lovegood had opened the Gryffindor common room entrance without using an audible password. He set that problem aside, and headed towards a light coming from Snape's small pantry.

A very worn Snape stepped out at the sounds of their entrance. "Headmaster; Madam Pomfrey; Professors."

"Are you well, Severus?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Barely," he said, drinking what Pomfrey thought was a strengthening potion. "From the looks of this, it was Potter who interfered?"

"Is Harry alright?" Lupin demanded.

"Yes, although it might have been a closer thing than I at first thought," Dumbledore said.

"Then we might have a different student to worry about," Snape said, drawing everyone's eyes back to him. "Draco was at the meeting. I believe he might be seriously injured. His portkey should have brought him to the castle entrance near the dungeons, but let me check his room first."

"Go," Dumbledore said, "we will search for him if it is necessary."

Snape found Draco collapsed outside the entrance to the Slytherin common room. "So, you survived," Snape said.

An exhausted Malfoy opened one eye. "Yes; thank you for your help, Godfather. I never thought. . . ."

"Exactly. You didn't. I would have thought you might have learned one important lesson by now. Very little is black and white. Nearly everything is gray. However, once you make a choice, many choices become impossible. Your only two choices now are a very devoted, even slavish, following of the Dark Lord -- either real or pretended -- or going to Dumbledore and confessing, offering to work for him as a spy. That would be a very dangerous game, and if the Dark Lord suspects you, he will kill you."

"But that would also mean working for Potter," Draco managed to spit the name. "I will stand by my vows."

Snape gave Draco a small vial, keeping two others in his pocket. "Drink that; it will help. Then go to bed."

"Yes, sir."

"You found Mister Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes; he was exhausted but not seriously injured."

"Poppy, I believe you will have to use some time to prepared Mister Potter's treatments?"

"Yes, sir," she said, taking the hint and leaving.

The three professors looked at Snape. He sighed. "There was a large meeting tonight. Potter's revelations had sparked much discontent. Draco's rebellion against being commanded by a half-blood was merely the most vocal. Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, and a few of the oldest members of His various followings revealed that they knew his status, and followed Him because of his power and His devotion to the Pure-Blooded ideals. This caused something of an up-roar, and Draco demanded to know how, if He is so powerful, Potter could keep on defeating Him. This got Draco Crucioed for a few seconds. The Lestrange brothers then tried to hit the Dark Lord with the killing curse. They missed, but He was hit by the reflections of it off the wall."

Dumbledore took up the story. "The escalating meeting must have made Voldemort drop his defenses to the point where Harry became aware of what was going on. His nightmare awoke his dorm mates, and somehow awoke Miss Lovegood. Once Voldemort was hit, Harry started a psychic attack on Voldemort."

"Damn!" Zoric said. "We should have trained more to block those possibilities."

"You may begin next week," Dumbledore said. He turned to Snape. "Continue, please."

"The Dark Lord started to curse Rastaban, but then seemed to stumble. That would no doubt be when Potter started his attack. Lucius and Bellatrix then killed the Lestranges, but I won't swear who killed whom. Then suddenly it seemed like everyone was throwing curses, more to even out old scores than for any reason directly connected to the meeting. I'm not certain what spell Voldemort used, but it knocked us all down. He was obviously under a great deal of

strain. He was still most . . . intimidating and inspiring, however. Even if any number of the fellowship still resent his birth, I don't believe it will surface for some time."

"And then?"

"Then he swept from the room."

"What happened to Harry?" Lupin demanded.

"When Voldemort engaged Harry with his full attention, Harry screamed, bringing the other Gryffindors to his room. Miss Granger soon took command of the situation. By then, the struggle was in earnest, and Harry was convulsing from the strain. These apparently worsened just as Miss Lovegood and I approached."

"She was there?" Zoric asked, surprised.

"She has Second Sight, and she loves Harry," Dumbledore reminded them. "That combination is very unpredictable; they obviously have developed a deep connection. She brought herself, Miss Granger, and Mister Weasley into physical contact with Harry, and with herself as a bridge, they gave him the strength he needed to extricate himself. Miss Lovegood believes that Voldemort may have suffered some additional injuries from this battle."

"Amazing," Snape admitted.

"Voldemort was very fortunate," Dumbledore said. "Had this occurred while Harry was awake, he may have succeeded in actually killing Voldemort via the link."

"We can't count on His being so seriously injured again," Zoric pointed out.

"True, but this was twice Harry nearly killed Voldemort this way, forcing Voldemort to break off the engagement -- the first was at the Ministry, remember. At the very least, this should ensure that He does not try additional psychic attacks on Harry."

"There is every chance that the Dark Lord will step up his attacks on opponents," Snape informed them.

"To both bind His followers closer to His leadership, and to give them all the chance to prove themselves to Him," Zoric observed.

"Exactly," Snape agreed.

"Will young Mister Malfoy desert?" Dumbledore asked.

"Only if he can find a more Pure-blooded alternative," Snape said sadly.

"Does he need any medical attention?"

"No," Snape said firmly. "I gave him a weak strengthening potion; let him understand what the Cruciatus curse is really like. After a slight taste, he might be less inclined to use it for fun."

"Very well." Dumbledore sighed. "Thank goodness tomorrow is not a class day."

Harry woke up shortly after 6:00. The memories of the night before reminded him why he was so stiff and sore that morning. As he stretched, he realized he was not alone in the bed.

Luna lazily opened her eyes. "Good morning, beloved."

"Thank you," Harry said simply, remembering how she had led Ron and Hermione into his mind to fight the demon.

"You're welcome," she answered, kissing him deeply. Harry then realized they were both naked.

After nearly fifteen minutes of mutual, although non-sexual, pleasure, the pair stopped. They certainly did not want to stop, but both knew that if they didn't, they would go too far.

Luna stood, and at Harry's sharp intake of breath, she stopped and showed off for him. Luna had never thought she was in any way attractive, but she now knew that she was beautiful in Harry's eyes. She walked back towards him, and handed Harry his glasses. She leaned over and kissed him on more time. "If I can't find you later, I expect you'll be alone in our place, thinking of me. If you can't find me, I'll be there, thinking of you, my love."

Harry blushed, but acknowledged to himself that she was likely correct. He watched as Luna dressed in the clothes the elves had left during the night. She kissed Harry again, and left.

Harry stood and stretched. "Good morning, Harry," Hermione said from Ron's bed. She sat up.

Harry opened his eyes, so shocked by Hermione topless condition that he forgot his own state of undress.

"How are you feeling."

"Stiff," Harry said, thinking of his sore neck and back.

"I can see that," Hermione said with a giggle. "I'd be flattered, if I didn't know it was all because of Luna."

"Eep!" Harry said, crouching and covering himself.

"I have my eyes closed, Harry. Put something on."

Harry opened his eyes and saw Hermione was putting on her buttonless pajama top, so he quickly got dressed. By then, Hermione had her robe on as well.

"If you don't mind my running up to my room to get dressed," she said, "we can meeting in the common room, and I can tell you what happened."

"Good idea," Harry mumbled, still embarrassed.

Hermione smiled. "Harry, first of all, we might very well spend at least part of next summer of the Zorics' Adriatic island, so we might as well not be embarrassed now. Secondly, we might love each other like siblings, but we aren't. It's okay to look, as long as it doesn't go any further."

"Thanks," he said, feeling a little less guilty. "Then I'll just say this; you are very beautiful, Hermione."

She stood even straighter and smiled. "Thank you. And you are a **very** well-put-together young man."

Luna Lovegood entered her dorm room. Two of her roommates were still asleep. Three were still petrified. "Oh, dear," Luna said softly. "After I un-hex you, let's go down to the common room and talk. Then I have to take a shower." She looked down. She had forgotten to wear slippers the night before.

Blaise checked and saw that Malfoy had returned, even though he had slept through the alarm. He dressed, and left to allow the junior Death Eaters to sort out their problems. Seeing the notice that the jogging club would not meet as a group, he went off to run anyway. All the usual Hufflepuffs were there, but all the Gryffindors were missing, as were all of the usual Fifth year Ravenclaws girls and of course the other Sixth year Slytherin boys.

Hermione and Harry gave the early-rising Gryffindors an edited explanation of what had happened, and repeated it an hour later to the rest of the House. Such was the cohesion of the group that none ever spoke of the events to anyone outside the House.

Harry finally made his way towards the great hall for breakfast alone at 8:30. He ran into Luna and her dorm mates. Similarly, none of her roommates, not even the two who had slept through the whole event but who had already been told what happened, would ever reveal what had happened.

They invited Harry to eat at the Ravenclaw table. This was not an uncommon event, especially on the weekends, but it was only acceptable if you were invited to another House's table and only for breakfast.

Gryffindor's Quidditch practice would not be until after lunch that Saturday, so after breakfast, Harry and Luna disappeared into their hidden suite, where they rested in each other's arms until it was time for lunch, luxuriating in mutual affection.

After practice, Harry was invited into Professor Dumbledore's office, along with the officers of the DA. Harry recounted his experience in greater detail than he had to the Gryffindors, but while it gave the Headmaster more details of the experience, it really offered little new knowledge.

Luna wasn't certain how she got the painting to open, but Dumbledore had his own ideas about that. When it came to Harry, the castle often seemed to help him along without prompting.

Voldemort had weathered an attack on his authority over his followers. The question now was what he would do to reassert that authority.

Chapter 18

Outside of Hogwarts, things were quiet for a week. Then, starting the night of September 22, wizarding houses started burning down. All were isolated, all were empty at the time. Between September 22 and the morning of October 13, 24 houses were destroyed; a loss of property, but not of life. No Dark Marks were seen, but the houses were certainly destroyed by some form of dark magic.

The houses belonged to a wide-range of families; rich and poor, from ancient Pure-bloods to those belonging to mixed couples to Muggles with magical children, in both Britain and Ireland. The Lovegood cottage in Ottery St. Catchpole was one of these, but Mister Lovegood had been spending the night at his Diagon Alley offices.

The night of Sunday, October 13, into the early morning of October 14, however, six houses were set on fire. All six were occupied. The Death Eaters did not try to attack those inside, or stay to produce the Dark Mark. Even though two were guarded and two were heavily-warded, all six burnt to the ground.

Five of the six attacks were designed to remind the students of Hogwarts that Harry Potter was a dangerous person to follow. The sixth was remind Harry that he was still a target.

Inside Hogwarts, those weeks had been somewhat strained, although Luna, Ginny, and Ron had thrown Hermione a big birthday party to try and lessen some of the strain on the DA members. The SDA practiced, and the joggers -- SDA, neutrals, and Death Eaters and sympathizers -- eyed each other warily. Draco Malfoy was noticeably quiet, and Theodore Nott seemed more in control of the Slytherin pro-Death Eaters for the moment, but they were not confronting the other students. Ginny's gossip informants claimed it was because Nott was too involved with Millicent Bulstrode to cause much trouble.

As Seamus had said of the tall skinny Nott and the tall, broad, and incredibly buxom Millicent, "That's a lot of woman for any man to handle."

By now, all the SDA in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were standing for the Monday Gryffindor processions, and most of their First, Second, and Third years were as well. Except for some friction between the First year Gryffindors and Slytherins, however, the various factions were content to give each other dirty looks in public. In private, there were still many attempts to sway the neutrals.

Monday, October 14, 1996

The first arrivals for the Monday procession were startled to see Professors McGonagall and Lupin waiting for them. Word quickly spread, and the entire House was present by 7:02. Harry, who was waiting for everyone to be present, then took a step forward. "What's happened."

"We need to speak to you and some of the other students, Harry," McGonagall said kindly.

'If she calls me Harry in public, especially in that tone of voice, something really bad has happened,' Harry thought. "I can't speak for anyone else, but if you have bad news for me, I'd prefer to hear with here, with my family, if it's possible."

"Miss Granger, Mister Finnigan, Mister Caradog, Miss Banks" (a Fourth year from a mixed-marriage) "and the Misses Patil. . . ." McGonagall started, but couldn't finish.

"Please tell us," Hermione said. "Harry's right, please tell us together."

"It will be harder to hear it separately," Parvati said, gathering her little sister to her.

"All your families' houses were attacked last night," Lupin said. "In the last war, the Death Eaters would break into the houses, torture and kill the families, and then leave. We, and most magical families, have based protections on that model. Last night, however, groups of at least four Death Eaters set five of the houses on fire, using a type of fast-acting fire-spell that has yet to be identified. All six houses were totally burnt; all six were occupied."

"Harry, the house on Privet Drive is gone, although the evidence is this was arson caused by Muggles. Your cousin is in serious condition at what the Muggles call a burn-unit, your aunt was less injured. Your uncle is not expected to survive. Miss Banks, your family is safe and fairly unscathed, although your home, and the business, are gone." Banks nodded, thankful her family was safe.

"Mister Caradog, the manor is of course made of stone, but the inside was gutted. All the members of your family were slightly injured, and I understand one of the house elves was killed."

Remus next turned to Seamus. "Mister Finnigan, I regret to say that while your mother is relatively unharmed, your father has been killed, and your sister is not expected . . . to survive." Seamus closed his eyes in pain, while Lavender hugged him tightly.

"Miss Granger," Remus said gently, seeing Ginny already hugging her and Ron hovering close by, "your father is also dead, while your mother is in hospital, and they are uncertain as to the outcome. Parvati, Sudipta, both your parents and your brother died on the way to St. Mungo's."

"Classes for Gryffindor are canceled for today," McGonagall said a tear running down her cheek. She turned to Parvati, "Miss Patil, Professor Flitwick will be bringing your sister presently towards the common room." She sniffled but managed to say, "My condolences to all of you. The Headmaster will be speaking to you . . . about arrangements."

Harry stepped forward. "Thank you, Professors," he said. "We'll take things from here." The two glanced at each other, and left.

Harry took a deep breath, reminding himself of the stories he had read in his last year at the Muggle school, stories of stoic British soldiers fighting in the Crimea, the trenches of World War I, the Battle of Britain, and the Blitz.

He hadn't asked for this responsibility and didn't want it, but fate had chosen him to be the commander of these people. He would not let them down.

He gathered Hermione and Ginny in a tight hug, and held his hand out to the Patils. Sudipta ran and hugged him and Hermione, while Parvati comforted and took comfort from Seamus and Lavender. Ieuan and Margene's friends gathered around them.

After a few moments, Harry released himself from Hermione and Sudipta's hug, and was immediately replaced by Ron. Harry marched to the center of the room and stood on a chair, attracting most of the eyes in the room.

"I've said many times that this is not a game," Harry said, starting out quietly. "I told you that it would be dangerous; that people would be hurt, or even killed. I can't promise that if you follow me, your families won't be targeted. I CAN say that if Voldemort wins, all this will happen anyway. Either we fight, or we're slaves. I can not choose for any of you. . . ."

Parvati looked up, and asked fiercely through her tears, "Do you mourn with us, Harry?"

"What. . . ." Ginny started to ask, even more fiercely, but Harry stopped her. He stepped down from the chair and said to her, "I'm very sorry for your losses, Parvati."

"I know you are, Harry," she said, wiping her tears. "So no apologies are needed. I pledged myself to follow you, Harry Potter," she said, a little louder. She turned to face the other students. "If you fear losing your family, DO something about it! FIGHT HARDER!"

Harry leapt back on the chair. "If anyone wants out, stay here! But we are Gryffindor! We are a family. AND I SAY, WHOMEVER ATTACKS ONE OF US ATTACKS ALL OF US!"

Hermione was suddenly standing next to Harry, and he had to grab her waist so she wouldn't fall off the edge of the chair. "I have followed Harry longer than anyone, except for Ron. Unlike some of you, perhaps, I have thought this through many times. I knew the risks from the end of my first year, and I haven't changed my mind today! I talked it over with my parents. They understood the risks. I may have lost everything I have outside this castle, or even this room, and I STILL say I made the right choices!" She took a deep breath, and managed to ask in a loud, steady voice, "WHO ARE WE?"

"GRYFFINDORS!"

"THAT'S BLEEDIN' PATHETIC!" Seamus screamed in fury, as he released Lavender.
"WHO ARE WE?"

"GRYFFINDORS!"

"WHAT ARE WE?" Ginny, Sudipta, Parvati, and Lavender yelled.

"THE BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE!"

"Remember Cedric Diggory!" Harry called out.

"AND REMEMBER THOMAS AND THE CREEVYS!"

"Let's go!" This time, Harry led them out.

The tenor of each week's march had been different. Today, there was no doubt that the mood was one of fury. As the march went past the first two suits of armor, they didn't salute, they instead started pounding on their own armor and shields in time with the Marchers' left steps as soon as the march fully exited the common room. In less than a minute, all the armor in the castle was drumming in beat to the Marchers, including the pair in the Slytherin common room. Even the more martial paintings joined in.

As they moved, Harry sent a new call through the line, for when they hit the common room.

As the march hit the ground floor, Professor Flitwick, Padma and the SDA Sixth years, and Luna and her room mates were waiting. A number of other Third through Seventh year Ravenclaws were watching from behind. Harry raised his hand for the line of Gryffindors to stop moving, but they kept marching in place. Ginny then started clapping on the beat, and within three beats the entire House had joined. Each Gryffindor's face was set, in determination, fury, or both.

Harry walked over and briefly embraced Padma. "I'm so sorry," he said.

"Thank you," she sniffled. "We can't stop now, though, can we?"

"I don't think so," Harry said.

"May we join you, then?" she asked, her chin up, tears running down her cheeks.

"Of course," Harry said. "Come between me and Hermione and Ron, if you want," he told the other Ravenclaws.

"We want," Boot snarled. He glanced over at Corner, Cho, and their friends. "Others can whine about neutrality; I prefer to stand up and be counted. I'm with you now, Harry; all the way. No more reservations. I, no we, are yours to command." Twelve Ravenclaws fell in directly behind Harry, while Padma took Harry's place near the rear, next to Parvati.

When the group marched into the main entrance hall, the fourteen suits of armor in the hall had been making quite a noise for some time. The great double doors to the great hall, which had closed apparently of their own accord a few moments before, swung open with a bang. Harry stood aside, and the Ravenclaws, except for Padma, went to their own table, and then the Gryffindors and Padma marched down to their seats, Harry still in the lead. An empty chair flew from the head table to the very foot of the Gryffindor table.

"REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!" two thirds of the Hufflepuffs shouted when the Gryffindors were in place.

"AND ALL THE INNOCENTS, SLAUGHTERED!" the Gryffindors responded.

A great silence descended on the castle for three beats, except for the sound of the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs sitting down.

Then the beat continued, an echo from the very castle itself.

thump

thump

thump

thump

Ginny Weasley picked up her knife and fork and joined the beat.

thunk

thunk

All the Fifth and Sixth year Gryffindors, plus Padma Patil, seated next to Parvati, joined.

Thunk

Thunk

The ceiling of the great hall, which had shown a totally over-cast sky, despite the sunny day outside, suddenly parted, showing Harry in a faint nimbus of sunlight.

Thunk

Thunk

Thunk

Almost all the other Gryffindors, except Harry joined in.

Thunk!

Thunk!

All the Gryffindors, except Harry, plus Luna and the Sixth year DA officers in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff joined.

Thunk!!

Thunk!!

Half the Hufflepuffs and a quarter of the Ravenclaws joined in. Word had spread to all the tables about the murders.

THUNK!

THUNK!

The clouds parted again, shining on Dumbledore, while the light on Harry grew slightly with each beat.

THUNK!!

THUNK!!

Nearly all the Hufflepuffs and over half the Ravenclaws joined.

WHUMP

WHUMP

WHUMP

WHUMP

At the head table, where all the staff except the two Divination professors and Binns were present, Hagrid joined.

WHUMP! The dishes on the staff table jumped.

WHUMP!

WHUMP!

Tomas and Mona Zoric, the tearful McGonagall, and Remus Lupin joined.

WHUMP!

WHUMP!

Flitwick joined.

WHUMP!

All the staff except for Dumbledore, Snape, and Sinistra joined.

WHUMP!

WHUMP!

WHUMP!

WHUMP!

WHUMP!

Only a few staff, and Harry, noticed, but the light was now faintly striking Ginny, Hermione, and, Luna as well.

WHUMP!

WHUMP!

Sinistra gave Snape a shrug and joined.

WHUMP!!

WHUMP!!

WHUMP!!

WHUMP!!

WHUMP!!

CRASH! Thunder rolled across the great hall on each beat, as the five Slytherin prefects and the Head Boy joined in.

CRASH!

Four other Slytherins joined on the next beat.

CRASH!!

CRASH!!

CRASH!!

CRASH!!

Harry stood, and the sounds from the castle faded into almost nothing, but the people continued.

bang!

bang!

bang!

bang!

bang!

Harry held his hands up, and staff and Slytherins stopped, while the other students kept the beat going more softly.

thunk

thunk

thunk

Harry looked straight at Draco Malfoy, who sat, looking stunned. Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy and some of the others looked terrified. He couldn't see the looks on Nott or Bulstrode since they were facing away from him. Harry forced himself to turn and address Snape over the slow drum beat.

thunk

thunk

thunk

"I know there are not only some people who approve of the murders and attacks committed last night, there are some who even take pleasure in them. To those people, I say, **WE WILL NOT BE FRIGHTENED INTO SURRENDERING! WE ARE NOT AFRAID OF THE COWARDS WHO BURN DOWN HOUSES FILLED WITH SLEEPING CHILDREN! WE KNOW WE WILL FACE LOSSES, BUT WE ALSO KNOW WE SHALL WIN!**"

thunk

thunk

"WE WILL WIN BECAUSE WE ARE NOT JUST FIGHTING FOR OURSELVES! WE ARE NOT FIGHTING FOR SELFISH POWER! WE ARE NOT FIGHTING FOR REVENGE! WE ARE NOT FIGHTING OUT OF FEAR! WE ARE NOT FIGHTING FOR ANYTHING SOME OF YOU WILL EVER UNDERSTAND! WE ARE FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE!"

Ginny and Luna instantly picked up the word with the beat. "JUS-tice"

"JUS-tice"

"JUS-tice"

The whole group of pro-SDA students, including a few of the Slytherins, was now softly chanting it.

"JUS-tice!"

"JUS-tice!"

"JUS-tice!"

Harry took a deep breath, and went on. "SOME OF YOU WANT TO STAY NEUTRAL; SOME OF YOU HOPE RIDDLE CAN BE DEFEATED BY PASSIVE RESISTANCE! THAT CAN NEVER WORK AGAINST A DISHONORABLE OPPONENT! BUT WE ARE NOT AGAINST YOU! LIKE YOU, WE HAVE THE GREATEST FORCE ON EARTH ON OUR SIDE! WE HAVE THE GREATEST MAGIC OF ALL! WE HAVE"

"LOVE!" Harry, Luna, Ginny, and Hermione screamed.

All the students supporting Harry leapt up as one and screamed the chant, aiming it directly at Snape and Malfoy and his friends.

"LOVE!"

"LOVE!"

"LOVE!"

"LOVE!"

"LOVE!"

Pansy Parkinson, Bellatrix Malfoy, and Andrea Pucey fled first, followed by two thirds of the Slytherins within the next five beats. Cho and her clique sat, crying, while Corner and Cornfoot looked very nervous. Zach Smith sat isolated at the Hufflepuff table, with a sneer on his lips. Snape then rose and made a dignified exit, followed by many of the other Slytherins, some reluctantly, until just ten were left at the Slytherin table, who had also joined in the chant, causing thunder to again roll through the castle.

Without a signal, as a group, the students stopped as the double doors shut behind the last departing Slytherin, and the castle was silent. Harry sat down and said hoarsely to Ron, "Pass the pumpkin juice."

The spell was broken, and most of the students burst into a mild round of applause before settling down to eat.

"What the bloody hell was that!" Ron asked, his eyes wide.

"We tapped into the powers of Hogwarts itself," Hermione said.

"That's why it was amplified when members of all the different Houses joined in," Harry agreed. "Save me some toast," he added, getting up and walking from the base of the Gryffindor table across the short distance to the dias where the head table was. Some of the staff were looking at him very warily, unsure what they had just experienced.

"Yes, Mister Potter?" Professor McGonagall asked, since he seemed to be heading for her as he stepped up onto the dias.

"May I ask a favor, Professor, from you and perhaps Professor Flitwick?"

"Certainly, my boy," Flitwick answered.

"May Padma join her sisters in our common room if she wants? Or may Parvati and Sudipta join Padma in Ravenclaw, if they prefer?"

The two professors looked at each other, and both shrugged. "Of course, Harry," McGonagall said.

"Whichever way they and their friends prefer," Flitwick added.

"I think some of us need to speak with you, Commander Potter," Dumbledore's soft voice said.

"Eight thirty, sir?" Harry asked. Seeing the surprised look at Dumbledore's face, Harry said very softly, "I need to speak to them first, and with Gryffindor's classes canceled for today, I believe all four Heads of Houses are free, if you need to have any present."

"Very well thought of, Harry," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Hogwarts has chosen its new champion very well. Even more so than I had thought."

Harry smiled grimly, and left to tell the Patils.

"Are you in trouble, Harry," Irena asked as breakfast broke up.

"No," Harry assured her. He turned to Hermione. "I am sorry," he said simply.

Hermione nodded, her eyes filled with tears as she remembered what had happened to her family. When Ron again hesitated, Ginny took Hermione's arm, and soon just Ron and Harry were standing together.

"What do I do, Harry?" Ron asked, tears now in his own eyes. "What can I say to her?"

"Do you really love her, Ron," Harry asked.

"I do, more than life," Ron said, "but I never know what to say."

"Ron, I say this as your best friend," Harry said seriously, "for once in your life, try not to say anything. You'll try to say something funny, to break the tension, and it will be the wrong thing to say. Hold her, and if you have to say anything, tell her you love her and that you'll be there for her for whatever she needs. No one will make fun of you."

"I just don't know if I can do this, Harry." Ron looked very torn and young.

Harry patted his taller friend's shoulder. "You can, if you really care, Ron."

"Thanks, Harry," Ron said. He started to turn, but stopped. "Were you scared this morning?"

"Scared? No; but I was VERY aware that I was riding something bigger than any of us. I promise, I'll be careful. And I know you and Hermione will keep me straight, if it goes to my head."

Ron smiled. "Good." He jogged off, and Harry went to see Dumbledore.

When Harry came from comforting Hermione and the Patils, there was only Dumbledore, Zoric, and Lupin in the Headmaster's office. There, he was told Vernon Dursley had indeed died. "I thought we should talk," Dumbledore went on. "There is no reason to involve any one else. Do you know what happened this morning, Harry?"

"Of course," Harry answered.

"Would you mind enlightening us?" Lupin pleaded.

"Hogwarts itself somehow resonated and amplified our collective magic -- it really jumped when the Slytherins joined," Harry said.

"Is that all?" Dumbledore asked gently.

Harry half-smiled. "No; it felt . . . almost as if I could reach out and channel that power."

"If you wish to make a commitment, you may channel that power," Dumbledore told him.

"Is that what you meant by 'champion'?"

"Exactly," Dumbledore agreed. "In some senses, it resembles matching a wizard and wand. Within strict limits, it amplifies your power slightly in all types of magic, greatly in a few areas, especially in defense of the castle and students."

"What limits?" Zoric demanded.

"In terms of time, there is a ceremony. For a week after that ceremony, Harry should not leave the castle. He should not go further afield than Hogsmeade or the Forbidden Forest for at least ninety days. His extra power will apply as far as the ends of the grounds fairly fast, perhaps a month or so, but will never extend further than about twenty miles -- or at least mine has not. Outside that boundary, he may appear to be a more powerful wizard than he is now not because he is actually more powerful, but because he is more in touch with the power within himself."

"Can the ceremony go wrong?" Lupin asked.

"No; if he is rejected, he will not be harmed."

"How many champions are there?" Harry asked.

"You would be the twenty-seventh since the founding of the school. The twenty-fifth died a dozen years or so before my birth. The previous champions are not ghosts here, but some have left strong echoes, to guide champions when there are no living ones present."

"What other limits are there?" Lupin asked.

"A champion must spend no more than a year away from Hogwarts; if he does, he will start to weaken. The way to avoid that is spending twenty-four consecutive hours at Hogwarts. For every day you are weak, you must spend an extra day here. I suspect, Harry, if you take on this role, you will be neither a professional Quidditch player nor an Auror, but a humble teacher at Hogwarts."

"How long have you known?" Harry demanded, angrily.

"Since this morning; I suspected it since you found your way to Fluffy and the trap door your first year. The castle has helped you more than most years of students combined. However, suspicions were not proof, and I felt forbidden to mention it without proof." Dumbledore frowned. "You will often get feelings like that, Harry. It is the castle itself. It is not alive nor sentient, but it is a manifestation of Higher Magic. It is never totally wrong."

"That simply means we don't understand it," Lupin complained.

"True," Dumbledore agreed.

Harry thought a moment. "What do you recommend, Master Tomas?" Harry asked.

Zoric shook his head. "I cannot say, Harry. I will say, I will help you no matter what your decision."

"I have to agree with Tomas," Lupin said sadly. "Under other circumstances, I would say no, very strongly, but I just can't today."

"I can't do it today," Harry said. That drew their attention. "I need to attend Mister Granger's funeral, and hopefully the ones for the Patils and Finnigans. If I do it Friday afternoon, I can still go to Hogsmeade the following weekend."

"And your uncle's?" Remus asked.

"I doubt Aunt Petunia, let alone Aunt Marge, will want me there," Harry answered.

"May I check for you?" Remus asked.

Harry hesitated, and then nodded.

"And if there are more funerals next week?" Zoric asked, making the other three wince.

"Then I shall have to be too ill to go," Harry said.

"You may go to Mister Granger's," Dumbledore said. "I shall explain to the Miss Patils and Mister Finnigan why I cannot let you start going to funerals as a rule."

Harry was about to object, when a new thought hit him. "I'll be able to really control magic within the grounds of Hogwarts, to actually see it?" Harry suddenly said.

"Yes, Harry."

"Then I won't be able to play Quidditch, will I? I'd have an unfair advantage."

"Since you play Slytherin first, that should not be a problem. It would take a great deal of determination to control the snitch, which is an amazingly complex magical object, and under normal circumstances that should not occur until after the end of the season. However, you are correct, in that you could not play next year."

A chime sounded. "Someone wishes to visit. Can you tell who it is, Harry?"

"Professor McGonagall?"

"Exactly."

Harry shrugged. It might have been a lucky guess.

"News, Professor McGonagall?" Dumbledore asked as she entered.

"Very bad news, I regret to say," she answered. "Muggle investigators sifting through the remains of the Grangers' house discovered four more bodies. They have been identified as Miss Granger's grandparents. Even worse, Hermione's mother died on the operating table."

"Hermione once told me she was from a long-line of only children, Harry said. "There's no one to help her." He looked around. "Can't someone help? I'd take on any costs."

"Actually, her maternal grandmother was a squib," McGonagall said. "She does have a magical older half-sister, although they have not . . . had not spoken in many years."

"You?" Harry asked.

She nodded. "I had planned to tell her after her N.E.W.T.s. Otherwise, she might have worried I was showing favoritism."

"If I may, shall I tell her all this?" Harry asked gently, since the professor seemed on the verge of tears.

McGonagall merely shook her head. Then she took a deep breath to explain, "I believe she is in her room, with her dorm mates, the Patils, Miss Weasley, and even Miss Lovegood." Boys of course were not allowed in the girls' area.

"I believe Harry can be trusted," Dumbledore said. "Come here, Harry."

Dumbledore stood, and Harry stood beside him. The Headmaster produced a key, and shook hands with Harry, the key held between their hands. Dumbledore mumbled an incantation, and Harry felt a slight frisson of power. Suddenly, for a fraction of a second, it was as if he was aware of all of Hogwarts.

Dumbledore nodded. "That confirms my suspicions even more. It is well you have a good working knowledge of Occlumency. For now, the key will allow you, and only you, access anywhere in the castle. Officially, you are now the special security prefect. For any door, open or secret, touch the key to it and simply say 'access.' For a warded threshold, hold the key in front of you, say it, and wait five seconds. I suggest you call out 'man on the floor' in the girls' area."

Harry nodded. He turned to McGonagall. "I'm sorry for your loss, Professor, but I am glad Hermione and you will have each other." She nodded silently, since she was now past the verge of crying.

"And the Patils?" Harry asked, turning to Dumbledore. "Sudipta said something about some Slytherin relatives?"

"Nearly all of their relatives have returned to India over the years," Dumbledore told him. "There is a maternal uncle, a partner in the firm who was a Ravenclaw. I shall be speaking to him shortly."

Harry nodded and turned to leave.

"Harry!" Harry turned and faced Dumbledore, puzzled. "I shall only inform Professor McGonagall of the other matter. May I ask that you tell no one?"

Harry thought a moment. "I think I should tell Hermione and Luna. I think I'll need their help."

"You are probably correct. But not until after the funeral."

Harry nodded his agreement, and started to leave. Then he paused and asked, "Are school uniforms appropriate for both wizard and Muggle funerals?"

Dumbledore nodded. "The blazers are appropriate for Muggle funerals; both would work at a wizarding funeral, although dark dress robes or a nice work robe would be preferred over the blazer."

Harry thanked them, and left.

Chapter 19

The first person Harry saw in the common room was Ron, who was pacing. "Thank Merlin, you're here!" Ron cried out, drawing everyone's attention.

"Why?" Harry asked.

Ron dragged Harry to an empty corner, and spoke softly. "Seamus is in our room, yelling and screaming. Neville and some of the Seventh years are keeping an eye on him. The little Patil girl went into hysterics, and a whole group of girls, including Loon, err Luna, swept upstairs. Half the people are hysterically angry, and I honestly think the rest of us are damn near homicidal."

"Prepare to be angrier," Harry told him.

"What?"

"Hermione's grandparents were visiting. . . ."

"It was her parents' anniversary today," Ron said, sadly.

"They were killed, and her mum died in hospital."

"Oh, hell!" Ron hissed.

"Is she up in her room?" Harry asked.

"Yeah; are you going to tell her when she comes down?"

"Dumbledore made me a security prefect. I can go anywhere," Harry said. He hesitated, then said, "I can't let you up with me, though. It won't work."

Ron made a face. "I understand. Tell her I'm here for her, whenever she needs me."

"I will. Ron, you could talk to the First through Third years," Harry suggested. "Be there for them, too, until Hermione can come down."

Ron frowned, then nodded. "You're right. I'm a prefect, the Quidditch captain, and the House SDA captain." Ron squared his shoulders. He had always wanted to be noticed and honored; it was time to face up to the responsibilities that implied.

"Man on the floor!" Harry proclaimed.

A few heads poked out from rooms, but not from Hermione's and Parvati's.

Harry knocked lightly on the door frame. The Patil sisters, Lavender, and Irena were on one bed; Hermione, Ginny, and Luna were on another. Only Irena, Ginny, and Luna saw him.

Harry walked over to Parvati's bed. The group looked up. "What? How did you get here?" Lavender asked, surprised.

"Dumbledore gave me clearance for everywhere," Harry said simply. "Is there anything I can do?"

"How's Seamus?" Parvati asked.

"Upset and, according to Ron, extremely angry and agitated."

"I wish he could be with us. . . ." Parvati said. She and Lavender both were casually dating him, Lavender a bit more seriously.

"Go ahead," Harry said. "Neville and some of the Seventh years are with him, but they might just be winding him up."

"But. . . ."

"It's alright," Harry said. "I can't let him up here, though; the alarms would still go off."

Parvati looked at her twin. Padma nodded. "You two go," she said. "I need to check on Sudipta's and Irena's robes, anyway."

Parvati accepted a warm hug from Harry, who was amazed at how natural it had felt all morning -- he knew the previous year he would have horribly embarrassed to hug anyone in public. Padma hugged him in a slightly less-passionate way than Parvati (since Parvati did everything passionately), and the group moved out of the room.

Harry turned around. Luna was sitting on Hermione's bed, the curtains open. She was leaning against the headboard, her legs up on the bed. Hermione was laying face down, her head near Luna's lap, Luna's hand massaging Hermione's shoulder. Ginny was leaning next to Luna, her head on Luna's shoulder, her hand on Hermione's back, next to Luna's.

"Is she asleep," Harry asked softly.

"No," Hermione's muffled voice said.

Harry laid his glasses on Hermione's bed-side stand, sat on the bed, and placed his hand over Luna's and Ginny's. "Hi," he said softly, a tear coming down his cheek.

"Hi," Hermione muttered. "Is . . . is . . . have you heard about Mum?" She sniffled. "Today is their anniversary."

Luna and Ginny looked at Harry, and he shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid it's very bad, Hermione," Harry said softly, his tears falling faster, although he managed to hold his voice steady.

"Mummy's gone?" she said in a very little girl's voice, sounding younger than she had when they'd first met.

"Your grandparents were staying over," Harry said.

"Oh, no!" Ginny whispered.

Hermione clutched Luna's legs. "All of them?"

Harry had been working out more than almost any other student since the gym had opened. He had no trouble lifting Hermione up into his arms. "I'm so very sorry, Hermione."

Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry and cried, even though she had thought just a short time before that she must be cried out. Luna leaned forward and hugged them from the side, while Ginny joined them from Hermione's back.

They stayed there for many minutes.

Finally, Harry wiped his eyes and asked, "Ginny, may I ask you something that would really set Ron off?"

"Sure," she said.

"How are Ron's and your blazers?"

"I just got a new one, but Ron went for a new robe instead. Why. . . . Oh!"

"Could you owl Bill?" Harry asked. "You can borrow Hedwig. If it leaves him short, I can send him permission to take it out of my account."

"We have our own accounts now," Ginny reminded him. She kissed Hermione's temple and went to take care of it.

Hermione sat back, taking a handkerchief from a pile Luna had put on the bed some time before. "God, Harry, what am I going to do?" She looked up him, not really seeing him, her eyes totally red. "You . . . you'll be with me, won't you?" She knew Ron would be, but "I need my brother with me."

"Actually, it turns out you have a great-aunt," Harry said.

"No I don't. Someone would have mentioned it," she said petulantly.

"Your maternal grandmother was a squib, and she had an older half-sister, who is a witch," Harry said. "Apparently, they were estranged."

"Do I know her?"

"Was your grandmother Scots?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered. "Why?" It suddenly hit her. "McGonagall?"

Harry nodded. "She's making the arrangements for your family. She was afraid that you would think she was showing you partiality, but she was going to tell you after the N.E.W.T.s." He swallowed. "Dumbledore said I could go to the funeral for your parents, but that I couldn't go to any others. It would just make Voldemort target student families to draw me out, I guess."

Hermione leaned forward and kissed Harry's cheek. "You probably have lots to do, Harry. Go ahead."

Harry looked at Luna, who nodded. He kissed Hermione's forehead, and then Luna gently on her dry lips. "I'll have something to drink sent up for everyone," he said before he left. "At the rate we're all crying, we'll all dehydrate long before lunch."

After Harry left to visit the other girls' rooms, Hermione asked, "Harry cried? But Harry never cries."

Luna smiled gently and kissed Hermione. "He loves you, so he grieves with you," she told Hermione. They had become close since Harry's ordeal the month before. "Lie down with me and nap," she told her friend. She pulled Hermione close, and within minutes, Hermione was asleep in Luna's arms.

Twenty-five minutes later, Harry had checked on all the Gryffindors, and marched out of the common room. His first stop was the kitchens.

"Harry Potter, sir!"

"Hi, Dobby," Harry replied.

"Dobby and the other elves are very sorry for the family of Harry Potter and his friends," Dobby said. The other elves turned and nodded, their eyes all wide and some of them teary.

"Thank you," Harry said. "I need to ask you do to some favors for me, if they're not too much trouble."

"Ask, Harry Potter," Dobby said, squaring his narrow little shoulders.

"First, does anyone know what a milkshake is and how to make one?"

"Moksi knows, Mister Harry Potter, sir!" a male elf called out. "Moksi has good friend that works at Fortescue's!"

"I need someone to take chocolate milkshakes, in the largest pumpkin juice or water glasses that we have, to Hermione Granger, the three Patil sisters, and Seamus Finnigan. Use lots of chocolate. I'd also like a large urn of hot strong tea sent to the Gryffindor common room. The way everyone is crying, they all need to drink something."

"Miss Hermione Granger lost someone?" Winky asked, coming out from the back of the crowd of elves, looking a little less worse than she had the year before.

"Yes, Winky; she lost the most of all of us. Her parents and all four grandparents." Winky's eyes grew wide, and a tear ran down her cheek. "Perhaps, if you have the time, you might want to look after her for a while?" Harry suggested.

"Come, Moksi!" Winky called.

"Then I need someone to ask Professor Dumbledore if we can have soup and sandwiches served in the common room for lunch, instead of our coming down. Tell him I'll try to get everyone down for dinner."

"Dobby will ask."

"Sometime before dinner, I need these two notices posted on the cork boards near Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff."

"Dobby will take care of."

"And finally, I need this note delivered to Professor Snape, when he's alone."

"Dobby will deliver." Dobby took it and looked up at Harry, to see what else he might need.

"Thank you, Dobby, and everyone." Dobby nodded and disappeared.

Harry had sent Snape a note, saying he would be in the auror potions lab until 11:00, in case he needed to talk with Harry about anything. Harry wasn't surprised to find a small milkshake and a cup of tea waiting for him.

At 10:55, Snape walked into the lab. "Did you want something, Potter?"

"Not really, sir. I thought you might want something from me, although I do hope you'll take some steps to protect the prefects?"

"I arranged for the Headmaster to give everyone a strict talk, at the least," Snape said. "I will also add a few strict hints."

"Did I do right by addressing you, instead of Malfoy?"

Snape sighed. "You did." He hesitated, then said, "Do NOT let anyone else hear, but please give Miss Granger my condolences." He hesitated, and added, "And the same to you, of course."

"Yes, sir." Harry understood it would not do to let the others know Snape had been partially playing a role during his years of verbal abuse. "It turns out all four of Hermione's grandparents were killed along with her parents."

Snape's face hardened. "I did not know."

"I know. If you knew and could have let anyone know without destroying your cover, you would have got the message out, somehow," Harry responded.

"I shall make certain Miss Granger, the Patils, and Mister Finnigan receive their assignments this week. Mister Weasley will no doubt let you know yours."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry addressed the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw SDA members that evening. All proclaimed their continued interest in the struggle. Afterwards, he found Megan Jones waiting for him.

"Potter," she said, "may I have a few words?"

"Of course," Harry answered. He started to walk her slowly back to Hufflepuff.

"You know I'm part of a small group of pacifists," she started off. Harry nodded. "We . . . we talked about what you said this morning."

"I didn't change anyone's mind, did I?" Harry asked, doubtfully.

"No," she admitted, "not entirely. But we did decide that there really is a huge moral difference in helping you, fighting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named non-violently, helping the Ministry, and staying totally neutral. Those were the options we saw available, this afternoon," she explained.

Harry nodded.

"We can not help the Ministry; they are corrupt. We cannot stay neutral. If we cannot do something to interpose ourselves between evil and the innocent, we will inform you or your House captains, in the hope that the innocent will not suffer. We do not believe in violence, but we understand why you would use it to stop worse things from happening. We can't join you, but we will help you in those few ways we can."

"Are any of the Seventh years taking the medical courses?" Harry asked.

"No," she admitted. "I wish now that I had."

"Thank you," Harry told her. "Good luck." He held out his hand. Megan smiled and shook it.

Thursday, October 17, 1996

To Harry's surprise, Aunt Petunia asked that he come to the viewing early that afternoon. He, Zoric, Luna, Lupin, Dumbledore, and three of Zoric's detectives went with him. They all stood in the back of the room, while Harry and Luna made their way to the front, where Petunia and Marge stood, receiving their friends, neighbors, and Vernon's business associates.

Petunia and Marge were obviously a bit surprised by Harry's appearance, and more so by Luna's presence, who was on her best behavior. Harry was nearly an inch taller since he had left some three months before, and he had put on eighteen pounds of muscle. Harry was obviously surprised in turn when Petunia nearly embraced him, but whatever she said brought a wry near-smile to his face. He obviously agreed to something. After a stiff greeting by Marge Dursley, he again looked surprised, this time by some question Dudley, still in pain from his burns, asked. Luna said her condolences sincerely to each woman, and to Dudley.

After paying his respects to some of the factory managers, Harry strode up the room, Luna right with him.

"Let's go see Hermione," he growled. Zoric was taking Harry, Luna, Lupin, and Dumbledore to the group funeral for Hermione's relatives. The three detectives would keep an eye on the funeral parlor and at the graveside service.

"What was that all about, if I may ask?" Dumbledore inquired.

"I was not aware that my estate was paying the Dursleys anything," Harry growled. "They always claimed that they paid for everything."

Dumbledore wisely stayed silent.

"Of course your estate paid them," Lupin said matter-of-factly. "If they didn't tell you that, you should have realized it as soon as you saw the Gringotts vault."

"A boy with a normal upbringing might, Muggle or magical," Harry retorted. "What chance did I have?"

"What have they done with the money, Harry?" Zoric asked.

"It turns out I own eight per cent of Grunnings' stock, while Uncle Vernon owned eleven per cent. He took any dividends as 'payment,' and had an option to buy at the original price any time up until my twenty-first birthday. Both arrangements died with him, and that was probably a fair portion of their income."

"What do you want to do?" Zoric asked. "I have the legal power to do anything you want me to for you."

"I don't want it. Sell it to Aunt Petunia or Dudley. I don't care if I make anything, but make certain I don't lose a penny on the deal or will have to pay anything in tax that I can't cover with their payments."

"Fair enough," Zoric admitted.

"What did your cousin ask?" Lupin asked.

"The ultimate question," Luna asked.

"What everyone wants to know," Harry agreed. "Is there anything . . . after."

"What did you say?" Dumbledore asked.

"The truth," Harry said. "I said there is something; I've seen ghosts and echoes, after all. But how long that lasts," he shrugged.

"What do you mean?" Lupin asked.

"Most ghosts fade away after a millennium or so at the most," Harry replied.

"And even if there is something after death, how long does it last?" Luna asked. "I **know** there are voices of the departed behind that veil at the Ministry, but forever is a very long time. For there to be any true afterlife, it must be timeless. Who can truly imagine existence eternal and yet personal? Very few of us, if any."

"Still, something is better than nothing," Harry said. "That's more than most non-religious Muggles have to believe in."

Unlike Vernon Dursley, the Grangers and Smythes (Hermione maternal grandparents) were being buried from church. Harry was unsurprised to see that it was a very High Anglican congregation, although he could not explain why, even to himself.

The SDA and the younger Gryffindors all wanted to go to all three funerals, but for security reasons, they were all scheduled for the same time. Harry was asked to divide them up. He sent a little under 30% for Hermione's family, 30% to Seamus', and a little more than 40% to the Patils.

Harry and Luna walked up a side aisle, and sat in the front pew with McGonagall, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny (Neville was with Seamus). The other three teachers sat in the pew behind them. The small church was filled.

After the burial service, the group from the front pew stood together in the chilly wind, so that Hermione could accept condolences from the Muggle patients and friends of her parents and grandparents. At the end, the first person wearing a cloak walked up. Zoric immediately strode forward, and McGonagall growled.

"Miss Skeeter," Hermione greeted, somewhat coldly.

Rita grinned. "Down, you two," she said to Zoric and McGonagall. "I was scared of you while I was in school and still am," she told McGonagall, "and I learned a long time ago not to cross you," she added to Zoric. "But I'd face the pair of you before I'd cross her."

She turned back to Hermione. "First of all, my condolences, Miss Granger," she said sincerely. "If you haven't noticed, I've been doing straight reporting again. You ruined my career for almost a year, but then you restored it. I promise you, a straight story. Straight, complete quotes; no Quick Quotes."

Hermione shook her head. "If I ever have anything to say, I'll be glad to talk to you first, under those conditions, but I really don't have anything to say."

"You're her guardian?" Skeeter asked McGonagall.

"I am."

"Short and to the point, as always." She looked around. "Any one else want to say anything?"

Harry had been remembering some conversations he had had with Hermione, Zoric, Lupin, and others. He stepped forward. "I do."

Skeeter smiled widely. "Go ahead."

"Harry. . . ." Dumbledore warned. Zoric and Lupin blocked Dumbledore from reaching out to Harry, but said nothing, leaving the decision up to Harry. Harry therefore ignored the Headmaster.

"These incidents might never have happened if Minister Fudge had believed us some sixteen months ago, and if he had done his job instead of conducting vendettas against Professor Dumbledore, Hogwarts, myself, and the truth by lying to the media. I believe there are those associated with the Ministry who are even more sympathetic to Voldemort than Fudge is, but I at least will never trust the Ministry while Fudge is in charge."

"Now does anyone else have something to say?"

"The Ministry could not act on the word of one delusional, spot-light seeking child," a cold voice said from the side. "Even if he turned out to be more or less correct."

"Hello, Percy," Hermione said coldly. "So, you got stuck coming to the Muggle funeral, while the important people went to see the Pure-Bloods at the Patils', hoping to influence them?"

Percy flushed, but before he could retort, Ron said, "You know, Percy, you should know by now being a member of the Ministry should mean serving the wizarding world, not your career. You may end up Minister, but you'll be a minister just like Fudge."

Percy was about to respond, but then saw his mother and brothers approaching. He opened his mouth again and then saw the look on his mother's face. He fled.

On that note, the groups separated and left.

While the professors portkeyed to Hogwarts with the other students, Zoric took Harry, Hermione, Luna, Ron, and Ginny back in his car. He would have to drive a ways before activating the portkey feature.

"You know, none of you ever told me what The Prophet has been saying about me since the end of last term," Harry remarked. He had just read The Quibbler, which had only fair and balanced things to say about him, along with nasty things about Fudge and the Ministry.

"They've been walking a fine line between praising you and trying not to offend Fudge," Hermione answered.

"They try never to offend the Ministry, unless it's really obvious that it's what the public wants," Zoric added. "I think, over the next few weeks, they'll have to choose."

Chapter 20

The Daily Prophet for Friday, October 18, ran four stories on its front page. One was Skeeter's article, one was a press release from Fudge's office, and the third was a very factual chronology of Fudge's term of office, with each time he had favored the extreme Pure-blood positions pointed out. The fourth, which then went on to fill two back pages, made it seem as if Fudge was either a fool, a dupe for the Death Eaters, or perhaps even a secret Death Eater himself. The paper had made its choice.

Saturday's edition showed that Hermione had been correct: Percy had been the only Ministry official sent to her family's funerals, and an even lower member of Fudge's office had been sent to Seamus' family. Fudge and all his entourage had gone to the Patils, and other Ministry employees (like Mister Weasley) had been forbidden to take time off. Skeeter's article that day was very damaging to the Minister and his allies in the Ministry.

Over the next week, letters to the paper and to the Ministry ran five to one against the Minister, who claimed that "the situation is still serious, but we believe we are gaining a handle on it. Lord Thingy had his best chance, and has missed the bus for a real attack against wizarding targets, although isolated individuals and unwarded families are still in grave danger."

Harry's initiation as Hogwarts Champion was of course a secret from everyone who did not need to know. Neither Hermione nor Luna could detect any real change in Harry afterwards, and Harry claimed not to really notice anything at first.

Over the next week, however, Harry grew to 'know' the castle. Running tests, usually with Luna and sometimes Hermione, he compared his knowledge with the Marauder's Map, and was correct each time by the following Friday. While he did not yet have the intimate knowledge of Hogwarts Dumbledore had, knowing the map showed him some things that even Dumbledore didn't know about.

Harry was curious if that why Dumbledore had wanted a copy of the Map, but it turned out, when Harry asked him, that he wanted it for any future headmaster who did not have his own relationship to the castle. Dumbledore assured Harry that his own powers would not change dramatically, but would increase faster than was normal for him at that age.

Saturday, October 26, 1996

The first Hogsmeade weekend was welcomed with slightly less enthusiasm than usual. The SDA, staff, and a few others would be patrolling, although Hermione had arranged things so that no student had to patrol more than two one-hour shifts.

Shortly before 11:30, two groups met by arrangement in the deserted area near the Shrieking Shack. The larger group consisted of Cho Chang, Marietta Edgecombe, Michael Corner, Stephen Cornfoot, Su Li, Julia Collins, and Paula Paine from Ravenclaw, and Zach Smith from Hufflepuff. The smaller group was Megan Jones, Eloise Midgen, and Amanda David from Hufflepuff, and Rita Coal and Doris Robin from Ravenclaw. The Neutrals and the Pacifists.

"Are you going help us stand up to Potter's militarism?" Zach asked.

"No," Megan said simply. "We, and that includes the others in our group, are going to help the SDA in any way that we can that doesn't directly cause violence."

"I see," Stephen Cornfoot mused. He looked about, and saw they were apparently alone. He turned to his best friend and said, "It's your move. With the Cause, or against?"

Michael Corner took a deep breath and pulled his wand. Zach and Stephen pulled theirs.

Corner turned to Cho. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

"Stupefy!" Zach cried. "Use 'Stupefy!'" he said, stunning another Pacifist. "It's quicker."

"Run!" Megan cried, putting herself between the three attackers and Robin, the youngest person there.

"Stupefy!" Zach called, stunning Megan.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" Michael cried, killing Doris Robin.

Corner had killed two, the other eight were stunned.

"Why kill them?" Zach asked. "The dementors will be here any minute you know, and that will finish them off!"

"You don't know how annoying that chink could be," Corner snarled. "When she wasn't whining, she was crying, and when she wasn't crying she wouldn't put out. And she wouldn't betray Potter any more than the Weasel bitch would."

"Let's get to a meeting place," Zach said. "We don't want to be in the way."

"STUPEFY!"

Parvati, Padma, Lavender, and Lisa moved out from under Harry's invisibility cloak. "I can't believe the little shite killed them!" Padma said. It had been over before the quartet assigned to watch Smith and Corner could react.

"We can't rescue them all," Lisa added.

"We save the Pacifists and go warn Harry," Lavender said, taking command. "If someone has time to come back for the idiots and traitors, fine. If not," she shrugged.

Lavender was nothing if not ruthless, in love and war.

As they maneuvered the students from the area, Parvati made a slight detour. Just in case Corner woke up before the dementors came, she kicked him twice in the testicles.

Draco Malfoy was simply waiting, along with Ted Nott, Pansy Parkinson, and Millicent Bulstrode, watching one of the people he currently disliked most.

As best Draco could tell, there were three minor flaws in the Mudblood's plan of surveillance, the first of which was she probably assumed people would not notice the surveillance. Probably no one other than Millicent had, and she had pointed it out to Malfoy within minutes of their hitting the village. The second was that she could not assign enough people to provide one-on-one coverage, unless people gave up their day for the project. The third possible flaw was yet to be shown as one, as it depended on Crabbe and Goyle sneaking up on the current three watchers.

Malfoy looked at his watch and gave a signal, which he hoped would mean Crabbe and Goyle were ready. Three soft 'thuds' proclaimed that Crabbe and Goyle had used their beater bats to good effect.

Malfoy smiled. A tiny bit of satisfaction was at hand, and Pansy would be very grateful -- she had even more grudges than he did. "Shall we?" Draco said softly, pulling his wand.

Pansy smiled and did the same.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" Two bodies dropped, and Millicent gasped in shock.

"Come off it," Malfoy snapped. "We needed to get rid of the pair of them." He signaled, and Crabbe and Goyle ran up, their bloody bats still in their hands. 'At least they didn't put them back in their robes like that,' Draco thought as he cleaned the bats off with a spell. "Okay, split up and get to the pub. We have less than ten minutes before the dementors show up."

As soon as they were out of sight, a nearly hyperventilating Millicent pulled Ted over to the side of a building. "What?" he demanded.

"What? Merlin, Ted! They killed. . . ." She couldn't finish.

"What did you think was going to happen? That we could win by twisting Granger's arm again?"

"I THOUGHT we had agreed to go along with Draco, not JOIN him!" Millicent hissed. "The next thing you know, they'll all have the Dark Mark and want you to get it, too!"

"We already have it," Ted told her, throwing her hand off his arm. "Pansy will get hers this summer, and she SAID you would, too."

"Oh, gods!" Millicent moaned.

Ted looked at her. "Are you with us, or against us?"

"I thought you loved me!"

"That doesn't matter," Ted said through clenched teeth. "Now decide! Dementors will be through here soon, Kissing everyone they can find!"

Millicent ripped open her robe, heavy jumper, and blouse. She jerked down her bra. "Then go ahead and just kill me," she hissed. "At least I won't be damned! Kill me, or help me go to Dumbledore!"

Ted looked regretfully at the huge breasts. He liked breasts, especially ones like Millicent's, and she knew that was the main reason they had been dating. While not stupid, he was a boy of simple tastes. Nott frowned in sadness, pulled his wand, and pointed it between the largest, firmest breasts at Hogwarts. "Stupefy!" Millicent collapsed with a very surprised look upon her face.

"Harry, sit and enjoy your lunch," Ron complained. "You haven't sat still all morning."

"Just worried," Harry said, not wanting to reveal he was physically missing being at the castle.

"Finish your stew," Luna said. "We'll go right after that."

At that point, a Third year Ravenclaw ran into the pub at a full sprint. "Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

"Sounds like Dobby," Ron said with a grin.

Harry stood, giving Ron a dirty look. "What is it?"

"We were . . . going to see . . . Shrieking Shack. . . ." the boy panted.

"You were going to the Shack, go on."

"Padma Patil . . . others . . . stretchers. . . ." the boy panted. "Said dementors coming. . . . Come here . . . get help . . . Harry Potter. . . . Then she said . . . to say . . . quiche."

Even Ron's smile faded at the code word. "Send code plan three," Harry told Hermione. She took out the faux galleon she had created, and sent the message. The SDA would make a quick tour, moving as many other students out of the streets as possible, but quickly move to the Three Broomsticks. Eleven students would stand outside, half the remaining SDA would be inside, ready to provide reinforcements outside, the younger half would secure the inside. Harry went and spoke to Madam Rosmerta, who would warn Dumbledore by fire call.

The staff and others in the village would also have received the alarm. They would act as they thought best, but knew the SDA plan.

Harry and Luna stood outside the front door. They met Malfoy and Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle a few paces behind them. "Problem, Potty?"

"Just the dementors coming. Go on inside, if you think it will be safe."

Malfoy hesitated. The surprise attack was obviously no longer a surprise. The students in the Three Broomsticks were, equally obviously, already on alert. He decided there was just

enough time to make it to the Post Office, the other safe meeting point. He turned to Pansy. "Let's go owl your cousin. Maybe the atmosphere will improve here later on."

The quartet moved away, towards the Post Office. Harry looked, and saw no sign of Malfoy's shadows. "Gin! Georgia!" he called.

"Commander?" Gin asked, seriously.

"I don't see Malfoy's shadows. Gin, bring me two bags of Hermione's auto-keys. Georgia, wait here with Luna and Gin. If Nott and Bulstrode show up, bring them in and hold them." He turned to Luna. "I'll be right back. Portkey the people the Patils are bringing in, and debrief the group."

"Of course," Luna said.

Hermione had made a large batch of one-way portkeys, originally made and set for Hogwarts' infirmary. Only she, Harry, Luna, and some of the staff could activate them. The staff had been so impressed (portkeys were normally activated by touching, timing, or either general or individual activation; this was this first time multiple but selected access worked) they had voted Hermione 50 House points. She had then managed to overlay more than one destination, which was difficult to do, although not as novel for real experts.

Harry took one bag and left Gin by the door. He quickly moved in the direction Malfoy had come from. He passed by a very stunned-looking Nott, who apparently didn't notice him.

A slight change of direction, based on Nott's path, brought him to Bulstrode's body. Harry pulled down her bra and revived her. "Potter?" she managed to say.

"Where are the boys who were following Malfoy?"

"Alley behind Gladrags," she said. "Vin and Greg . . . beater clubs. . . . But Draco and Pansy . . . they killed. . . ." Millicent stopped there, unable to go on.

"I'm going to have stun you again," Harry said. "Just to be certain."

"Don't leave me. . . ." she begged. "The dementors are coming! Take my wand, stun me if you have to, but don't leave me here."

"Alright, I'll stun you and portkey you to the Infirmary," Harry said.

"Wait," she said, fumbling in her robes. Harry kept his wand on her. She pulled out a pencil and a scrape of parchment. She wrote, 'leave me stunned, I can't be trusted' and signed her name. She pinned it on her robe. "Go ahead."

Harry stunned her, took her wand, and portkeyed her away. He moved to the alley behind Gladrags, and found the three students. All three were in bad shape, and Harry didn't think one, Maurice Hardy, was likely to survive the massive head injury. He portkeyed them away as well.

Then he saw the two dead bodies. Harry cautiously approached them. That's when Harry felt it, the wave of coldness and fear. He looked around, and saw one dementor. Harry smiled, and

tossed a portkey (they were all silver sickles) at the dementor. A scabby hand reached out and grabbed it.

Hermione had read that dementors would react like that, since although a knife or arrow hitting a dementor couldn't kill it, they could feel some sort of pain by being pierced. A dementor could, and would, grab an arrow in flight. This dementor had caught the sickle.

"Porto inferno," Harry said, pointing his wand. The dementor would reappear in the middle of an active lava flow in the South Pacific. Harry took off towards the Shrieking Shack at a run.

When he arrived, there were thirty dementors, some engaging students in the Kiss, others obviously just having finished some off. Harry stared for just two seconds, and the remaining three feeders dropped the limp bodies.

"Expecto Patronum!" The silver stag drove the dementors past the Shrieking Shack.

A hex flew past Harry's head. Harry spun and set up a shield, which blocked a second hex.

"Well, well, well, a bonus this. . . .!" Harry recognized the voice. It was Antonin Dolohov.

"Tiho!" Harry commanded, using a spell Zoric had taught him that caught the Death Eater unawares. Dolohov was once again mute.

Dolohov raised his wand against Harry, as he had when he had nearly killed Hermione at the Ministry. Harry moved faster, making his own slicing motion. "Sjeci!" A deep cut appeared on Dolohov's right hand and forearm, and he dropped his wand in agony.

Moving under cover of the nearest building, Harry walked up to Dolohov. "You hurt my friend," he said coldly. "You enjoyed hurting my friend, didn't you? I should really castrate you."

Dolohov's eyes went wide in fear. Instead, Harry tore open the man's left sleeve, rolling it up to reveal his Dark Mark, showing since he was acting under the Dark Lord's orders. "If I ever fight you again, you won't get off so easily." Harry portkeyed Dolohov to the auror's holding cell -- the third location programmed into the portkey -- a person could be portkeyed in, but no one could get out without an auror's help.

A slight movement caught Harry's peripheral vision, and he ducked as a hex went past him. He managed to block the next one.

"Aw, wook, da widdle Pottie tink he stwong," Bellatrix mocked, stepping into view. Her face hardened. "Here's one you can't block, boy! Imperio!"

Harry could have laughed, but waited until Lestrage stepped closer. He could feel the connection, and he started the feed-back technique he had discovered by accident practicing Occlumency the previous August. Harry wondered if it would work as well with the Imperius curse, since they both created a mental connection.

It did. Harry could feel the memories of pain in Bellatrix' mind. He started using his own pain to link her memories together. "Know what a circuit is, Lestrage?" Harry asked. Her worst feelings and fears rising up inside her, she could only shake her head. She couldn't stop the

spell or fight back. "Of course not," Harry mocked, "it's a Muggle concept. Your mind keeps your memories separate, and your feelings under control. I discovered, while practicing Occlumency, that I could trace the spell back without using Legilimency. I also learned I could suck people into my darkest fears, triggering theirs off. But that didn't work with your Master. It shocked him, but he's seen too much for my fears to work against him."

Harry walked up to her. "But I saw where he kept his. I was nearly able to link those together, without the breaks of his mind. He managed to fight back. I wonder if you can?"

"No!" she pled. "Please!"

"Why shouldn't I?" Harry asked, easing up just a bit.

"Anything! I'm still beautiful. . . ."

"You're ugly to me, and I have more than enough love and beauty in my life; more than I deserve."

"What do you want? Do you want me to beg? Do you want money? Power? Do you want me for your sex-slave? I'll do anything!"

"Can you give me Sirius back? Can you give the Longbottoms back their lives?" Harry made the final connections. He didn't know if this would be permanent or temporary, and he didn't really care. Bellatrix Lestrange collapsed. "Thought not."

Harry looked at regret at the bodies the dementors had fed off of and the two dead. "Sorry, Cho," he said sadly after checking them. He rushed back towards the Three Broomsticks. The dementors had to have gone somewhere.

Peter Pettigrew transformed into his human shape. He could have perhaps saved Bellatrix by attacking Harry, but he decided that, by not interfering, he had paid Harry back in full. His Master still favored Bellatrix. If she could still be saved, the Master would have to do it.

The students, staff, and many townspeople had accumulated at the pub. A number of Patronus were just managing to keep what looked like several hundred dementors at bay. Many of the people could only hold off one dementor. Most of the people were just able to produce the silver mist that merely helped in the effort. Hagrid's Patronus, for example, was a very baby Norbert; distracting to a dementor, but not enough to deflect it.

A few, such as Hermione's otter, were able to take on three or four. Luna's platypus was keeping five at bay, while McGonagall's tiger and Zoric's brown bear were doing more than blocking the dementors, they were crunching on individual dementors, driving them away looking rather bent.

Harry sensed a presence near him, but before he could hex it, saw it was Professor Dumbledore. "Help herd them over towards the Post Office, Harry," Dumbledore said grimly. "On three."

Harry's powerful stag was joined by Dumbledore's phoenix. The staff and advanced students joined in the push. As the dementors were confined to a relatively small area, Dumbledore gave a signal, and the staff started shouting something Harry couldn't quite hear. "Close your eyes and look towards the ground, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly.

Harry did so. He was still nearly blinded by the tremendous flash of light.

"You may look, although there's nothing much to see," Dumbledore said.

When Harry's vision cleared, he saw the dementors were gone. "Destroyed?" he asked.

"Probably only a few at most," Dumbledore answered. "It would take a great deal more heat and light than that burst, but that would have injured many of us as well. While dementors may not disappear as we know it, they can automatically retreat to a pre-planned hide-way. Please brief me before I take any other reports."

Harry did so, and when he was finished Dumbledore truly looked his age. "You did well, Harry," Dumbledore acknowledged, if sadly. "While it is a shame we were unable to save those students, there is little more you could have done."

"Sir," Harry answered, "you had no real choices either. No one really believed an attack on Hogsmeade was likely. The Ministry refused to send aurors; most of the staff were grumbling; and the SDA acted as if it were a fun exercise. No doubt that's how Crabbe and Goyle were able to attack those three Fourth years."

"Ah, yes; Miss Bulstrode's information. We shall have to check on her and her story before Mister Malfoy and friends realize she's alive."

"Nott probably did it. But sir, I think Malfoy and Parkinson may have killed Blaise and Tracy. That's who I saw just before the single dementor showed up. It looked like . . . the Killing Curse."

"I shall check into this immediately," Dumbledore said. "Tell your mentor I want him and any one he needs to bring Malfoy, Parkinson, Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle to the castle. Check the alibis of the other known Death Eaters; if they aren't firm, I want them there, too."

"Yes, sir." He hesitated. "It looked like Smith and Cornfoot were caught by the dementors."

"Ah," Dumbledore acknowledged. "They were likely not entrusted with the code words of power. They would then be treated as any other person, since this was obviously set up as a mass, indiscriminate, attack."

Chapter 21

The attack on Hogsmeade had shown the value of the DA and SDA. While there was the tragedy of the deaths and Kissings, the students had quickly rallied. The Death Eaters and dementors had had no time to damage the town or any of the residents. A few days after the attack, the business people of Hogsmeade announced a 5% discount for the students for any remaining Hogsmeade weekends that year.

The castle was of course something of a mad house for the twenty-four hours or so after the attack. All the students who had gone to Hogsmeade were interviewed at least three times; Harry ten times, Padma and her team, eight.

Points were doled out liberally that Saturday night at dinner. Harry, Padma, Parvati, Lavender, and were all promised special citations by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Minister Fudge revoked them when he arrived shortly after dinner to try and figure out how to keep up the appearances that nothing was seriously wrong.

The most important person interviewed by law enforcement, however, was Millicent Bulstrode. After her statement, the aurors had no choice but to test Draco's and Pansy's wands, despite Minister Fudge's objections. Fudge and four assistants (including Percy Weasley) were so busy trying to do general damage control, they failed to realize exactly how much damage they were doing to each other. When the reporters compared some of their notes, they saw a clear pattern of pro-Voldemort obstruction.

Hermione and Luna made certain that the press wanted to compare those notes. Six reporters, and Luna's father, were at Hogwarts by 5:00 pm Saturday evening. By the next morning, there were twenty. Luna fed them all the stories they needed, although how she got a hold of the multiple copies of the complaints the aurors and hit wizards were filing against Fudge and his assistants, she wouldn't say.

Draco and Pansy were of course arrested. There was no defense even Fudge could make up for them when the shadows of Blaise Zabini and Tracy Davis came out of their wands and accused Pansy and Draco of their murders. Crabbe and Goyle went next, trace amounts of blood on their beater clubs (which they had kept in their robes) indicting them. Crabbe's plaintive wail, "But Draco cleaned them for us!" had convinced even Percy Weasley and forced Fudge to refuse to interfere.

Nott had quickly broken down and confessed on his own -- Millicent had refused to name him as her attacker. The three Seventh year Slytherin Death Eaters had been trapped inside the Three Broomsticks, but Nott's accusations had had them seized for questioning. Harry had demonstrated another ability he had inherited from his contact with Voldemort -- he wasn't certain how he knew he could do it, but he had demanded the chance to try. Casting the Dark Mark against the three had revealed their own Marks. When Fudge had objected Harry might be causing the Mark to appear from nothing, Harry had cast it against Hermione, Luna, and then Percy. Harry had even offered to cast it on Fudge, but he had huffily left the room.

Luckily for Snape, he had never directly met Nott on Death Eater business, nor had they been present at common meetings. The other Death Eater students refused to comment.

By Sunday afternoon, Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle were under arrest and facing capital crimes. Theodore Nott, Adrian Pucey, Miles Bletchley, and St. John Montague were under arrest and facing lesser charges. Zach Smith, Stephen Cornfoot, Michael Corner, Marietta Edgecombe, Su Li, Julia Collins, and Paula Paine had been Kissed. Blaise Zabini, Tracy Davis, Cho Chang, Doris Robin, and Maurice Hardy had been killed. The two other Fourth year Ravenclaw boys would be in the infirmary with serious head injuries for another two weeks.

Parental anger, and the ire of the general wizarding public, which might have at least partially gone against Dumbledore or the Ministry in general or even the SDA, instead was directed nearly totally against Fudge. The Daily Prophet again pointed out Fudge's attempt to protect Malfoy and his friends, while The Quibbler ran a four page article outlining Fudge's attempts to protect the Malfoys over the years, and Fudge's 'charity' associations that now appeared to be a kick-back scheme. That led The Prophet to run a series over three days, re-showing nearly every photo of Fudge with now-known Death Eaters, right down to his defense of Lucius Malfoy as a poor victim of the Imperius Curse after Voldemort's first disappearance. Even Teen Witch, in an article portraying the 'glamorous' heroines Lavender Brown and the Patil twins, took a vicious swipe at Fudge for putting them, and the rest of the wizarding world at risk. Witch Weekly reminded its readers that it was a totally non-political periodical, and therefore would not be printing any letters on the matter, 'even though, running 67 to 1 against the Minister, it is obvious that our readers have a strong and nearly-united opinion on this matter.' The foreign press was even more scathing.

And, the point that made Daily Prophet headlines on the Monday after the attack and world headlines the next day, a reporter, asking Harry the last question allowed Sunday evening, had inquired if it were true Harry used the real name of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry, annoyed about the question, had responded, "I use his name, which was Tom Riddle, and I use his self-assumed title, Voldemort. If you people don't have the guts to use either, make up a name and use that. He's a powerful, very evil wizard, but this 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' nonsense makes him seem even worse than he is. Call him 'Lord Thingy' or 'Moldiemort' or 'Moldiewart' or even 'The Dark Lord of the Sith' for all I care, but call him something! What's he going to do different? Jump up and down, screaming 'kill them, kill them; destroy them, destroy them'?"

Severus Snape, called to the Dark Lord Saturday night to report on the arrest of most of the student Death Eaters, had found Him angry at the over-all failure of the attack and the capture of two of the four adult Death Eaters sent to guide the dementors. Bellatrix Lestrange was still catatonic.

Tuesday night had found Him angrier than Snape had ever seen before. None dared comment, and none dared suggest a plan. Nor did any dare to remind Voldemort that repeatedly screaming 'kill them all' did nothing to enhance His image.

When Millicent Bulstrode was released from the Infirmary Wednesday morning, she had come and thanked Harry for saving her life. With rather more courage, she then apologized to

them all, especially Hermione, for her actions over the previous five plus years. Daphne Greengrass, the other surviving Slytherin Sixth year, had then led Millicent away. At the Slytherin table, the students no longer sat by year, but by clear sympathy: of the 72 Slytherins of the week before, two were dead, eight had been arrested. Twenty-one sat on one end of the table, clearly sympathetic to the Dark Lord, or at least His followers. Thirty-three were equally clearly opposed. Eight were stuck in the middle, including the two remaining Sixth years, who sat there because they weren't wanted by the pro-SDA students.

"I think you did a great thing, saving someone like her," Lavender told Harry.

"That's right, Harry," Seamus piped up, "thanks for saving two of the school's greatest assets!"

Harry blushed, the boys laughed, and the girls plotted suitable retribution on the boys, especially Seamus.

At Hogwarts, a number of staff and others found themselves doing 'grief counseling' for the students. Mona Zoric bore the greatest burden, as she had started with the Patils after the murder of their family. Luna and Hermione watched Harry closely, but he did not seem to have any real negative reaction to the so-called 'Battle of Hogsmeade,' which worried them both.

"He's not allowing himself to feel," Luna told Hermione. "It's all being repressed. When it comes out, its form will be created from the trigger -- it could be anger, depression, or the genuine grief."

Both wished Harry could have attended Cho's funeral, which might have triggered his hidden grief, but Dumbledore refused their pleadings. Rumor had it that Zoric and Dumbledore had had a major row on the subject, and it was clear the Remus Lupin and the Headmaster had also had words on the same subject. The two girls vowed to keep a close eye on Harry.

The Gryffindor March on October 28th had been the quietest so far that term. It was a triumph marred by the deaths and Kissings of the innocent students, just as the Halloween feast had been the most subdued in recent memory. The March of November 4th was again one of anger, for Luna had had advance word from her father that morning, passing it on to the Gryffindors just as their March had started, that all the Death Eaters arrested after the attack on Hogsmeade, except for Nott, had been allowed to escape the evening before.

The next day, Zoric and Dumbledore asked Harry if he would be willing to go to the Ministry to test five suspected Death Eaters. No one else could cast the Dark Mark with even Harry's partial effectiveness.

Harry agreed.

He was shocked to be led into a room with five naked men, including Cornelius Fudge and Percy Weasley. Harry was very glad that Fudge's only major female assistant, Umbridge, had been forced to retire.

"I already tested Percy," Harry pointed out to the stoney-faced hit wizards.

"They might not have the Mark on their wrists, since they would be undercover," one explained.

Harry tested Percy first, and cleared him, much to his own relief. But Fudge had the Mark on the top of his left thigh, and two of his aides had it on the inside of their left elbows.

Even Harry had been shocked. He had been certain that some of Fudge's aides must be connected to Voldemort, but had never suspected Fudge himself (it turned out that Fudge had long been a sympathizer, but had actually taken the Mark only late that summer). Dumbledore and Zoric had been equally shocked.

Dumbledore again refused to become Minister, an action now more explicable to Harry than it had been before. Asked his opinion on Fudge's successor, Dumbledore suggested Amelia Bones. Harry heartily endorsed the idea when asked.

In a short, private meeting with the Minister-elect before they left, Harry made a suggestion. Percy Weasley and ex-Minister Fudge's other ex-assistant were assigned to Arthur Weasley. They would now handle the problems of tracking down wizards who mis-enchanted objects, while leaving Arthur to deal with his beloved Muggles.

The two young men, given the choice of that or being moved to the Centaur Office, took the positions under Arthur.

Percy even had the good grace to send Harry a short note of apology. Mrs. Weasley sent him a longer note, and his favorite treacle tart.

The months of November and December passed without any further activity on the part of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, which everyone seemed to find confusing (including most of the Death Eaters, according to Snape). Reports on the movement of giants continued through to the spring. Reports were also made on the disappearance of a number of homeless Muggles, a few of whom were later found having been Kissed, or otherwise insane from over-exposure to dementors, between late November and late March. Whatever plans Voldemort had were clearly not being told to many, and still included the dementors.

The only news Snape brought was the marriage of Draco and Pansy shortly after their escape, and the less surprising information that the Death Eaters, although restless, were not going to challenge Voldemort.

For the school population as a whole, the students quickly settled down to their work, especially the Fifth and Seventh years. The teams playing the autumnal Quidditch matches were rescheduled. The first game of the season was now Hufflepuff -- Gryffindor, which Gryffindor won 210-60. Ravenclaw and Slytherin, which both had to partially rebuild their teams after the Hogsmeade attacks, was played in early December (Ravenclaw won, 270-60).

The school's second Hogsmeade weekend passed by without incident. The students, as a whole, were looking forward to their up-coming holidays.

The Patils' uncle decided to sell the family business, and would flee back to what he hoped would be the comparative safety of India after the holidays. He tried very hard to persuade the three girls to drop out of Hogwarts and go back with him, promising them fine traditional weddings and good dowries.

All three refused, and after a week of hard negotiations, Tomas Zoric emerged as their new guardian. Parvati and Padma were content with the results, as were Harry, Gin, and Georgia. Irena and Sudipta, already close friends, were thrilled to be almost sisters.

The SDA and DA continued their work. Harry continued his investigations of the castle, finding some secret rooms and passages that were not marked on the Marauders Map. None of the passages were particularly interesting, and most of the secret rooms were empty or held rubbish. The room behind the DA Officers' Room, however, held a stack of manuscripts, which Luna, Padma, and especially Hermione fell at with a vengeance.

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The bomb-shell from the Ministry fell on the last Monday of term, December 16.

The headlines on The Daily Prophet screamed

NEW REGULATIONS FOR THE MUGGLE-BORN AND RAISED! Pure-Blood Triumph?

Reading through the article quickly, most students and staff decided it was no-where near the dire situation the headlines suggested. Starting the following year, all Second year Muggle-born and raised students in the UK and Ireland would have to take a one year course on wizard culture and traditions. They would have to pass the exit exam for the course with a 70% at some point before taking their O.W.L.s.

Hermione, looking through the requirements and subject material listed, decided that, if fairly implemented, the vast majority of her fellow Muggle-born and raised students would have had little trouble with the course, or test. It was a 'triumph' for the Pure-bloods only in that it reminded the Muggle-born and raised that they indeed came from a different culture. As she told her great-aunt, who had worried that Hermione might go off on another crusade, "No offense, but if Professor Binns taught his course properly, most of this would be taught to First and Second years in any event."

Since this was told to her in private, and she secretly agreed, Professor McGonagall had let the question drop. Most hoped that this would undercut some of the support the Death-Eaters

had, as it showed that the Muggle-born and raised would at least understand wizarding culture, which was a point that most of the community agreed on anyway. That was, of course, the rationale behind the proposal.

Hermione was too busy to pursue another crusade. Winky had come to comfort her after her parents and grandparents' murders. The two had grown to understand and like each other. Winky still thought Hermione a very odd witch, but decided her heart was in the right place. Although Hermione didn't realize it, Winky was trying to teach Hermione to understand what the proper relationship between a witch and house elf should be, so that Hermione would ask Winky to be her house elf.

Hermione was fascinated by the information on house elf culture, and by Winky's psychology. She was trying to teach Winky why she should enjoy her freedom.

This contest of wills was proving to be very entertaining to the Gryffindors, and Luna and Padma, who all watched the contest of wills with great fascination. Ron particularly enjoyed watching, as he really didn't like fighting with Hermione. Hermione's tug-of-war with Winky actually made her less inclined to fight with Ron, as long as Ron kept off certain subjects. With constant coaching from Ginny, Parvati, Padma, Lavender, Gin, Georgia, Luna, Seamus, Neville, and Harry, he was slowly learning which subjects to keep off from.

The other elves enjoyed the situation as well, as Hermione left them alone to do their work, which is what all house elves enjoyed to some extent.

In addition to his classes, Harry was still being tutored by Tomas Zoric. He was now able to successfully disillusion himself, and could usually make himself invisible to all the students except Luna and most of the staff.

He was still too busy to let his worries and grief overwhelm him. Zoric agreed with his wife, Luna, and Hermione that they needed to watch him over the holiday, in case he did more than decompress.

Mrs. Weasley of course hoped to have Harry and Hermione at the Burrow that year. The Zorics were willing to have every one to their London home, or have just the students go to their manor in Scotland or the island in the Adriatic. Discussing it between themselves, Hermione and Luna decided what was best, then okayed it with the students, and then finally presented their case to their parents or guardians.

Luna's father was busy up-grading The Quibbler to include even more opinion pages. The community needed a forum to debate issues in public, and he saw the market potential. He would therefore visit Luna on Boxing Day and New Year's Day, and leave her plans intact.

The Weasleys would be sent off to the Burrow until January 2. Bill and Fleur would be there, Charlie was coming back for the holidays, and Percy was coming back to beg full acceptance back into the family. Harry might be an unofficial son, Hermione and Neville beloved by children of the house, but it would be a family-only holiday. Neville and Hermione would visit on Boxing Day. Harry would have to stay safe at Hogwarts.

The enlarged Zoric family would stay at Hogwarts until Christmas, where their adopted son would visit if he could get the time off. The Zorics, including Sudipta Patil and the twins, would go to the Adriatic from Boxing Day until after New Year's Day.

Snape brought back word that, whatever plans the Dark Lord had, they were all long-term and secret as far as he could find out. It was as if He had decided that nothing useful could be done until he could destroy Harry, and that He couldn't do that until He could issue a formal challenge after Harry's seventeenth birthday.

As best Snape could tell, Voldemort and the Death Eater leaders were more concerned with the fact that Pansy had just discovered she was pregnant than they were with any short-term plans for conquest or mayhem.

The Order of the Phoenix and the DA leadership were therefore confronted with the problem of what to do next; should they merely prepare for Voldemort's mysterious future move, over seven months away, or was there some way, some reason, to manoeuvre the Death Eaters at least into the open before then?

The Ministry, at least, now seemed determined to track the Death Eaters down. Beyond that, it looked like there might be a period of stalemate.

Unless, of course, this was all a blind on Voldemort's part.

Faced with this, the students merely turned to the usual problems of the end of the autumnal term. There were exams to take in the last weeks of the term, there were projects to finalize, presents to acquire, travel plans to make.

Chapter 22

Sunday, December 22, 1996

Nine very tired, very wet students walked into the entrance hall, representing all the students staying at Hogwarts over the Yule break: Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Parvati Patil, Sudipta Patil and Irena Zoric from Gryffindor; Irena's foster-sisters Ginny Driver and Georgia Anderson from Hufflepuff; and Padma Patil and Luna Lovegood from Ravenclaw. The nine had been playing in the wet snow.

The Patils had drawn closer to Harry and his friends for a variety of reasons. Harry had of become the magical apprentice of Tomas Zoric, and Zoric's wards and daughter had become close friends with Harry and his friends. The two older girls were very active in the DA and SDA, helping to make Hufflepuff a close second in participation, and the two were about the most enthusiastic members of the jogging and Muggle self-defense activities. Parvati and her friend Lavender were the SDA, DA, and Gryffindor chief morale boosters. Sudipta Patil was Irena's best friend, and Padma had decided two years before that Luna, now Harry's girlfriend, deserved befriending after suffering years of teasing. Then the Patils' parents and younger brother had been murdered by Voldemort. The girls now clung to Harry and his group for security, emotional as well as actual. Zoric, who had worked with several of the Patils' relatives, had arranged to take in the three girls for the rest of their education.

All together, with the addition of the missing Weasleys, Neville, Lavender, and Seamus, these represented one of Hogwarts closest-knit groups.

A few quick waves of Hermione's and Padma's wands dried up the groups wet clothes, while Harry and Parvati cleaned up their trail, so that Filch wouldn't have a fit.

"What should we do now?" Sudipta asked.

Gin and Georgia put their heads together, which certainly worried Hermione. The pair was trouble. Not the kind of trouble Fred and George Weasley caused, but they were a precocious pair.

"Let's go to the Room of Requirement," Gin said.

"You two think of a nice roaring fire in a fireplace," Georgia told the elder two Patils. "You three think of some comfy poufs for each of us to sit on," she told Harry, Luna, and Hermione. "You two think of hot chocolate," she told the youngest pair.

"And what are you two going to think of?" Hermione demanded.

"Something for us to do," Gin answered.

"Something fun!" The pair giggled.

"Oh, God!" Hermione muttered.

The room was set up as they the group had asked. Gin was almost bouncing in excitement.

"Okay," Hermione said, sitting on pouf, "we're here. What do you two devils have planned for us?"

"Poker!" Gin exclaimed.

"That's not too. . . ."

"Strip poker!" Georgia added.

"**WHAT!**" Parvati, Padma, Hermione, and Harry chorused.

"We are **not** going to play strip poker, especially not with Sudipta and Irena here," Padma said firmly.

"We WANT to play!" Irena almost wailed. Sudipta merely nodded.

"And not with Harry here!" Hermione said equally firmly. Harry nodded, and began inching towards the door.

"Oh, it's no fun without at least one boy!" Georgia said.

"And we all know we can trust Harry," Luna added. Gin and Georgia smiled.

"Traitor!" Harry managed to tell his girl friend.

"And what's the worst that can happen?" Gin asked. "That Irena and Sudipta see their first Pink Elephant? Big deal." The two flirtatious First years giggled. "Like Luna said, we all know Harry is too honorable to ever embarrass us by telling anyone, would never take advantage of any of us, and none of us will tell."

"I don't think so," Harry said, moving a little closer to the door.

"Oh, the big brave Gryffindors are shy!" Georgia said, blocking the door.

"You know you want to, Harry," Georgia said.

"And once someone is out of clothes, they pay the highest hand a forfeit of a kiss on the lips!" Gin stated.

"And you wonder why people keep saying you're gay one," Georgia told her foster-sister.

"I prefer boys," Gin said, "I just like kissing!" She looked around. "Is there anyone here who has never kissed a girl on the lips?"

A blushing Hermione raised her hand.

"Really?" Padma asked. "Does the idea revolt you?"

Hermione froze for a second, then to her amazement, she shook her head.

"Alright then," Padma said. "This does **NOT** involve anything more than what we all agree to. If it does, Hermione and I will tell Ginny Weasley we did this without her, and sic her on you!"

Parvati was doing some quick thinking. She then took off her gloves. "Right now, without the gloves, ear muffs or jewelry, I have thirteen articles of clothing. Any have less?"

Harry said, "Twelve, but maybe we should start without the cloaks. It's already pretty warm." They all had a number of layers on -- at least two jumpers or t-shirts or under-vests on, as well as work robes and perhaps their uniform blazers.

Sudipta just had eleven. They decided to leave off their cloaks, and the others took off enough (usually their scarf and perhaps a shoe), so everyone started with eleven items.

They arranged the poufs in a circle, and sat Gin, Georgia, Hermione, Harry, Luna, Padma, Irena, Sudipta, Parvati.

"It's just One twenty," Hermione said. She did a quick spell, and a small hour glass appeared, with a bell next to it. "An alarm will go off at Four. We stop by then no matter what. All right?"

"But we probably won't be nearly finished by then!" Gin objected. The group therefore agreed to play until Four.

It took some five minutes before everyone agreed on the rules they would play under, (including agreeing that the winner of each hand get a kiss on the cheek from everyone), but finally, Gin dealt the first hand:

Georgia . A h, K c discarded 6 s, 5 d, 2 s
Hermione. K h, 7 d, 7 h J c, 4 s
Harry . . K s 8 s, 6 h, 4 h, 2 c
Luna. . . A c, K d, Q d 8 c, 5 c
Padma . . 9 h, 8 h, 2 h Q s, 5 s
Irena . . 4 d, 3 c, 2 d 10h, 7 s
Sudipta . 9 s, d c J s, 7 c, 3 d
Parvati . J h, 10s, 10 d 6 c, 4 c
Gin . . . A d, Q c, Q h 10c, 3 h

Gin shuffled the remaining cards and the discards, then dealt.

Georgia . **A h, K c, Q s, 7 s, 4 h**
Hermione. **K h, 7 d, 7 h, 6 h, 2 c**
Harry . . **K s, 5 s, 5 c, 4 c, 3 d**
Luna. . . **A c, K d, Q d, J s, 10 h**
Padma . . **9 h, 8 h, 6 d, 3 s, 2 h**
Irena . . **Jok, 9 d, 4 d, 3 c, 2 d**
Sudipta . **9 s, 9 c, 8 s, 8 c, 4 c**

Parvati . J h, **10s**, **10d**, **10c**, 7 c
 Gin . . . **A s**, **A d**, **Q c**, **Q h**, J c

Padma took off her scarf, and everyone kissed Luna's cheek.

Hermione. A h, J h, J d discarded K s, 6 h
 Harry . . 2 s, 2 c. Q c, 8 s, 5 s
 Luna. . . K h, 4 s, 4 d 10d, 3 d
 Padma . . A d, A c. 8 h, 7 d, 3 c
 Irena . . 6 d, 5 c, 3 s, 2 d. Q h
 Sudipta . 7 s, 5 h, 4 c, 2 h. K d
 Parvati . 9 d, 9 s. Q d, 10c, 4 h
 Gin . . . Q s, J s, Jok, 9 c. 7 c
 Georgia . 10h, Jok, 8 c, 7 h. 5 d
 Hermione. A h, **J h**, **J d**, 10d, 3 d
 Harry . . **Q d**, **Q c**, 10c, **2 s**, **2 c**
 Luna. . . K h, 8 s, 5 d, **4 s**, **4 d**
 Padma . . **A d**, **A c**, **A s**, K s, 4 h
 Irena . . **K d**, 6 d, 5 c, 3 s, 2 d
 Sudipta . **Q h**, 7 s, 5 h, 4 c, 2 h
 Parvati . K c, J c, **9 d**, **9 s**, 6 s
 Gin . . . **Jok**, **Q s**, J s, 9 c, 6 h
 Georgia . **10s**, **10h**, **Jok**, 8 c, 7 h

Sudipta took off a shoe, then everyone kissed Padma. When asked why she was keeping her scarf on, Sudipta merely shrugged.

Harry . . K c, J s. discarded 7 s, 6 h, 3 h
 Luna. . . 10h, 10c. J c, 5 d, 3 s
 Padma . . Jok 10d, 6 c, 5 h, 2 d
 Irena . . 9 h, 9 d, 4 h, 4 c. Q d
 Sudipta . 10s, 8 s, 7 c, 6 s. 3 d
 Parvati . A d, A h, 8 h, 8 c. 9 c
 Gin . . . A c, 7 d, 7 h. J d, 2 c
 Georgia . K s, K d, K h. J h, 9 s
 Hermione. Q c, Q h, 2 s, 2 h. 5 c

Harry . . K c, **J s**, **J h**, **3 s**, **3 d**
 Luna. . . Q d, **10h**, **10c**, 4 s, 3 c
 Padma . . **Jok**, **10d**, 8 d, 6 c, 4 d
 Irena . . Q s, **9 h**, **9 d**, **4 h**, **4 c**
 Sudipta . **10s**, 8 s, 7 c, 6 s, 2 d
 Parvati . **A d**, **A h**, J c, **8 h**, **8 c**
 Gin . . . A c, 9 s, **7 d**, **7 h**, 5 d
 Georgia . **K s**, **K d**, **K h**, 7 s, 2 d
 Hermione. **Q c**, **Q h**, 6 h, **2 s**, **2 h**

Sudipta took off her other shoe, and Georgia happily collected her kisses.

Luna. . . Q h, 10h, 9 h, 7 h, 3 h
 Padma . . J c, J d. discarded 10c, 7 d, 6 c
 Irena . . A c, K s. 9 d, 5 h, 4 d
 Sudipta . K d, Q d, 2 d 8 c, 4 c
 Parvati . A s, A d, K h 6 s, 3 c
 Gin . . . A h, Q c. 6 d, 5 d, 2 h
 Georgia . 4 s, 4 h. 9 c, 6 h, 2 c

Hermione. **Jok, Jok**. 10s, 8 h, 5 c
 Harry . . **Q s, 8 s, 5 s, 2 s**. 7 c
 Luna. . . **Q h, 10h, 9 h, 7 h, 3 h**
 Padma . . **J c, J d**, 8 c, 6 s, 3 c
 Irena . . **A c**, K s, 9 c, 4 c, 2 c
 Sudipta . **K d**, Q d, 10s, 7 c, 2 d
 Parvati . **A s, A d**, K h, 8 h, 5 c
 Gin . . . **A h**, K c, Q c, 9 s, 7 s
 Georgia . **J s, J h**, 5 h, **4 s, 4 h**
 Hermione. **Jok, Jok, 10c**, 9 d, 4 d
 Harry . . **Q s, 8 s, 5 s, 5 d**, 2 s

"Arrgh!" Sudipta cried when Harry picked up his cards, smiled, and laid down his hand. "Lost again!"

"Are you sure you're trying?" Gin asked.

"Yes, I'm trying!"

"Going to take that scarf off?" Georgia asked.

"Nope," she said with a smile, and took off her work robe instead.

"Deal," Sudipta told Luna, after Luna collected her second round of kisses.

Padma . . K h, 2 c, 2 d discarded J c, 5 h
 Irena . . K d 9 d, 6 c, 4 s, 2 s
 Sudipta . A h, Q h, Q c J d, 4 h
 Parvati . K c, 8 s, 8 h 10c, 4 d
 Gin . . . K s 9 s, 5 c, 4 c, 3 s
 Georgia . A c, Q d. 7 s, 5 s, 3 d
 Hermione. Q s, J s. 10h, 8 d, 5 d
 Harry . . Jok, A d, J h 8 c, 6 h
 Luna. . . A s, Jok. 10d, 7 c, 6 s

Padma . . K h, 8 c, 6 s, **2 c, 2 d**
 Irena . . **K d**, 9 d, 6 h, 5 d, 4 h
 Sudipta . A h, **Q h, Q c**, 10h, 2 h
 Parvati . K c, 10s, **8 s, 8 h**, 5 h
 Gin . . . K s, 10d, **9 h, 9 s**, 7 c
 Georgia . **A c**, Q d, 5 c, 4 c, 3 h
 Hermione. **Q s**, J s, 10c, 6 c, 3 s
 Harry . . **Jok, A d**, J h, 9 c, 4 s
 Luna. . . **A s**, Jok, 7 d, 4 d, 3 c

"Thanks!" Sudipta said to Irena as she laid down her hand, "at least I'm not low player this time!"

"Looks like I might be," Hermione said a moment later. "Drat!" she said after Harry and Luna played. She had already taken off one shoe before play started, and now took off the other one.

"New rule, if Luna doesn't mind," Gin said.

"What's that?" Luna asked, puzzled.

"When Harry wins, he gets a real kiss!"

"I approve," Luna said, giving Harry a soft, lingering kiss. The other girls followed, with much giggling on Irena's part and some shyness on Hermione's.

Irena . . . Q c, Q d. discarded J d, 10s, 8 c
Sudipta . . K d, J h, 10h, 9 c. 2 d
Parvati . . 3 c, 3 h. 8 d, 6 h, 4 s
Gin A s, 8 s, 7 s, 2 s. 4 h
Georgia . . K s, J s, 6 s, 5 s. 8 h
Hermione. K h, 6 h, 6 d. 10c, 9 s
Harry . . . 7 c, 7 h. 10d, 6 c, 5 d
Luna. . . . Jok, K c, Q h. 9 h, 3 s
Padma . . . A d, A c. 9 d, 5 c, 2 h

Irena . . . A h, **Q c, Q d**, 10d, 6 c
Sudipta . . K d, **J c, J h**, 10h, 9 c
Parvati . . 9 d, **5 d, 5 c**, 3 c, 3 h
Gin A s, 8 s, 7 s, **2 s, 2 h**
Georgia . . **K s**, J s, 8 c, 6 s, 5 s
Hermione. K h, **6 h, 6 d**, 4 d, 3 d
Harry . . . 9 s, **Jok, 7 c, 7 h**, 2 d
Luna. . . . **Jok, K c**, Q h, 8 d, 5 h
Padma . . . **A d, A c**, J d, 7 d, 4 s

"Oh, well," Georgia said, pulling off her shoe, "at least we get to kiss Harry again!"

"I'm getting hot, err, warm," Gin said. "Let's all take off one thing."

"You should have thought of that when we agreed to start with eleven articles of clothing," Padma told her. "Deal, Irena."

Sudipta . . Q c, 6 c, 6 h. discarded 10c, 9 d
Parvati . . **10d, 5 d, 4 d, 3 d, 2 d**
Gin **A h, K h, Q h, Jok, 2 h**
Georgia . . A s, J c, 10s. 8 d, 4 c
Hermione. J h, J s. 8 h, 6 s, 3 h
Harry . . . A d, K s, J d. 5 c, 4 h
Luna. . . . A c. 10h, 7 d, 3 c, 2 c
Padma . . . Jok, Q d. 8 c, 5 h, 4 s
Irena . . . K d, 9 c, 9 s. 6 d, 5 s
Sudipta . . Q c, 7 s, **6 c, 6 h**, 2 s
Parvati . . **10d, 5 d, 4 d, 3 d, 2 d**
Gin **A h, K h, Q h, Jok, 2 h**
Georgia . . **A s**, K c, J c, 10s, 9 d
Hermione. Q s, **J h, J s**, 9 h, 5 s
Harry . . . **A d**, K s, J d, 7 c, 3 s
Luna. . . . **A c**, 8 c, 7 h, 6 s, 5 h
Padma . . . Q d, **Jok, 8 s, 8 h**, 4 s
Irena . . . K d, **9 c, 9 s**, 6 d, 3 h

"Win some, lose some," Luna said after kissing Gin's cheek. She tossed her shoe behind her.

Parvati . . J c, 8 c, 8 h. discarded 6 s, 4 h
Gin Q d, Q c. 10s, 8 s, 5 d
Georgia . . Q h, J d, Jok, 9 s. 5 c
Hermione. A h. J s, 10d, 8 d, 7 c
Harry . . . K h, 2 s, 2 d. 4 c, 3 c
Luna. . . . 10c, 10d. 6 d, 5 h, 2 c

Padma . . . K d, 7 d, 7 h 9 d, 3 s
 Irena . . . A s, Q s. 9 c, 7 s, 4 d
 Sudipta . . . A c, 3 h, 3 d K c, J h
 Parvati . . . J c, 9 c, **8 c, 8 h**, 5 d
 Gin . . . **Q d, Q c**, 5 s, **4 h, 4 s**
 Georgia . . . **Jok, Q h**, J d, 9 s, 6 h
 Hermione. **A h, A d**, 8 s, 7 s, 4 d
 Harry . . . K h, 9 h, **2 s, 2 d, 2 h**
 Luna. . . **Jok, 10c, 10d**, 4 c, 2 c
 Padma . . . **K d, K c**, J h, 7 d, 7 h
 Irena . . . **A s, Q s**, 9 d, 6 s, 3 c
 Sudipta . . . A c, 6 c, **3 h, 3 d, 3 s**

"That was close," Parvati said as Irena threw her hand down.

When Sudipta showed her hand, Irena shrugged and took her robe off, while Luna accepted her tributes.

Parvati . . . Jok, A c. discarded 7 d, 5 d, 3 s
 Gin . . . 6 c, 6 s. 9 s, 5 c, 4 d
 Georgia . . . Q h, Q c, 3 h, 3 c. 10 s
 Hermione. . . J c 8 s, 7 s, 5 s, 3 d
 Harry . . . A d, K c, J s, 10c. 4 h
 Luna. . . K d, J d. 10h, 6 h, 5 h
 Padma . . . K h, J h. 9 c, 6 d, 4 c
 Irena . . . K s 9 h, 8 c, 7 h, 4 s
 Sudipta . . . A h, A s. 10d, 8 h, 2 c
 Parvati . . . **Jok, A c**, 9 s, 8 s, 2 d
 Gin . . . 7 d, **6 c, 6 s**, 5 c, 4 d
 Georgia . . . **Q h, Q c**, 5 d, **3 h, 3 c**
 Hermione. . . Q s, J c, 3 s, **2 c, 2 h**
 Harry . . . **A d, K c, J s, 10c, 9 h**

"Oh, you lucky. . . ." Gin muttered as Harry laid down his straight.

Luna. . . **K d**, J d, 8 c, 7 h, 6 d
 Padma . . . K h, J h, 9 d, **4 c, 4 s**
 Irena . . . **K s**, 10h, 6 h, 5 h, 4 h
 Sudipta . . . **A h, A s, Jok**, 9 c, 2 s

Irena shrugged, took off her blazer, and grabbed Harry in a passionate embrace.

"Down, girl!" Gin commanded.

"I hate to think what Ron would say," Hermione muttered.

"Scarlet women," Luna and Parvati both whispered back, making Hermione choke on her hot chocolate.

"You're a real shark, Potter," Georgia said with admiration.

"I think Gin was right," Luna, who had been staring at Sudipta, said. "It is getting warm, and I don't think removing two items each would threaten anyone with complete nudity."

"Luna!" Padma protested, since Hermione was still coughing. Luna leaned over and whispered to her. Padma's eyes narrowed. "Oh, very well."

"What!" Parvati protested. Padma whispered to her twin. "Oh, alright," Parvati said. She turned on Gin. "It was your idea, and we might as well go in order. You first."

Gin shrugged and took off her shoes, while Georgia took off her remaining shoe and her robe. Hermione, frowning all the time, took over her robe and blazer. Harry had thought about it, and took off his robe and one shoe. Luna took over her blazer and heavy jumper, then put the blazer back on and took off her remaining shoe. Padma took off her blazer, then both the jumpers she was wearing, and then put her blazer back on as well. Irena simply kicked off her shoes.

Sudipta took off her blazer, and then seemed to hesitate between her jumper and her trousers.

"Take the scarf off," Padma and Parvati said together, while Parvati took off her own scarf and one shoe.

"No," Sudipta pouted, and started to pull off her pull-over jumper.

Parvati sighed and grabbed her little sister, who struggled and squeaked while Padma unwound the scarf.

"And just where did you get that love bite!" Padma scolded.

Parvati turned on Irena. "I didn't do it!" Irena exclaimed, hiding behind an amused Harry.

Luna put her hand on the still scolding Padma, while Hermione said a healing spell and circled the bruise with her wand.

"Tingly," Sudipta said.

"It should heal over-night, unless it's really deep," Hermione told her. "Don't let someone do that to you again. It's not a sign of real affection."

Sudipta flushed even darker, but nodded her head.

"Come on," Hermione said, "deal Parvati." That surprised everyone enough that they did just that.

Gin . . . 5 h, 5 s. discarded 8 c, 7 s, 4 h
Georgia . K s, K d, Q d, J s. 7 h
Hermione. 10h, 10c. 8 d, 7 d, 6 d
Harry . . Jok, K h, K c 9 h, 7 c
Luna. . . A c, J h. 10d, 6 c, 3 h
Padma . . 9 s, 9 c, 9 d, 3 d, 3 c
Irena . . A s, 10s, 6 s, 4 s. 8 h
Sudipta . 5 c, 4 c, Jok, 2 c, A h
Parvati . 2 s, 2 h. J d, 6 h, 4 d

"This should be interesting," Gin said, when neither Padma nor Sudipta discarded.

Gin . . . 8 d, 7 d, 5 h, 5 s, 3 h
Georgia . K s, K d, Q d, J s, 6 d
Hermione. J d, 10h, 10c, 7 h, 4 h
Harry . . A d, Jok, K h, K c, 8 s
Luna. . . A c, Q c, Q h, J h, 2 d

Padma . . **9 s, 9 c, 9 d, 3 d, 3 c**
 Irena . . **A s, 10s, 6 s, 5 d, 4 s**
 Sudipta . **5 c, 4 c, Jok, 2 c, A h**
 Parvati . **Q s, J c, 4 d, 2 s, 2 h**

"Drat!" Sudipta said when Padma showed her full house.

"I don't see what you're complaining about," Irena said. "I'm low so far!"

"How often will I get dealt a straight!" Sudipta pouted.

"Go kiss our sister," Parvati said. "Deal, Gin." Irena thought a moment, and then took off her jumper.

Georgia . 4 h, 3 c, 2 c, Jok. . . discarded 8 h
 Hermione. **K s, Q h, Q s, J c** 2 s
 Harry . . **K d, K c, Q c** 6 c, 2 h
 Luna. . . 8 s, 7 c, Jok, 5 d. Q d
 Padma . . **A s, J s, 4 s, 3 s** J h
 Irena . . **A c, A h, 6 d, 6 h** J d
 Sudipta . **K h, 10h, 10s** 9 d, 7 d
 Parvati . 10d, 8 d, 2 d 6 s, 5 c
 Gin . . . **A d, 9 h, 9 s** 4 c, 3 d

"We're either all pretty lucky, or we're taking some awful risks," Gin said.

"Probably both," Georgia answered her.

Parvati just shut her eyes and hoped.

Georgia . **Jok, 4 c, 4 h, 3 c, 2 c**
 Hermione. **K s, Q h, Q s, J c, 3 d**
 Harry . . **K d, K c, Q c, 6 c, 2 h**
 Luna. . . **10c, Jok, 8 s, 7 c, 5 d**
 Padma . . **A s, J s, 5 h, 4 s, 3 s**
 Irena . . **A c, A h, J d, 6 d, 6 h**
 Sudipta . **K h, J h, 10h, 10s, 2 s**
 Parvati . 10d, **8 d, 8 h, 7 s, 2 d**
 Gin . . . **A d, 9 h, 9 s, 5 s, 4 d**

Georgia raised her hands in triumph, while Harry said, "It's unlikely to draw a flush with this many players."

Padma threw her blazer at him.

Hermione. **K d, K s, Q c** discarded 8 s, 8 s
 Harry . . **Jok, 4 d, 4 h** 10c, 6 d
 Luna. . . **Q s** 10d, 7 d, 6 h, 3 c
 Padma . . **Q h, J c, 8 d, 8 c** 7 s
 Irena . . 3 d, 3 h. 8 h, 7 c, 6 c
 Sudipta . 2 d, 2 h, 2 c J d, 9 c
 Parvati . **Jok, A s, A c** K h, 6 s
 Gin . . . **A h, J h, J s** 5 c, 2 s
 Georgia . **K c, 9 h, 9 d** 5 h, 4 c

"It's a good thing we're not betting," Harry said to Padma, "Sudipta certainly doesn't have a poker face."

Hermione. **K d, K s, Q c, 10d, 2 s**
 Harry . . 7 d, 6 h, **Jok, 4 d, 4 h**
 Luna. . . **Q s, 6 s, 5 d, 4 s, 3 s**
 Padma . . Q h, J c, 9 s, **8 d, 8 c**
 Irena . . A d, Q d, 9 c, **3 d, 3 h**
 Sudipta . 6 d, 3 c, **2 d, 2 h, 2 c**
 Parvati . **Jok, A s, A c, 8 h, 7 c**
 Gin . . . A h, **J h, J s, 7 s, 6 c**
 Georgia . K c, J d, 10c, **9 h, 9 d**

"About time I won," Parvati grumbled, as Luna took off her blazer.

Harry . . K c, K s. discarded J d
 Luna. . . A s, K h, Q c 7 c, 3 c
 Padma . . A h 8 c, 5 c, 4 d, 2 h
 Irena . . J h, 7 h, 4 h, 3 h. K d
 Sudipta . Q d, J s. 9 s, 7 d, 2 d
 Parvati . 2 c, 2 s. J c, 10d, 6 h
 Gin . . . Jok, A d. Q h, 8 d, 5 h
 Georgia . A c, 9 c, 9 h 4 c, 3 s
 Hermione. Jok, 10c, 9 d, 8 h. 3 d
 Harry . . **K c, K s, 7 c, 5 c, 3 s**
 Luna. . . A s, K h, **Q c, Q h, 8 d**
 Padma . . A h, J c, 10d, **5 s, 5 h**
 Irena . . **J h, 7 h, 6 h, 4 h, 3 h**
 Sudipta . **Q d, J s, 6 d, 5 s, 2 h**
 Parvati . 10h, 9 s, 8 c, **2 c, 2 s**
 Gin . . . **Jok, A d, J d, 7 d, 3 c**
 Georgia . A c, 10s, 7 s, **9 c, 9 h**
 Hermione. 10c, 9 d, **Jok, 8 h, 8 s**

"Hurrah!" Irena said, standing and giving something that seemed to be a mixture of a victory dance and wiggle.

"What are you doing?" Padma demanded of her little sister. "Take off your jumper!" Sudipta leaned forward and whispered in Padma's ear. "Then take off a sock!"

"No," Sudipta said, and dropped her trousers.

"You're a bad influence," Parvati teased Irena.

"Everyone kiss me!" Irena demanded. "Then Harry can deal the cards."

Luna. . . Q s discarded J d, 10d, 7 s, 2 d
 Padma . . K d 10c, 6 s, 5 s, 2 c
 Irena . . A s, Q h. 7 d, 5 h, 2 s
 Sudipta . Jok, A h, K h 9 c, 4 c
 Parvati . 9 d, 9 h. J c, 6 d, 5 c
 Gin . . . Jok, Q d. 9 s, 8 d, 3 s
 Georgia . K c, K s, J s 8 c, 3 d
 Hermione. A c, J h. 8 h, 7 c, 4 s
 Harry . . A d 10s, 8 s, 7 h, 2 h

"That was a fine mess you apparently dealt most of us," Gin teased Harry as he shuffled the remaining cards and discards.

"Just hope you don't come off on bottom," Harry retorted, dealing again.

Luna . . . **Q s**, 10d, 7 s, 6 s, 2 c
 Padma . . . **K d**, 10c, 5 s, 3 c, 2 d
 Irena . . . A s, **Q h**, **Q c**, 10h, 5 d
 Sudipta . . . A h, K h, **Jok**, **6 d**, **6 c**
 Parvati . . . **9 d**, **9 h**, 8 h, 6 h, 4 d
 Gin . . . **Jok**, **Q d**, 8 c, 4 s, 3 d
 Georgia . . . **K c**, **K s**, **J s**, **J d**, 7 c
 Hermione. **A c**, J h, 9 c, 5 c, 4 h
 Harry . . . **A d**, 10s, 9 s, 8 d, 3 h

Sudipta jumped up. "Hurrah! I finally win!" She grabbed Hermione and kissed her full on the lips. Hermione struggled, but didn't want to hurt the young girl. Sudipta finally released her, and proclaimed, "I gave Hermione her first real girl kiss!"

Everyone laughed, even the red-faced Hermione. Luna took off her blouse, which revealed she was wearing a vest as well as a bra. Harry and Georgia both looked a little disappointed.

Padma . . . A c, K c, 6 c, 3 c, 2 c
 Irena . . . 6 h, 5 d, 4 d, 3 h. . . discarded K s
 Sudipta . . . K d, 10h, 10s 8 h, 3 s
 Parvati . . . A h J c, 10c, 6 d, 3 d
 Gin K h 10d, 9 h, 5 h, 2 s
 Georgia . . . 7 d, 7 h, Jok 9 s, 6 s
 Hermione. . . A d, 8 s, 8 d 9 c, 5 s
 Harry . . . 2 d, 2 h. J s, 9 d, 5 c
 Luna A s, 4 c, 4 h J d, 7 s
 Padma . . . **A c**, **K c**, **6 c**, **3 c**, **2 c**
 Irena . . . 6 h, 5 d, **4 s**, **4 d**, 3 h
 Sudipta . . . K d, **10h**, **10s**, 6 d, 3 d
 Parvati . . . **A h**, K s, Q h, 8 h, 3 s
 Gin K h, J d, **7 c**, **7 s**, **Jok**
 Georgia . . . J s, **7 d**, **7 h**, **Jok**, 2 s
 Hermione. . . A d, J c, 9 d, **8 s**, **8 d**
 Harry . . . **Q s**, **Q c**, 5 c, **2 d**, **2 h**
 Luna A s, 10c, 9 h, **4 c**, **4 h**

"Drat!" Parvati said, tossing her shoe.

Irena . . . 8 c, 7 c, 6 h, 5 s. . . discarded A c
 Sudipta . . . K c, K s. Q c, 5 d, 4 h
 Parvati . . . A h, J s. 6 c, 4 s, 2 s
 Gin Q h, 7 h, 7 s 4 d. 3 c
 Georgia . . . Jok, J h, 9 h, 8 h, 3 h
 Hermione. . . Jok, 5 h, 4 c, 3 s. 9 s
 Harry A d 6 s, 5 c, 3 d, 2 c
 Luna K h, Q d, J c, 10d. 2 d
 Padma Q h J d, 9 c, 8 s, 2 h

"Maybe you'll finally lose, Harry!" Gin teased.

Harry shrugged. "We'll see."

Irena . . . **8 d**, **8 c**, 7 c, 6 h, 5 s
 Sudipta . . . **K c**, **K s**, 9 s, 7 d, 2 c
 Parvati . . . **A h**, J s, 10h, 4 d, 3 c
 Gin Q h, 10s, **7 h**, **7 s**, 5 d
 Georgia . . . **Jok**, **J h**, **9 h**, **8 h**, **3 h**
 Hermione. . . 5 h, **Jok**, **4 h**, **4 c**, 3 s
 Harry . . . **A d**, **A s**, 8 s, **2 d**, **2 h**

Luna. . . **K h**, Q d, J c, 10d, 6 d
 Padma . . Q h, J d, 10c, **9 d, 9 c**

Luna sighed, and took off a sock.

Sudipta . 10s, 10c, 10d discarded Q s, 9 c
 Parvati . A c J d, 8 s, 6 h, 4 s
 Gin . . . K c 10h, 9 s, 5 s, 2 h
 Georgia . Jok, K h, K d 7 d, 4 d
 Hermione. Jok, Q d. 6 s, 3 c, 2 s
 Harry . . Q c, J c. 5 d, 4 h, 2 c
 Luna. . . 8 c, 8 d. 7 h, 4 c, 2 d
 Padma . . 7 s, 7 c, 5 c, 5 h. 3 s
 Irena . . K s, Q h. 9 d, 6 c, 3 d
 Sudipta . J d, **10s, 10c, 10d**, 2 h
 Parvati . **A c**, J s, 8 s, 6 h, 4 s
 Gin . . . **K c**, 8 h, 5 s, 3 h, 2 c
 Georgia . **Jok, K h, K d**, 6 s, 3 c
 Hermione. **Jok, Q d**, 7 d, 3 s, 2 s
 Harry . . **Q s, Q c, J c, J h**, 9 h
 Luna. . . **9 c, 9 d, 8 c, 8 d**, 6 c
 Padma . . **7 s, 7 c, 5 c, 5 h**, 3 d
 Irena . . **K s**, Q h, 10h, 7 h, 4 d

"Drat!" Gin said, as Irena put down her hand. As she laid her robe behind her, she said to Harry. "If it was almost anyone but you, I'd be suspicious."

"Just lucky," Harry said with a grin.

Sudipta . A s, K c, K d discarded 8 c, 5 d
 Parvati . 8 h, 8 d, 7 d, 7 c. A d
 Gin . . . 4 d, 4 s. 6 c, 5 c, 3 s
 Georgia . Q s, J d. 9 h, 5 h, 2 s
 Hermione. A c, Q c. 10s, 4 h, 3 d
 Harry . . Jok J c, 10d, 7 s, 5 s
 Luna. . . J h, J s. Q d, 10c, 2 h
 Padma . . K h 10h, 9 s, 8 s, 3
 Irena . . 9 c, Jok, 7 h, 6 h. 2 c
 Sudipta . A s, **K c, K d**, Q d, 3 h
 Parvati . 10c, **8 h, 8 d, 7 d, 7 c**
 Gin . . . 10h, 9 s, **4 d, 4 s**, 2 h
 Georgia . Q s, **J d, J c**, 9 h, 5 h
 Hermione. **A c**, Q c, 10d, 7 s, 5 s
 Harry . . **Jok, K s**, Q h, 6 d, 2 d
 Luna. . . **J h, J s**, 6 s, 4 c, 3 c
 Padma . . **K h**, 8 s, 6 c, 3 d, 2 s
 Irena . . **10s, 9 c, Jok, 7 h, 6 h**

Hermione let out a sigh of relief when Padma laid down her hand. Padma, however, was not pleased to lose a sock.

Parvati . A s discarded 10s, 8 c, 4 d, 3 s
 Gin . . . K h, Jok, J c, 10c. 5 h
 Georgia . A d 10h, 7 s, 6 c, 2 d
 Hermione. A c, K c, Q h, J h, 10h
 Harry . . 6 d, 5 s, 4 h, 3 h, 2 h
 Luna. . . A h, Q c. 8 s, 4 s, 2 s
 Padma . . 9 d, 8 d, 7 d, 3 d. 5 c
 Irena . . Jok, K s, Q d, J s. 5 d
 Sudipta . K d, 9 c, 9 h 8 h, 3 c

Parvati . A s, 7 c, 7 h, 5 h, 2 d
 Gin . . . K h, Jok, J c, 10c, 7 s
 Georgia . A d, 8 s, 6 c, 5 c, 3 s
 Hermione. A c, K c, Q h, J h, 10h
 Harry . . 6 d, 5 s, 4 h, 3 h, 2 h
 Luna. . . A h, Q c, 9 s, 4 c, 4 s
 Padma . . J d, 9 d, 8 d, 7 d, 3 d
 Irena . . Jok, K s, Q d, J s, 10d
 Sudipta . K d, 9 c, 9 h, 8 h, 6 s

"Now what do we do?" Hermione asked.

"Well, we start this way," Irena said, kissing Hermione. When she broke the kiss, she added, "now everyone kiss us deeply!"

It took a few minutes to get through that, but no one complained. Georgia took off one of her two jumpers.

Gin . . . Jok, 9 h, 8 c, 7 h. . . discarded 4 s
 Georgia . K s, 10s, 5 s, 2 s. 9 d
 Hermione. 6 s, 6 d. Q d, J s 8 d
 Harry . . K h, Q h, J c, 10d. 7 s
 Luna. . . Jok, 6 c, 6 h. A h, 10c
 Padma . . 5 c, 5 h, 4 h, 4 d. K c
 Irena . . J d. 8 h, 7 d, 3 h, 2 c
 Sudipta . 3 c, 3 s. Q s, 9 c, 2 h
 Parvati . A d. J h, 7 c, 5 d, 3 d
 Gin . . . 9 h, Jok, 8 s, 8 c, 7 h
 Georgia . K s, 10s, 5 s, 2 s, 2 h
 Hermione. Q c, 10h, 9 c, 6 s, 6 d
 Harry . . K h, Q h, J c, 10d, 9 s
 Luna. . . 8 h, 7 d, Jok, 6 c, 6 h
 Padma . . 5 c, 5 h, 4 h, 4 d, 3 h
 Irena . . Q d, J d, J d, J h, 7 s
 Sudipta . K c, 9 d, 8 d, 3 c, 3 s
 Parvati . A d, A s, A c, 4 s, 2 c

"Two in a row!" Georgia moaned, taking off her second jumper.

Georgia . J h, 10h, 9 s, 8 c, 7 s
 Hermione. A s, 4 c, 4 s. discarded 10s, 6 c
 Harry . . A c, Jok, J c, 10c, 2 c
 Luna. . . K c, K s. 10d, 4 d, 2 h
 Padma . . A h, 8 d, 8 s. 7 c, 7 s
 Irena . . K d. Q s, 7 h, 5 d, 3 c
 Sudipta . 6 h, 5 c, 3 s, 2 d. 9 d
 Parvati . A d. J s, 6 d, 5 h, 3 d
 Gin . . . 9 c, 9 h. Q c, J d, 5 s
 Georgia . J h, 10h, 9 s, 8 c, 7 s
 Hermione. A s, 5 d, 4 c, 4 s, 3 c
 Harry . . A c, Jok, J c, 10c, 2 c
 Luna. . . K c, K s, 7 c, 7 d, 5 h
 Padma . . A h, 9 d, 8 d, 8 s, 3 d
 Irena . . K d, Q s, 8 h, 4 d, 3 h
 Sudipta . 7 h, 6 h, 5 c, 3 s, 2 d
 Parvati . A d, Q c, J d, 5 s, 2 h
 Gin . . . K h, Q h, 10s, 9 c, 9 h

"Well, what do you give up, Su?" Parvati asked.

"She has a jumper and two . . . oh. . . ." Harry said.

Sudipta flushed and defiantly took off her jumper. It was clear that her thin blouse did nothing to cover up her dusky skin and especially not her sickle-sized and very dark brown, and hard, nipples. Harry averted his eyes, which made all the girls grin, even Sudipta.

Hermione looked at her watch. "Half the time is gone. Shall we continue, or stop now?"

Everyone was adamant that they wanted to continue. "Fine then, shall we play to the bitter end?" she said. They swore they would.

"What the devil's gotten into all of us?" she wondered as Georgia dealt the cards. "We're playing faster and faster, but we're lingering over the kissing a little; in fact we're all deep kissing."

"Just play," Padma told her.

Hermione. A s discarded 9 d, 7 h, 4 h, 3 s
Harry . . 8 d, 8 s J h, 4 s, 2 d
Luna. . . A s, 3 d, 3 c 10d, 4 d
Padma . . 6 c, 5 d, Jok, 3 h. 9 s
Irena . . K s, J c. 6 h, 3 c, 2 s
Sudipta . K d, Q h, J d, 10c. 5 h
Parvati . Q s, 10s, 7 s, 6 s. K h
Gin . . . 7 c, 7 d. 9 c, 8 h, 5 s
Georgia . A h, Q d. 8 c, 5 c, 2 h
Hermione. **A s**, 9 h, 6 d, 4 c, 2 s
Harry . . K c, **8 d, 8 s, 2 d, 2 c**
Luna. . . A s, **3 d, 3 c, Jok**, 9 d
Padma . . **Jok, 10h**, 6 c, 5 d, 3 h
Irena . . **K s**, J c, 8 c, 7 h, 4 d
Sudipta . **K h, K d**, Q h, J d, 10c
Parvati . **Q s**, 10s, 7 s, 6 s, 5 h
Gin . . . 10d, **7 c, 7 d**, 5 c, 4 h
Georgia . **A d, A h**, Q d, 9 c, 2 h

Parvati shrugged and tossed her blazer behind her, and then kissed Luna as Hermione readied the next deal.

Harry . . J c, 10c, 6 c, 2 c. . . discarded 5 h
Luna. . . A d, K c, Q d, J h. 7 h
Padma . . A h, A c. 8 c, 6 d, 5 d
Irena . . 8 h, 8 d. 6 s, 4 s, 2 h
Sudipta . 9 c, 8 s, 7 d, 6 h. 4 c
Parvati . 3 s, 3 d. 10d, 9 s, 2 s
Gin . . . A s, Jok. Q c, 7 c, 5 c
Georgia . K d 10h, 9 h, 5 s, 3 c
Hermione. K s, Jok, J s 4 h, 2 d
Harry . . **J c, 10c, 6 c, 4 c, 2 c**
Luna. . . A d, K c, **Q d, Q h**, J h
Padma . . **A h, A c**, 8 c, 4 k, 2 h
Irena . . 10h, **8 h, 8 d**, 6 d, 2 d
Sudipta . **9 h, 9 c**, 8 s, 7 d, 6 h
Parvati . **5 d, 5 s**, 4 d, **3 s, 3 d**
Gin . . . **A s, Jok**, J d, 7 s, 3 c
Georgia . K d, Q c, **7 c, 7 h**, 5 c
Hermione. K s, **Jok, J s**, 10d, 5 h

Georgia judged the ambient temperature of the room, and slipped off her trousers instead of a sock or her blouse, then joined the line to french kiss Harry -- when Harry won, it took a bit longer to do the kissing.

As Harry shuffled, Hermione took stock of the situation. Gin and Harry still had not lost, and therefore had the most articles of clothing left. Hermione had lost one. Georgia was down to her socks, blouse, and underwear. Luna was also down to five: her underwear (including a vest), trousers, and one sock; while Padma had those plus her blouse. Irena had her underwear, socks, trousers, and blouse, while Parvati had that plus a jumper. Sudipta had her pants, blouse, and socks.

"Sudipta is looking rather chilly," Hermione heard herself say. "We should raise the fire."

"It will get rather stuffy for the rest of us," Harry pointed out.

"I'll sacrifice a sock, if the rest of you lose something," Sudipta said.

"We should also move around so that Su's closer to the fire," Padma said.

'I swear, this just keeps on getting odder and odder,' Hermione thought, as she took off her jumper. 'Why are we agreeing to this?' Gin took off her robe, and Harry took off his blazer. Georgia, Luna, Padma, Irena, and Sudipta each took off a sock, Parvati her jumper.

```
Luna . . . A d, K s, K c, 10c, 10s
Padma . . Q s, J h, 10d . . . . . discarded 5 c, 4 s
Irena . . Jok, 9 s, 9 c . . . . . 8 h, 6 c
Sudipta . J s, 8 s, 7 s, 5 s . . . . . 4 c
Parvati . A s . . . . . J c, 7 d, 6 s, 3 c
Gin . . . A h, K h, 10h, 5 h . . . . . 8 d
Georgia . 9 h, 7 h, 6 h, 3 h . . . . . 4 d
Hermione. A c . . . . . 9 d, 7 c, 3 s, 2 d
Harry . . Jok, K d, Q d, 6 d . . . . . 8 c
Luna . . . A d, K s, K c, 10c, 10s
Padma . . Q s, J h, 10d, 8 c, 3 c
Irena . . Jok, 9 s, 9 c, 8 h, 4 c
Sudipta . J s, 9 d, 8 s, 7 s, 5 s
Parvati . A s, 7 c, 5 c, 4 s, 2 c
Gin . . . A h, K h, Q c, 10h, 5 h
Georgia . 9 h, 7 h, 6 h, 3 h, 3 d
Hermione. A c, J d, 7 d, 6 s, 4 d
Harry . . Jok, K d, Q d, 6 d, 2 s
```

As soon as Irena laid her hand down, Padma, Parvati, Gin, and Hermione let out sighs of relief. While Irena collected her kisses, Sudipta took off her remaining sock.

```
Padma . . 7 d, 7 h . . . . . discarded 6 c, 4 c, 3 h
Irena . . Q h, 5 c, 5 h . . . . . 8 s, 6 h
Sudipta . A s, Jok, 7 s, 4 s . . . . . 8 c
Parvati . A d, K d . . . . . 9 s, 6 s, 3 d
Gin . . . A h, 9 c, 9 d . . . . . Q d, 7 c
Georgia . K h . . . . . Q s, 9 h, 8 h, 3 c
Hermione. 2 c, 2 h . . . . . K s, J h, 4 h
Harry . . A c . . . . . J s, 6 d, 5 s, 3 s
Luna . . . 2 d, 2 s . . . . . Q c, J d, 4 d
Padma . . 7 d, 7 h, 6 s, 5 s, 4 d
Irena . . Q h, J d, 10d, 5 c, 5 h
Sudipta . A s, Jok, Q s, 8 h, 3 c
```

Parvati . **A d**, K d, 7 s, 4 s, 3 h
 Gin . . . A h, J h, **9 c**, **9 d**, 4 h
 Georgia . **K h**, **K s**, 10s, 5 d, 3 d
 Hermione. Q d, **8 c**, **8 s**, **2 c**, **2 h**
 Harry . . A c, 10h, **Jok**, **6 h**, **6 c**
 Luna. . . J c, 8 d, 4 c, **2 d**, **2 s**

"You're really lucky," Parvati said to Harry as she pulled her trousers off.

"Very," Harry said, looking at Parvati's long shapely legs, along with Georgia's and even Sudipta's.

Irena . . 6 c, 6 s. discarded Q c, 9 s, 4 d
 Sudipta . Q s 9 c, 7 c, 3 c, 2 h
 Parvati . A d, K d, K c 9 h, 8 c
 Gin . . . 10c 9 d, 8 s, 5 c, 2 c
 Georgia . Q d J c, 10c, 4 h, 2 d
 Hermione. A s J s, 10h, 8 d, 3 s
 Harry . . A c, Jok, 5 h, 5 d. 4 c
 Luna. . . A h, 7 s, 7 d 3 d, 2 s
 Padma . . 8 h, 7 h, 6 d, 5 s. J h
 Irena . . 10s, **6 c**, **6 s**, **6 h**, 3 c
 Sudipta . Q s, **9 d**, **9 c**, **2 d**, **2 h**
 Parvati . A d, **K d**, **K c**, Q c, 7 c
 Gin . . . **J s**, 10c, 9 s, 4 d, 2 c
 Georgia . **Q d**, J h, 10h, 8 s, 3 d
 Hermione. A s, **4 s**, **4 h**, **3 s**, **3 h**
 Harry . . A c, 8 d, **Jok**, **5 h**, **5 d**
 Luna. . . A h, 9 h, **7 s**, **7 d**, **Jok**
 Padma . . **J c**, 8 h, 7 h, 6 d, 5 s

Padma looked at her cards with disgust, and started to undo her blouse.

"Aw, do the trousers," Parvati said. "Harry likes our legs." Irena and Luna smiled, but Padma complied, flushing duskily.

Sudipta . A c discarded Q c, 9 s, 5 s, 3 s
 Parvati . Q d, 8 d, 7 d, 4 d. J c
 Gin . . . Jok, 2 s, 2 c K h, 10s
 Georgia . A h K s, J h, 6 c, 5 h
 Hermione. A d J d, 9 h, 6 s, 5 d
 Harry . . K d, Jok. 8 c, 6 h, 5 c
 Luna. . . A s K c, 7 h, 4 h, 3 c
 Padma . . J s 10c, 7 s, 6 d, 4 s
 Irena . . 10h, 10d. Q h, 7 c, 3 h
 Sudipta . **A c**, Q s, 9 s, 5 s, 3 s
 Parvati . **Q d**, **9 d**, **8 d**, **7 d**, **4 d**
 Gin . . . 7 s, 6 h, **Jok**, **2 s**, **2 c**
 Georgia . **A h**, J h, 10c, 7 c, 5 c
 Hermione. **A d**, K c, Q h, 7 h, 4 s
 Harry . . **K d**, **Jok**, **K s**, J c, 5 d
 Luna. . . A s, **8 s**, **8 c**, **3 d**, **3 c**
 Padma . . **J s**, **J d**, 9 d, 6 c, 5 h
 Irena . . **10h**, **10d**, 9 c, 8 h, 4 h

Georgia made a big show of pulling her sock off, but no one but her was really into feet.

Parvati . A h, A s. discarded J s, 7 h, 3 h
 Gin . . . 4 s, 4 c. J d, 10s, 8 c

Georgia . A c 9 d, 6 s, 5 s, 3 d
Hermione. K h, 8 h, 5 h, 4 h. 3 s
Harry . . K s, Q c, J c, 10d. 8 d
Luna. . . Jok, K d, 7 d, 6 d, 5 d
Padma . . 2 h, 2 c. Q d, 8 s, 4 d
Irena . . K c, Q s, J h 6 c, 2 d
Sudipta . Q h 10h, 9 s, 3 c, 2 s
Parvati . **A h, A s**, 9 d, 6 s, 5 s
Gin . . . J d, **4 s, 4 c, 3 h, 3 d**
Georgia . **A c**, 10s, 9 s, 7 c, 2 s
Hermione. K h, 8 h, **5 c, 5 h**, 4 h
Harry . . K s, Q c, **J s, J c**, 10d
Luna. . . **Jok, K d, 7 d, 6 d, 5 d**
Padma . . 9 h, 7 h, **2 h, 2 c, Jok**
Irena . . **K c**, Q s, J h, 10c, 6 c
Sudipta . **A d**, Q h, 8 c, 6 h, 2 d

"One card between victory and defeat," Irena muttered, taking her sock off.

Gin . . . Q h, J s, 10s discarded 4 c, 2 d
Georgia . A h, A c. J c, 9 s, 2 s
Hermione. A s, K d, Q d 7 c, 5 c
Harry . . A d, Jok. 9 d, 8 s, 5 h
Luna. . . 7 d, 6 s, 5 d, 4 d. K s
Padma . . Q c 8 d, 6 d, 4 h, 3 d
Irena . . 10d, 10h. 9 c, 5 s, 3 h
Sudipta . 3 c, 3 s. K h, J d, 6 h
Parvati . 8 h, 8 c. K c, 7 s, 4 s
Gin . . . **K s, K c**, Q h, J s, 10s
Georgia . **A h, A c**, 7 s, 6 d, 5 c
Hermione. **A s**, K d, Q d, 9 d, 5 h
Harry . . **A d, Jok**, 8 s, 5 s, 3 d
Luna. . . **9 c**, 7 d, 6 s, 5 d, 4 d
Padma . . **Q c**, 10c, 9 h, 6 c, 2 h
Irena . . **10d, 10h**, 9 s, 8 d, 7 c
Sudipta . J c, 4 s, **3 c, 3 s**, 2 s
Parvati . K h, J d, **8 h, 8 c**, 4 c

While Harry collected his kisses, Luna pulled off her trousers.

Georgia . Jok, J h. discarded 6 s, 4 d, 2 h
Hermione. A h, A c, A s, 5 s, 5 d
Harry . . Q h, 10h, 9 h, 7 h, 6 h
Luna. . . A d, K d. J c, 8 c, 7 s
Padma . . K h, Q d, J s 9 d, 4 h
Irena . . Q c, 9 c, 5 c, 4 c, 3 c
Sudipta . Jok, K c, Q s 7 d, 4 s
Parvati . 6 c, 6 d. J d, 10s, 3 d
Gin . . . K s, 8 h, 8 s 3 h, 2 d

"Care for a side bet?" Irena asked Harry and Hermione smugly.

"What?" Hermione asked, her eyes narrowed.

"Winner does whatever she wants to to the losers; middle hand loses one piece of clothing, low hand loses two."

"Confident, aren't you?" Harry asked.

"I'm confident of not losing, anyway," Irena stated.

"So am I," Hermione said simply.

"Alright," Harry agreed.

Georgia . **Jok, J h, 9 s, 6 s, 2 c**
Hermione. **A h, A c, A s, 5 s, 5 d**
Harry . . **Q h, 10h, 9 h, 7 h, 6 h**
Luna . . . **A d, K d, 10c, 9 d, 3 c**
Padma . . **K h, Q d, J s, 4 d, 4 h**
Irena . . **Q c, 9 c, 5 c, 4 c, 3 c**
Sudipta . **Jok, K c, Q s, J c, 2 s**
Parvati . **10d, 10s, 6 c, 6 d, 2 h**
Gin . . . **K s, 8 h, 8 s, 8 c, 7 d**

"Pooh," Luna said with a pout.

"I lost?" Irena said in awed disgust. "A queen-high flush, and I came in **third**?"

"You certainly did," Hermione said smugly. "Lose two."

"That puts three of us down to two," Luna said, taking off her vest.

Harry tossed off his shoe, but when Irena started to take off her blouse, Hermione stopped her. She told Irena, to her own and everyone else's shock, "Lose both pieces on top, or bottom, whichever you prefer."

Irena blushed slightly. She pulled her blouse out, and saw that, if she was careful, it would cover her pubic area. She took off her trousers and pants, exposing only her bum, and that only for a second. She leaned across the circle, and Hermione kissed her gently, yet deeply.

"What's my penalty?" Harry asked, after he kissed her.

"Kiss me again!" 'Something is really wrong here,' Hermione thought as she kissed Harry passionately, 'but right now, I don't care.'

As soon as Harry picked up his cards, Harry asked, "Anyone up to another side-bet dare?"

"What?" Padma asked.

"Sure!" Irena said.

"Losers lose half their remaining clothes, odd number loses the odd one; winner just gets to enjoy the victory."

"I'm in!" Irena said.

"Alright," Padma agreed.

Hermione. 7 d, 7 s. discarded J d, 10 c, 2 s
Harry . . Jok, Jok, 3 c, 3 h, 3 d
Luna. . . J h 10d, 8 c, 4 h, 2 d
Padma . . 6 c, 6 h, 6 d, 2 c, 2 h
Irena . . 5 h, 5 d, 5 c, 5 s. 10h
Sudipta . A h, Q h, 9 h, 8 h. 4 s
Parvati . Q d, Q c, 9 c, 9 s. A c
Gin . . . K s, J s, 10s, 6 s. 8 d
Georgia . A d, A s, 4 c, 4 d. 8 s
Hermione. J c, 7 d, 7 s, 7 c, 7 h
Harry . . Jok, Jok, 3 c, 3 h, 3 d
Luna. . . K d, K h, K c, J d, J h
Padma . . 6 c, 6 h, 6 d, 2 c, 2 h
Irena . . 10c, 5 h, 5 d, 5 c, 5 s
Sudipta . A h, Q h, 10h, 9 h, 8 h
Parvati . Q d, Q c, 9 c, 9 s, 9 d
Gin . . . K s, J s, 10s, 6 s, 2 s
Georgia . A d, A s, 4 c, 4 d, 4 s

"Anyone else want in?" Harry asked before they laid down their cards.

They all did.

"Something isn't right," Hermione protested. "The odds are. . ."

"We're magical," Harry answered. "Even if none of us have done anything, our desires affect what goes on, especially in this room. So, are we all in?"

"Whoever has the low hand shouldn't lose an extra garment," Luna said, since she was down to two.

"That person can kiss everyone," Gin suggested.

They all agreed.

They looked at the cards in shock. "You swear you didn't do anything?" Hermione asked. Harry looked offended, and no one said anything more.

Hermione had to go first. She had seven items, so she kept her panties, bra, and vest, but lost her blouse, trousers, and socks. Luna lost her bra, but kept her pants, while Padma lost her blouse and bra, keeping her pants and vest. Harry rather enjoyed watching her take the bra off without removing the vest.

Irena thought she was the worst off at first. Then she took off her blouse, then turned around, took off her vest, and put the blouse back on. Sudipta took her pants off, although her blouse didn't quite cover her as well as Irena's. Parvati lost her socks and bra, but kept her pants and blouse. Her nipples showed through, large, dark, and hard.

Gin thought, and took off her jeans, jumper, and socks, leaving her pants, bra, blouse, and Weird Sisters t-shirt. Georgia was left with her panties, bra, and blouse. She should have kept a sock, but snuck that off as well.

"Aren't you warm, Harry?" Irena asked hopefully.

"No, I'm very comfortable," Harry said.

"Harry, what's going on?" Hermione asked. "This just isn't us! Or at least not me!"

"This is the Room of Requirement; it set up the environment some of us wanted," Harry explained. "Not me!" he hastened to add.

"And that was?" Hermione demanded.

"I've been trying to figure that out since you and Padma agreed to play. I think I have it now. The terrible two here wanted a room where we could play strip poker," Harry said. "So the room has induced the desire. Once we agreed, we have to play until the time limit is up. You might observe the hourglass you created isn't moving. The room's time is out-of-joint with the school's right now. Game time only runs while we're playing or kissing."

"We're sorry," Georgia said.

"No, you're not," Harry said. "You two have been trying to flirt with Parvati and Padma for over a month; Irena has a crush on me and Sudipta has a crush on Hermione. So, you all wanted to see us nude."

"And you and I wanted to see each other," Luna added.

"True. How about you two?" Harry asked the twins. "Any confessions along those lines?"

Parvati stretched and smiled. "We have great bodies; why would we mind showing them off for a discriminating and trust-worthy audience." She looked at Gin and Georgia. "Who has the crush on me?"

"I do," Gin admitted.

"Well, since we're the only students in the castle, McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick said we could room as we like, except for Harry and Luna of course. . . ."

"Really!" Gin enthused.

Parvati smiled. "Just over the vacation; until Lavender and Seamus return."

"Well, you finally have to put-up or shut-up," Georgia said. "We've never actually done anything with anyone other than kiss," she told the group.

Gin blushed.

"How about you?" Padma asked.

"Really?" Georgia asked, suddenly very nervous.

"Boys are nice," Padma said, "girls are better, and I am currently unattached." Georgia suddenly had a very goofy grin.

"Sorry, Sudipta," Hermione told the girl.

"I know," she responded, looking at Hermione with wide-eyes. "But you are . . . splendid."

"She is," Harry said, "but she's also loyal, and Ron is very jealous."

"Harry is also loyal, even if neither of us are jealous," Luna told Irena. They all knew they shouldn't remind the pair of their age.

Harry looked at Hermione, who flushed, but nodded. Harry had the power to end the spells, but she wanted to play on. "Alright," Harry said. "Let's play cards."

Harry . . . A h, J o k, K d, K s . . . discarded Q h
Luna . . . A d, 3 h, 3 s 7 c, 4 h
Padma . . . J s 9 d, 7 d, 3 d, 2 c
Irena . . . A s, K h, Q d, 10s 2 h
Sudipta . . . 10d, 10c 8 c, 6 s, 5 c
Parvati . . . 10h, 9 h, 8 h, 7 h 4 s
Gin . . . Q s, Q c 9 s, 4 c, 2 d
Georgia . . . K c J c, 9 c, 5 h, 4 d
Hermione . . . J o k, 8 s, 8 d, 6 d, 6 s
Harry . . . **A c, A h, J o k, K d, K s**
Luna . . . A d, J d, J h, 3 h, 3 s
Padma . . . Q h, J s, 9 d, 7 c, 3 d
Irena . . . A s, K h, Q d, 10s, 2 s
Sudipta . . . **10d, 10c, 5 d, 2 h, 2 c**
Parvati . . . **10h, 9 h, 8 h, 7 h, 4 h**
Gin . . . Q s, Q c, 4 c, 4 d, 2 d
Georgia . . . K c, 9 s, 8 c, 4 s, 3 c
Hermione . . . **J o k, 8 s, 8 d, 6 d, 6 s**

"Drat!" Padma said, as Georgia's King high beat her Queen.

"I know how you feel," Hermione said.

"I'm going to feel chillier than you," Padma reminded Hermione, shrugging off her vest. Georgia's eyes widened. Everyone could see her libido do her thinking.

"None of that!" Harry said. "I won!"

"Kissing anywhere permitted, as long as both agree!" Gin shouted.

"No!" Harry and Hermione commanded. "This is NOT going to become an orgy!" Hermione added.

Blushing, they all agreed.

Luna . . . 6 h, 6 s discarded K d, 5 s, 3 s
Padma . . . 10c, 9 d, 8 s, 7 h 5 d
Irena . . . K s, Q d 8 c, 5 c, 4 h
Sudipta . . . 7 s, 7 d, J o k 10s, 4 s
Parvati . . . A s J c, 10c, 3 d, 2 s
Gin . . . A d, K h 10h, 9 s, 2 h
Georgia . . . 9 h, 9 c J d, 7 c, 4 c
Hermione . . . A c J s, 5 h, 4 d, 2 c
Harry . . . 3 c, 3 h Q h, 8 h, 2 d
Luna . . . **J c, J d, 6 h, 6 s, 5 h**
Padma . . . **10c, 9 d, 8 s, 7 h, 4 c**

Irena . . K s, Q d, Q s, 8 h, 8 d
 Sudipta . 7 s, 7 d, 7 c, Jok, 6 d
 Parvati . A s, A s, Q h, 10d, 9 s
 Gin . . . A d, K h, Q c, 10s, 3 d
 Georgia . K c, 9 h, 9 c, 6 c, 4 s
 Hermione. Jok, A c, K d, 8 c, 2 s
 Harry . . 10h, 5 c, 3 c, 3 h, 2 d

Padma sighed, and went down to the buff. "Oh, you completely depilate, just like Parvati!" Hermione said, then blushed.

"Doesn't every girl by their Fourth year?" Gin asked. "It's been the style here for a couple of years."

"Hermione doesn't," Parvati teased. "Bushy at both ends."

"I didn't need to know that," Harry complained.

"We'll let these girls do whatever they like," Luna assured Hermione, "we'll stay natural."

"Well. . . ." Hermione prevaricated.

"Unlike you, Hermione at least does do the basics," Padma teased Luna.

"Does it bother you, Harry?" Luna asked seriously, raising her arms and looking.

Harry blushed.

"I don't think I can trust most of these girls not to ravish me," Luna told Hermione. "Maybe you could take care of me? Then Harry can decide which her prefers."

Hermione's blush matched Harry's as she agreed.

Padma . . Q h, 10h, 9 h, 4 h. . . discarded 3 s
 Irena . . K s, J s, 7 s, 6 s. 3 d
 Sudipta . 8 c, 5 c, 4 c, 2 c. 7 d
 Parvati . K h 9 d, 8 s, 7 h, 3 c
 Gin . . . Jok. J h, J c Q c, 4 d
 Georgia . 6 c, 5 d, 4 s, 3 h. A h
 Hermione. A s, 10s, 5 s, 2 s. 8 d
 Harry . . A d, J d, 6 d, 2 d. 5 h
 Luna. . . K c, K d. 9 c, 6 h, 2 h
 Padma . . Q h, 10h, 9 h, 8 h, 4 h
 Irena . . K s, J s, 7 s, 6 s, 6 h
 Sudipta . 8 c, 5 c, 4 c, 2 c, 2 h
 Parvati . K h, 8 d, 8 s, 5 h, 3 d
 Gin . . . Jok. J h, J c, 7 h, 7 c
 Georgia . Jok, 6 c, 5 d, 4 s, 3 h
 Hermione. A s, Q c, 10s, 5 s, 2 s
 Harry . . A h, A d, J d, 6 d, 2 d
 Luna. . . A c, K c, K d, Q d, 3 s

"Oh, bother," Hermione said, slipping her bra off.

Irena . . 7 c, 7 s. discarded Q c, 10h, 6 c
 Sudipta . A h, A s. K s, 9 s, 5 d

Parvati . J h, 7 h, 4 h, 2 h. 6 d
 Gin . . . K h, K c. 10s, 8 c, 6 s
 Georgia . 8 s, 8 d. K d, 6 h, 4 d
 Hermione. A d Q d, 10c, 5 s, 2 c
 Harry . . Jok, Q h, 5 h, 3 h. 2 d
 Luna. . . Jok, 3 c, 3 s 9 c, 2 s
 Padma . . A c J s, 8 h, 5 c, 4 c
 Irena . . **7 c, 7 s**, 6 d, 5 c, 4 c
 Sudipta . **A h, A s**, J c, **9 c, 9 d**
 Parvati . **J h**, 8 c, 7 h, 4 h, 2 h
 Gin . . . **K s, K h, K c**, 6 c, 2 d
 Georgia . Q d, 10c, **8 s, 8 d**, 2 s
 Hermione. **A d**, J s, 10h, 4 s, 3 d
 Harry . . **Jok, Q h, 8 h, 5 h, 3 h**
 Luna. . . J d, **Jok, 3 c, 3 s**, 2 c
 Padma . . **A c**, Q c, 9 s, 7 d, 4 d

Parvati's blouse was long enough to cover her, as she took her bikini panties off. Hermione, looking at the hourglass, figured there was time for no more than six or seven more hands, and then took her turn kissing Harry.

Sudipta . 8 c, 7 s, 6 d, 5 d. . . discarded 3 c
 Parvati. Jok, K h, K s 7 h, 5 c
 Gin . . . A d, A h. K d, 7 d, 2 c
 Georgia . K c J d, 7 c, 6 h, 3 s
 Hermione. Jok, Q c, J c 4 d, 2 h
 Harry . . A s 10h, 8 s, 3 h, 2 d
 Luna. . . 8 h, 8 d. J s, 9 h, 4 s
 Padma . . A c 10d, 9 d, 3 d, 2 s
 Irena . . Q s, Q h. 10c, 6 c, 4 c

"You better lose this time, Potter," Padma tried to growl.

"Well, if YOU lose, you have to kiss all of us," Georgia said.

Everyone looked at Hermione. "Sounds fair, but on the lips or cheek!" Hermione warned.

Sudipta . **8 c, 7 s, 6 d, 5 d, 4 d**
 Parvati . **Jok, K h, K s**, 10h, 3 d
 Gin . . . **A d, A h**, K d, 7 d, 6 s
 Georgia . **K c**, 10d, 9 d, 7 c, 4 c
 Hermione. **Jok, Q c, Q d**, J c, 4 h
 Harry . . **A s**, 9 s, 6 c, 5 c, 2 s
 Luna. . . J s, **8 h, 8 d, 8 s**, 6 h
 Padma . . **A c**, J h, 4 s, 3 h, 2 d
 Irena . . **Q s, Q h**, 10c, 9 c, 2 h

"Guess I'm just lucky!" Harry said with a smile.

"Well, I didn't have to lose much," Georgia said, taking off her bra from under her blouse. Hermione looked puzzled, but let it go.

"You're just not that good a card player," Gin teased her adoptive sister.

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really!"

"Are you three times better?"

Gin blinked at that. "Huh?"

"You have four items, I have two. Loser goes down to one?"

"Deal!"

Parvati . K s, K d. discarded 10d, 8 c, 4 h
Gin . . . 10c, 10s, 7 d, 7 s. A d
Georgia . 6 c, 6 d. K c, J d, 9 d
Hermione. Jok, A c. J s, 5 s, 4 c
Harry . . J c, J h. Q c, 6 h, 5 s
Luna. . . A s, 7 c, 7 h Q d, 3 s
Padma . . 9 s, 9 c. 6 s, 5 d, 3 c
Irena . . Jok, Q s. 8 h, 4 s, 2 h
Sudipta . 8 s, 8 d. K h, Q h, 3 h

Georgia frowned.

Parvati . **K s, K d**, J s, 5 s, 3 c
Gin . . . **10c, 10s, 7 d, 7 s**, 4 c
Georgia . K c, **6 c, 6 d, 6 h**, 5 h
Hermione. **Jok, A c**, 9 d, 8 c, 5 d
Harry . . K h, Q h, **J c, J h**, 2 d
Luna. . . A s, **7 c, 7 h, 3 h, 3 s**
Padma . . A d, 10d, **9 s, 9 c**, 4 h
Irena . . **Jok, Q s**, 10h, 3 d, 2 c
Sudipta . A h, **8 s, 8 d**, 4 s, 2 h

"Lucky!" Gin hissed. She turned around and stripped off her clothes, putting her blouse back on. Sudipta took the opportunity to remove her blouse without anyone else watching, making her the second one nude.

"Alright," Gin said, "me, Luna, Irena, and Parvati. Winner keeps their one, other three lose their last piece." She leered at Georgia, "Unless you want to risk two?"

"No, I risk one!" she answered, pulling her pants off, making certain her blouse kept her covered.

"Hermione?"

"NO!"

"Harry?" Gin and Georgia asked together.

"No thanks!"

Let's go!"

Gin . . . A d, K s, Q c, J s. . . discarded 8 s
Georgia . Jok, A c, A s Q d, 3 d
Luna. . . 2 s, 2 d. 8 d, 7 s, 3 s
Irena . . 6 d, 6 s. K h, 7 c, 4 c
Parvati . A h J h, 5 d, 4 s, 2 h

Gin . . . A d, **K s, K c**, Q c, J s
 Georgia . **Jok, A c, A s**, J c, 9 h
 Luna. . . J d, 7 s, 3 s, **2 s, 2 d**
 Irena . . 10c, **6 d, 6 s, 6 c**, 2 c
 Parvati . **A h**, 8 h, 7 h, 5 s, 4 s

"Bugger me!" Gin spat.

"Later," Parvati told her. Gin, Luna, Irena, and Parvati went nude.

"We only have three or four more hands to go," Luna said to Harry. "Could you at least take off your jumper?"

"For you, sure," Harry agreed.

Georgia . K c, J c, 4 c, 2 c. . . discarded 7 d
 Hermione. Q h, J s, 10h, 9 h. 3 c
 Harry . . Jok, A s. 7 s, 5 h, 4 h
 Luna. . . A c, 6 h, 6 s K h, 10d
 Padma . . Q c J h, 10c, 5 d, 4 d
 Irena . . A h, 2 h, 2 s 9 s, 3 d
 Sudipta . 8 h, 8 c, 6 d, 6 c. 3 h
 Parvati . 5 s, 4 s, 3 s, 2 d. Q d
 Gin . . . 7 h, 7 c. Q s, 10s, 5 c

"Sure we can't tempt you with another side bet?" Georgia asked Hermione.

"Very."

Georgia . **K d, K c**, J c, 4 c, 2 c
 Hermione. Q h, **J d, J s**, 10h, 9 h
 Harry . . A s, **Jok, 10s, 10c**, 5 c
 Luna. . . A c, Q d, **6 h, 6 s**, 5 d
 Padma . . **Jok, A d**, K s, Q c, 8 d
 Irena . . A h, 9 c, 3 h, **2 h, 2 s**
 Sudipta . **8 h, 8 c**, 7 s, **6 d, 6 c**
 Parvati . **5 h, 5 s**, 4 s, 3 s, 2 d
 Gin . . . **7 h, 7 c, 4 h, 4 d**, 3 c

Irena kissed all the players after the others had kissed Harry, and Georgia set to deal.

Hermione. 6 c, 5 d, 4 s, 3 c. . . discarded 9 c
 Harry . . 8 h, 7 h, 6 h, 5 h. 2 c
 Luna. . . 9 s, 8 c, 7 c, 6 s, 5 s
 Padma . . A s, K h, Q d, J h. 4 c
 Irena . . Jok, 10d, 7 d, 6 d, 2 d
 Sudipta . A c, 3 d, 3 s 10c, 2 h
 Parvati . A h, K s, Q c, J c, 10s
 Gin . . . Q h, Q s, 8 d, 8 s. K d
 Georgia . A d, K c. 9 d, 7 s, 2 s

No one dared to dare Hermione. One look in her direction kept them all quiet.

Hermione. **9 d**, 6 c, 5 d, 4 s, 3 c
 Harry . . **9 h, 8 h, 7 h, 6 h, 5 h**
 Luna. . . **9 s, 8 c, 7 c, 6 s, 5 s**
 Padma . . A s, K h, Q d, **J h, J d**
 Irena . . **Jok, 10d, 7 d, 6 d, 2 d**

Sudipta . A c, 9 c, 4 h, 3 d, 3 s
Parvati . A h, K s, Q c, J c, 10s
Gin . . . Q h, Q s, 8 d, 8 s, 3 h
Georgia . A d, K c, J s, 7 s, 4 d

"You're all nasty, evil pervs, each and every one of you!" Hermione declared, crossing her arms over her vest-clad chest. "The room made me lose, 'cause you all want to see my . . . my. . ."

"Knockers?" Parvati teased.

"Fried eggs?" Gin teased next.

"Baps, maybe, but they're certain too large to be called fried eggs" Georgia offered.

"But too small for bristols, boozys, or jubblics," Gin countered.

"Mounds of perfection?" Sudipta suggested wistfully. Even Hermione laughed.

"Remember, we don't get to leave until we see 'em!" Gin reminded Hermione. "Let's see what you have!"

Harry turned around, and Hermione stripped off her under-shirt. After the round of kissing, they saw there was only time for one more hand.

"All or nothing?" Georgia asked. "We'll cut for high card?"

"You don't get it, do you?" Hermione asked. "The game is fixed!"

"Please, Hermione?" Sudipta asked. Hermione ignored her.

Luna leaned over, and talked to Hermione softly. "Yes, the game is 'fixed.' Think of the last hand as an experiment. Considering the Room, you are no more likely to loose either way."

Gin held out the deck of cards.

Hermione bit her lip, and agreed. She took a card. "Nine of diamonds," she said.

There was a quick shuffle, and Georgia picked, "The nine of diamonds!"

Harry turned around again, and as the two girls removed their last articles of clothing, the timer went off.

Hermione started getting dressed immediately. Luna came and again spoke softly in her ear, and Hermione calmed down.

"This was just a silly little game," Padma said. "We all can get dressed, and, for the most part, we can ignore what happened tonight. Alright?"

They all agreed, and dressed quickly.

Padma took Georgia's hand, and they left the room, each giving Harry a kiss on the way out. The other four did the same, leaving Harry, Luna, and Hermione.

Chapter 23

Summary of Chapter 22, for those who skipped over the 'R'-rated plot elephant. Only nine students are left to start the Yule holiday at Hogwarts: Harry, Hermione, Luna, Georgia, Gin, Irena, Padma, Parvati, and Sudipta. After a rousing snowball fight, Gin and Georgia convinced everyone to retire to the Room of Requirement to dry out and warm up. The pair hoped to entice the others into playing strip poker and engage in kissing games, so the Room planted the desires to do so in all the students (although it did not affect Harry, he was happy to go along). Much kissing and complete nudity (except for Harry) ensued. Georgia and Padma exit, each thinking the other as a possible partner. Parvati and Gin exit thinking of the other as a possible fling, although Parvati is already committed to Lavender and Seamus as slightly more than casual dates. Sudipta and Irena are too young to be anything other than excited by being allowed to join in the kissing. Harry and Luna exit having had fun, but still committed to each other.

Hermione exited confused, although for now she will bury her feelings and the experiences by blaming it all on Gin, Georgia, and the Room of Requirement. Other than on Christmas and Boxing Day, Hermione mostly will hide from the students involved, except Harry and Luna, embarrassed by her participation and her enjoyment of that participation. She will write Dumbledore a very non-explicit report on why the Room should be made off-limits if possible.

We pick up the story that Sunday evening, December 22, after a very quiet dinner.

"What are everyone's plans?" Hermione asked. As one of the only two remaining prefects, she felt compelled to ask. Since there were so few of them, most of the staff except for Dumbledore, Lupin, Zoric (and his wife), Pomfrey, and Sinistra were all gone for the holiday. They also had permission to sleep in which ever of the three Houses they liked, so long as it was in the girls' dorms, and Harry slept in his room. Harry had promised not to sleep in the girls' dorms, and they had all promised not to sleep in the boys'. Dumbledore had seen the evasions, but had decided to say nothing.

Sudipta and Irena saw the serious looks on everyone's faces, and were a bit puzzled by them. Deciding that everyone had gone too far that afternoon, and afraid they might catch part of the blame, they announced they would be in their room, and they hurried away.

Padma held out her hand to Georgia, who took it. "We'll be in Ravenclaw, after we get Georgia's toothbrush and such."

Georgia flushed, put her arm around Padma, and the two moved off. Parvati smiled with joy at her sister's happiness.

"Parvati?" Gin asked.

"Of course," Parvati said. "Let's go get my toothbrush . . . and such."

Hermione gave a mighty sigh as the pair moved off. "I never thought of us . . . as them, well, as being. . . ."

"Bisexual?" Luna asked.

"Yes," Hermione confessed. "I mean, I've shared a room with Parvati and Lavender for over five years, and I never knew. . . ."

"I am under the impression that they only became . . . really intimate this past summer," Luna told her friend.

"Oh . . . that does make me feel a little better," Hermione admitted. She suddenly looked lost. Professor McGonagall would only be present for Christmas. Everyone else was a couple, or at least a couple of friends. What could she do, besides study and translate the manuscripts they had found?

"I think you need to come with us," Luna said firmly.

Hermione, seeing the still-lusty look on Harry's face, declined.

"Harry has had more than enough kissing for one day, and has seen far too much skin other than ours," Luna said even more firmly. "Come along. If you promise not to tell anyone where it is, I'll show you Harry's and my hide-away. Harry, go ask Dobby for a large pot of green tea and then meet us there."

Knowing that Luna in a firm mood was not to be denied, they complied.

As she laid down to sleep that night, Hermione had to admit that it had been an exhausting but enjoyable day. She also had to admit that she had really enjoyed the evening even more. She had read while sitting on a very comfortable sofa, while Luna had done the same sitting next to her for part of the evening. Harry had finished off his Muggle Studies written work, and then, to Hermione's surprise and embarrassed delight, he'd given them both foot massages. While she was missing Ron, she was glad he wasn't there to wonder why the three of them smelled like lavender.

Harry had then snuggled in-between the two most important people in his life, and joined them in reading until after 10:00. It had been an intimate, and innocent, evening. Hermione could not imagine being truly sexually active with any woman, or any man other than Ron, and him only far in the distant future. She had accurately assessed Ron; he was anxious to start a sexual relationship, he saw each step as a quick stop on the path to sex with her, and that as a stop to marriage and a traditional family life, with Hermione as homemaker. Hermione was trying to train Ron to think of her in other terms, but she was getting tired of fighting with him about it.

No, she was determined NOT to let Ron lead her into a premature sexual relationship, no matter how lonely she felt. But that shared night on the sofa made her feel like part of a true family again, and so it was a lovely Christmas present. She said goodnight to Luna, who was sleeping in Lavender's bed, and fell asleep.

Monday, December 23, 1996

Hermione awoke to the dazzling brightness of a sunny day reflected off of snow. Although it was early, Luna was already gone.

Coming down to the common room fifteen minutes later, Hermione found Luna and Harry sleeping together on the largest sofa, which they had moved near the fire. Luna woke up as Hermione walked into the room, and Harry woke up a few minutes later. They hurriedly dressed, and they trio went down to breakfast.

Tomas and Mona Zoric were the only two people already at breakfast. "Everyone else sleeping in late?" Zoric asked.

"Probably," Harry said.

"Irena and Sudipta were the only other ones sleeping in Gryffindor," Hermione said.

"And what are your plans for the holiday after Boxing Day?" Mona asked Hermione. Since the teen had lost her entire immediate family, Mona was worried about her.

"I have a large number of old manuscripts to go over," Hermione answered. "Not for assignments, but for fun. After Boxing Day, I'll do my school work. Between the Second and the Fifth, I'll work out coaching sessions for the Gryffindor Fifth and Seventh years."

"So you at least scheduled three days off? I suppose that's not too bad, for you," Mona gently teased.

Hermione forced a polite smile at the teasing, ate a small breakfast, and left.

"And what about you two?" Mona asked.

"I'll tutor Luna in Charms and Defense today and tomorrow," Harry said.

"Gin, Georgia, and I will work on Transfiguration tomorrow afternoon as well," Luna added.

"Sounds like a plan," Mona said.

Very little was seen of Padma and Georgia, but what little was seen confirmed they were now a couple. Christmas Eve, all nine slept in Gryffindor. Harry slept in his own room, while Gin slept in the First year's dorm with Sudipta and Irena, her fling with Parvati already over. Luna slept in Lavender's bed, while of course Parvati and Hermione slept in their own. Padma and Georgia, hoping she would forgive them, slept in Ginny Weasley's bed. The group spent the evening decorating a small Christmas tree and singing Christmas carols.

Christmas, 1996

Harry woke up feeling warmer than he usually did in the winter. He realized why when Luna blew gently in his ear.

"Good morning, beloved," she said. Luna kissed him gently. "That was one present; everyone is waiting downstairs for you so we can open more."

Harry had to detour to the lavatory, but was still downstairs in five minutes. The eight girls were sitting near the tree, and a fair number of presents awaited them. After breakfast, they would go to the Zoric's suite of rooms to open more.

"Harry, why don't you be Father Christmas and pass out the gifts?" Luna suggested. He was happy to do so.

Harry received a tin of treacle fudge from Hagrid that actually looked edible (his cooking and baking had improved since his magic had, with help from Madam Maxime); a small foe glass from Lupin, Tonks, and Moody; a box of fireworks from the twins; a Weasley jumper; a Chudley Canons hat from Ron; a small jar of homemade salve (good for minor injuries from Quidditch) from Neville and Ginny; a pair of hand-made mis-matched socks from Dobby (which somehow matched his violet Weasley jumper); a book on Muggle history from Hermione; and a magical journal and a bottle of her favorite massaging oil from Luna. The Patil twins, not knowing what else to buy Harry, had given him a box of chocolate frogs. Gin and Georgia had done the same. He also received a card from Dudley and Aunt Petunia, which is what Harry had sent them, via Professor Zoric's office in Muggle London.

Harry had of course sent Dobby socks. He had given the Patils, Georgia, and Irena silk scarves and sent one to Ginny as well. He had sent Ron a Chudley Canon team jacket and given Gin a hat for her favorite Quidditch team, the Magpies.

Besides the card, Harry had managed to post a Muggle-style letter to the Dursleys. They had sent back (all at Harry's expense, of course) boxes of interesting Muggle items. There was a box of Muggle novelty items, which of course had gone to the twins. Mr. Weasley got a set of Muggle DIY books. Luna had helped him pick out a set of spices which were in fairly common use in the Muggle world but were still seen as fairly rare in the magical one, and sent those to Mrs. Weasley.

Hermione was always difficult to buy for. Harry arranged a mail drop for her (as well as one for himself), making it easier for both of them to receive items by mail from the Muggle world without having to bother the people in the detective agency. He also arranged accounts for her at two well-known Muggle bookstores.

Harry had thought long and hard about Luna's gift. He made certain that it was the last gift they opened before the group went down for breakfast.

After she opened it, all the other seven girls had the same reaction -- a long, wishful, romantic sigh.

It was a combination bracelet and ring. It was in British red gold, and the bracelet connected to the ring via two fine chains. The ring had a small emerald, and the bracelet had three smaller emeralds and two small diamonds.

"It's beautiful," Parvati said.

Gin's comment was "I'm surprised you picked it out . . . ow!" Georgia had slapped her lightly on the back of the head.

"I did pick it out," Harry said with dignity. "Do you like it?" he anxiously asked Luna. Hermione had just finished putting it on for her.

"It's exquisite," Luna said.

Breakfast was better attended than the previous few days, as Snape, McGonagall, and Flitwick had returned, Snape looking like he had spent some time with the Death Eaters (which he had; it was always a psychological strain, especially since he would have to rejoin them on the 28th).

After the late breakfast, Zoric insisted everyone come back to his suite for more presents and Yule cheer until the afternoon feast at 1:30. It took a little persuasion, but even Snape finally agreed.

The DA officers had taken up a small collection, and bought a large amount of wool thread in various colors. Dobby had used half and knitted Dumbledore eighteen individual socks -- all the same size but each one different. (The other half was his payment.) Snape had been shocked to be handed a present as well. The auror potions class had taken up a collection (although most of the money came from Harry, Ernie, and Lisa) and bought Snape a set of small platinum measuring spoons (platinum being even more non-reactive to magic than gold in most cases) and a set of special non-reactive glass measuring beakers. Snape's thanks had been unpracticed, but as sincere as Dumbledore's.

Most of the presents had been from the Zorics to their three 'official' children, and were mostly clothes. The Patils had received some clothes as well, while Hermione was given a book on Native American symbols and Harry another book on Muggle history.

Luna opened her presents from her father with the Zorics. Professor McGonagall had given Hermione a large box, with information of her magical family connections. In all, everyone at Hogwarts had a wonderful Christmas morning, although everyone agreed that Luna's present from Harry was the best. Even Snape admitted it was tasteful.

On the way back to the great hall for the feast, however, Hermione brought a dose of reality in, asking Professor Dumbledore to arrange a meeting on the 27th for himself, Snape, Lupin, Zoric, Harry, and herself. He quietly agreed.

After the feast, Harry was granted permission to set off the Weasley Rockets. Dusk comes early in northern Scotland, and it wasn't long before the twilight and then evening sky was lit up.

The students all retired back to the Gryffindor common room, where they played exploding snap and gob stones, and after a light dinner of soups, they went to bed 'camp out' style, in

plush sleeping bags on the common room floor. If Luna and Harry, and Padma and Georgia, shared sleeping bags, no one commented on it.

Thursday, December 26, 1996

The next morning, the Zorics and Patils portkeyed to the Adriatic. Harry harnessed one of the coaches, and he, Luna, Hermione, and McGonagall went into Hogsmeade in the late morning. Hermione and McGonagall flooed to the Burrow, while Mr. Lovegood flooed to the Three Broomsticks. A little after 3:00, they made the return journey.

Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon and evening making preparations for her presentation the following morning. Harry knew what it was about (and Luna had some small idea), and they decided to let Hermione deal with it as she thought fit. They did force her to eat a heartier supper than her stomach was inclined to desire at that point, but they made certain she knew she was not alone. That night, as Harry and Luna fell asleep cuddled on the large sofa, Hermione fell asleep next to them in a very comfy chair, Crookshanks providing a little extra warmth and affection.

Friday, December 27, 1996

The meeting Hermione had asked for, with herself, Harry, Dumbledore, Zoric, Remus, and Snape, occurred after lunch.

"You have the floor, Miss Granger," Dumbledore told her.

"Professor Snape, do you know if Pansy and Draco participated in the Wedding Night Blood Ritual?" Hermione asked.

"Of course they did," Snape said with something of a sneer. "Whatever else the pair might have done, Pansy would have remained a virgin for just that very purpose."

"What does it do?" Harry asked.

"That new requirement from the Ministry is certainly necessary! Blood from the maidenhead and secretions from her vagina, mixed with the semen of the husband, are combined in a potion," Snape explained. "It must be done within thirty-six hours of their bonding vows. Taken approximately one week before ovulation, along with an exchange of blood ritual, the

wife will conceive a male child. The potion should make between two to four doses, although it only lasts two years."

"And did Pansy take that potion to conceive? The rumor she that is she pregnant is true?" Hermione asked.

"Actually," Snape answered, "she did, probably in late November. Didn't Potter inform you?"

Hermione looked very upset and worried. "Professor Dumbledore, did you know Harry discovered a secret room behind the DA Officers' Room?"

"I did, soon after he discovered it," Dumbledore answered. "I hadn't known it was there. What was inside it?"

"Books, all hand-copied, separated out by a librarian in the late 1500s, as well as some manuscripts."

"Dark magic?" Snape demanded.

"Not as such," Hermione answered. "More like books that describe Dark arts rituals, their purpose, requirements, and so on, without giving enough of the actual details that would allow them to be performed."

"So, how to recognize them, but not how to do them?" Zoric asked.

"Exactly," Hermione agreed. "And there is one Dark ritual I'm very afraid might be playing out now, called the Sweet Sacrifice, a Phoenician Dark ritual described by a Roman sorcerer of the early Empire, quoting Carthaginian and New Carthaginian sources. The codex we have was copied sometime in the late Thirteen hundreds."

"What does it do, and what are the requirements?" Lupin asked.

"It needs two Pure-bloods, male and female virgin, of at least five generations."

"Both fit, although just barely, in Pansy's case," Snape remarked.

"They must freely conceive a male child, through the Blood-ritual, and the woman must freely donate a measure of blood, about one and a half pints, I believe, and they must freely donate a full dose of the Marriage Night Potion. The husband must then donate half the amount of blood his wife had."

They all nodded their understanding. "The wizard desiring to do the ritual must create a potion, using an equal measure of his own blood to the woman's, and his own semen equal in volume to the Marriage Night Potion. There is a fairly extensive ingredient list beyond that. . ."

"And?" Harry prompted, knowing Hermione was having difficulty going on.

"It takes some four full moons to brew, but it will last up to the end of the pregnancy. The wizard then drinks a third of the potion. The rest does NOT have to be voluntary. The woman will then be eviscerated before giving birth. The fetus will also be disemboweled. The

placenta, fetus' testicles, and part of the fetus' and mother's livers, adrenal glands, and spleens, and one of the mother ovaries, are then shredded and added to the potion. The wizard then drinks half. While that is going on, the baby and mother are being roasted alive, and the wizard must live on only their flesh and wine for 10 days. Then the wizard finishes the potion, which has been steeping since the murders."

The group stared at Hermione, appalled. "You mean," Harry, looking very queasy now that he knew the full details, finally said, "they're going to gut and roast Pansy, and her baby, alive?" Harry looked even closer to vomiting.

"And then Voldemort will eat her," Hermione said.

"And the purpose?" Snape asked.

"At least eighty years of total invulnerability to magical attacks," Hermione answered.

"And the older the fetus, the more powerful the potion?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione said. "It's most powerful once the contractions begin."

"Then we know his likely target date," Snape said.

"Around July Thirty-first," Harry agreed.

"Do you have the list of ingredients?" Snape asked.

Hermione opened her book bag, and then frowned. "I would have sworn I put it in here."

"What did it look like?" Harry asked.

"A Muggle blue cardboard report cover," Hermione answered.

"You left it on the table in the Officer's room," Harry told her.

"Could you go get that list, Miss Granger?" Snape asked.

"Yes, Professor." She left the room.

"You removed it?" Snape asked Harry.

"Yes, sir. I knew we'd have to talk about . . . options," Harry answered.

"You understand them?"

"Hermione won't like any of the alternatives to the obvious," Harry said to Snape.

"True, but you know what might have to be done," Snape replied.

"Won't like what?" Lupin asked. "What must be done?"

"It is the last resort, but it must be planned on," Zoric agreed.

"What!" Dumbledore demanded.

"It would be best to get Pansy away," Harry said. "Barring that, we must either abort the fetus or kill Pansy. If we don't achieve one of them, we've lost."

Dumbledore and Remus stared at the other three.

"Do you think young Malfoy knows?" Zoric asked.

"Possibly, but that would be far from certain," Snape mused. "Draco never did much more than tolerate and use her. However, I do not believe, even if he knows, that Draco would look forward to her death."

"Especially if he has to witness it," Harry sniped.

"What does that mean?" Snape demanded.

"Draco never had a problem hurting people that I ever saw," Harry retorted, "but he always shied away from other people's blood on the Quidditch pitch. If he knows Pansy is going to die, and even if his unborn son is going to die, he might be able to shrug it away. If he can actually conceptualize the ordeal, I think he might be willing to try and save them."

"Oh? And how do I manage to accomplish that!"

"Take a look at the way Voldemort's court is run," Zoric suggested. "I'm guessing they eat a lot of meat, and drink a lot."

"They do," Snape admitted, his lip curling a bit at their foolishness. "They're getting fat and lazy. Even the Dark Lord."

"Considering the sadism level of some of His followers, a few probably enjoying butchering the animals. As far that goes, someone might even be practicing on sheep or pigs," Zoric pointed out.

"A squealing, bleeding pig or piglet might give Draco a good jolt in the arse," Remus agreed.

"Miss Granger is returning," Dumbledore warned.

Hermione handed Snape the list, giving Harry a dirty look as she did so.

"I have not been asked for the rarer ingredients, but several of others could be getting them," Snape mused. "None are that terribly difficult to get, considering the people He has at his disposal. They are more a matter of expense. None are highly restricted, as you probably saw for yourself. I did see a gold cauldron this size right after the marriage, and wondered why it had been brought."

"So you believe it is likely Voldemort is brewing this abomination?" Dumbledore asked.

"It clarifies a number of questions I had," Snape admitted. "I shall have to be very careful, but I need to talk with Draco."

"What can we even offer him?" Hermione asked.

"What do you mean, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked.

"He and Pansy murdered two people. We can't simply let them go unpunished," she reminded the men. "On the other hand, we can't threaten them with any sort of capital punishment, or even as severe a punishment as they would deserve by any standard, because I don't think Draco would help save Pansy under those circumstances."

"You might be correct," Snape admitted.

"We can't hide them here, away from the Ministry," Zoric said, "at least not for very long."

"I shall be meeting with the Minister privately Friday," Dumbledore told the group. "I shall breach the subject then. I must state firmly that no one know else about this." He looked at Harry. "DOES anyone else know?"

"Luna does," Harry told the Headmaster. Harry turned to Hermione. "Did Padma help translate this?"

Hermione merely shook her head. "Just Luna."

"Then we leave it at this, unless Professor Snape has a chance to broach the subject to Mister Malfoy before I can with the Minister."

"I agree," Snape said. "I won't have many chances."

"There is just one more thing," Hermione broke in before anyone could think of leaving.

"And what is that, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore inquired.

"This particular manuscript is a collection of twenty-seven blood and/or flesh potion ceremonies, all of them vile, although this is by far the worst so far as . . . the ingredients go. Eighteen are noted to be moderately to very successful, including, I might add, the one that Vol, err, Riddle used to restore a body for himself. Three are noted as weaker than promised, while three are nearly worthless."

"And the other three? Of which I gather the ceremony in question is one?" Snape demanded.

"They are three of the nine that require full human sacrifice. All of these three have the notation, that there is no evidence they have been tried. There are other notes, in Celtiberian I might add, which seem to have been in the original source, and which I don't believe the copiest understood. The only notation for this ceremony was 'handed down from the Old Times, certainly not tried since the fall of the African Baal.'"

"Which would mean what, the fall of Carthage in One forty-six BC?" Zoric asked.

"Probably," Hermione said. "There is no way to know if this would actually work or not."

"How thick was the dust in that room?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione looked puzzled. "Would you have thought it laid undisturbed for four hundred years or more? Or more like . . . fifty?" Dumbledore pressed.

Hermione closed her eyes. "The dust was laying very uneven on the different parts of the room. It was as if some areas were disturbed, and instead of a real cleaning, the dust was just shifted."

"As if by someone who had a very imperfect knowledge of cleaning spells," Snape said. "Such as a Muggle-raised boy who took the N.E.W.T. Charms class, rather than Household Charms."

"Would Riddle have had access?" Harry asked.

"The room used to be the Prefect's sitting room, but it was so rarely used, Dippet closed it in the late Forties," Dumbledore said. "Tom might have had access to the room. But he would not have tried to replicate the potion just from that list of ingredients." The list of the final potion ingredients were given, but not most of the quantities.

Snape looked at the list again. "Nonsense, Headmaster. There are some forty-two ingredients where the quantity is not specified. I can tell you approximately what thirty of them should be. He does not have to have the complete potion list; although he would need more than just this."

"If there's a fuller set of instructions, he might have found them in the twenty years he was turning himself from Riddle into the Dark Lord," Harry said. "He came back physically changed, having gone through rituals and worse. Those people might have known this as well."

"True," Dumbledore agreed.

Chapter 24

That night, Hermione took Luna off to the side and explained the events of the afternoon. Luna really hadn't helped translate that particular manuscript, but Harry and Hermione had both decided on the spot to include her in the information loop. They both knew they would need to talk about it with her, if they had any chance of living with the knowledge.

Luna was, of course, aghast. "You mean, not just kill and eat them, but roast them ALIVE?" Luna looked ill at the very concepts.

Hermione could only nod.

"I don't see how anyone could be that cruel," Luna said, her eyes starting to glisten from just the thought of such evil. "I mean, I don't doubt they're planning on doing this; I just have a difficult time believing how cruel people can be. It seems so . . . inhuman."

"I know," Hermione said.

"It makes you wonder if the species deserves anything more than a short, unhappy life."

That surprised Hermione; it seemed out of character for Luna.

"Sorry," Luna said, picking up on Hermione's concern immediately. "Until last year, I of course knew there was evil in this world, but about the worst I had ever actually seen were things like people hiding my possessions and Professor Snape yelling at us." She placed her hands on her face, her chin resting on the heels of her hands, remembering. "Umbridge, the Inquisitorial Squad, all the terrible things at the Ministry . . . I almost lost Ginny and Ronald. We almost lost you, Harry, and Neville. We did lose Sirius Black. Harry hearing that awful prophecy, and losing much of his faith for a time. Our cottage burning down. All the murders, especially you losing practically your entire family. That awful Saturday in Hogsmeade." She started crying gently. "This life really doesn't make sense anymore."

Hermione sat next to Luna, and hugged her. "It's not all bad, is it?" she asked softly.

"No," Luna admitted, "of course not."

"Tell me the good things that happened to you in the last fifteen months," Hermione requested.

"Well, Ginny and I became close again, even more than we were as children. I made friends with all of you. . . ."

"And Harry," Hermione reminded her.

"And Harry," Luna admitted, a small smile crossing her still-teary face.

"What else is bothering you?"

"I've been reading ahead in Muggle Studies and History of Magic," Luna admitted. "Twentieth century genocides." She looked up. "We're really no better than the Muggles, are we?"

"We're all human," Hermione answered simply. "We're capable of good and evil. There seems to be a balance between them in this life, although stupidity certainly makes evil look worse than it actually is." She looked at Luna. "Did you really think we were better?"

"I didn't really know until last year how evil any of us were," Luna said. "And now. . . ."

Hermione cut to the heart of the problem. "You're worried about Harry, aren't you?"

"He's trying so hard, and he is so amazingly powerful, but he doesn't have to just defeat Voldemort. I know he can defeat Voldemort. He has to kill Voldemort." She sighed. "I don't know if he can kill anyone on purpose. And if he does, I really think something inside him will die. Harry will either die, or what makes Harry so wonderful will either die, or be terribly scarred."

"I have a difficult time believing Harry can kill anyone either," Hermione admitted.

"That's just what I said," Luna said. "He probably can't. Then he'll be dead. And if he does . . . kill, then he may be partially dead inside." She started crying again. "How can we even pretend there is any justice in this world, when Harry has to plan on killing someone, even someone as evil as Voldemort?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "It all comes down to faith. If we have it, we can make it through this life, and hopefully into the next. Without it, we either turn to selfishness or evil, or run around in a circle of existential angst until we drive ourselves into depression or insanity."

The two sat in close, if depressed, silence for several minutes.

"We should think about something else," Hermione finally said, turning to Luna and drying her tears with her handkerchief.

"Like what?" Luna asked, sniffled, allowing Hermione to clean her up.

Hermione pulled out the now-somewhat worn pamphlet Why it's Important for Witches to Wait. "Were you taught all this stuff? And is it real, or just the usual nonsense adults try on teens? I can't be certain." she asked, handing it to Luna.

Luna blew her nose and read through the little booklet quickly, a smile slowly starting to come to her face. "You didn't read this before?" Luna asked.

"Why would I have?"

"All girls are given this near the end of the Second year . . . oh, of course! You were petrified."

"Oh."

"Do you know WHY having intercourse is so incredibly painful for Pure-blood witches the first time?" Luna asked. "They seem to have left that out, although we were told in the assembly. Of course, most of us born to the culture already knew that."

"The breaking of the hymen shouldn't be any where near that painful," Hermione protested, "at least not in most cases. This seems greatly exaggerated." She smiled. "Harry almost fainted when he read this last August!"

"It is that painful for most of us, because a spell is put on us when we are born that prevents it from being torn," Luna said simply.

"WHAT!"

"The blood of the breached maidenhead is very powerful, as you discovered in researching that evil potion ceremony. The mixture from the marriage night is used to help produce not just a male heir, but a magical male heir. Although its effectiveness as a pregnancy inducer falls off after two years, it does boost the chances of a magical child after that. It may also be used in aphrodisiacs for either men or women, not just the pair that produced it."

"But to reenforce the maidenhead to the point where penetration produces so much pain that . . ."

"As the pamphlet says, the bonding ceremony . . . makes penetration easier, they just should have added that it is because the ceremony breaks the charm," Luna pointed out. "In fact, there is a spell in the bonding ceremony that actually weakens in. There are several other spells that do the same thing, although you can't make the Marriage Night Potion if you use them without the bonding. I know three, and there are at least four more. Most of us know at least one."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Many normal girls have theirs weakened or torn long before regular sex."

"Ronald will understand," Luna said. "You could always talk to Professor McGonagall or Madam Pomfrey."

"No, that's alright. . . ." Hermione sighed. "I swear the magical world is as crazy as the Muggle, just in different ways."

"I won't argue with that." Luna looked at her friend. "You seemed upset with Harry earlier tonight. Why?"

"I think he took my report folder on the potion out of my bag, but I can't think why he would want to send me after it. He doesn't play stupid tricks on people."

"Oh," Luna said, happy this was the only problem, "that's simple. You're the only person I know who is more moralistic than Harry, if in slightly different ways."

"What does that mean?"

Luna's expression turned serious. "What if Draco is unwilling or unable to bring Pansy out of this situation?"

"I don't understand," Hermione stated.

"You do, you just don't want to admit the consequences," Luna replied. She decided to force the issue. "To what extreme will our side have to go to stop this ceremony, if we have to?"

Hermione looked very uncomfortable. "Well, we could abort the pregnancy. Snape could slip something into her food or something."

"Then they get her pregnant again, and Snape is either dead or unable to keep a watch on Voldemort. No, they'll have to kill Pansy." Luna looked upset, but not nearly as much as Hermione did as she thought it through.

"But . . . but . . ."

"There are no other obvious alternatives," Luna said unhappily. "We need to hope that Draco does the right thing."

"Great," Hermione grumbled. "Reduced to hoping Malfoy does the right thing. We're doomed."

The rest of the weekend went quietly. Hermione was coaching both Harry and Luna on their transfigurations. Luna needed to practice for her O.W.L.s, but the Sixth and Seventh year N.E.W.T. transfigurations were primarily self-and-other human transfigurations; Hermione was the only one in the class who was really able to do them fairly consistently. Luna was no help, as she saw through them too easily, even when Professor McGonagall did most of them (except for the animagus transfiguration).

Remus Lupin was still in the castle. So far, he had not had a really bad or painful transformation that year. While still awful-tasting, Snape had learned how to make minor adjustments in the wolfbane potion so that it matched Remus more efficiently. Any students looking for signs that the werewolf professor was dangerous merely saw him as overly nervous the few days approaching the full moon, and extra tired for the few days after. Professor Zoric had only had to fill in for a few of Lupin's earliest classes.

Remus helped Harry teach the two girls the disillusionment spells (these were Seventh year transfiguration and charms material) over the break. Harry also demonstrated some of the other techniques Zoric was teaching him. His invisibility spell impressed both Lupin and Hermione, although he merely looked a bit faded to Luna. He could also find someone under his invisibility cloak, much as Zoric and Dumbledore could. With practice, he would even be able to detect most people under disillusionment and invisibility spells.

Harry had also managed to master a very tricky 'overlook' spell -- it simply made people ignore your presence. Not only did Luna have a difficult time looking straight at Harry, it even worked on Lupin's more sensitive sense of smell.

Harry had tracked down Dobby, and given him a small job, which the elf was happy to perform for his beloved Harry Potter. With Dumbledore's permission, Harry, Luna, and Hermione did not go to dinner New Years Eve, but rather down to the landing. The bored house elves had gone all out, and set up a small dining table, replete with a number of small dishes with little delicacies that Luna and Hermione enjoyed but which were rarely if ever served at Hogwarts. Harry had consulted with Master Tomas before Christmas, and therefore had two splits of sparkling moscato available (sweet, for the tastes of teens, and with less than 1/2 the alcohol of champagne).

Hermione graciously excused herself from dessert, leaving the second bottle for her good friends to toast in the new year by themselves.

Saturday, January 4, 1997

Neville and the Weasleys returned Saturday morning. Ginny and Neville disappeared quickly, while Ron sought out Hermione. An agitated Ron approached Harry that evening, and asked if they could talk in private. Harry agreed, and they went to their dorm room.

"What's wrong, Ron?" Ron had been edgy and unhappy all afternoon and evening.

"Are Padma and Georgia . . . a couple?"

"They seemed to be," Harry agreed. "Does it bother you?"

"No," Ron said, a bit doubtfully.

"Alright," Harry pressed, "if that's not what's bothering you, what is? You didn't even sit next to Hermione at dinner."

Ron looked very uncomfortable, but after a few moments of silence, asked, "Is Hermione fooling around with someone?"

Harry was stunned. "What?"

Ron's ears went red, but he pressed on. "Is Hermione fooling around with someone else?"

"Like who?" Harry asked, incredulous.

Ron's jaw set. "Like you, or even you and Luna."

"YOU are a nutter," Harry stated firmly. "Yes, we care about Hermione. Yes, we worked on a DA project over the holidays; yes, we're all three worried about it and can't talk to you or anyone else about, on orders from Dumbledore and Zoric. I'm sorry if that means you feel cut off, but to accuse Hermione, Hermione of all people! of cheating on you, is ridiculous and you should know it! In fact, if it were anyone but you. . . ."

"You would WHAT?" Ron sneered, now really angry at his friend as well as life in general. "I could break you in half." He took a menacing step forward, looming nearly six inches taller than Harry. Harry looked Ron in the eye, and Ron was flung back onto his bed. Within the

castle, Harry was learning to control his magic without a wand, something Ron knew, even if he didn't know the reasons for it.

"We've both been training, Ron Weasley," Harry said coldly. "I know I could never beat you physically, but don't think I couldn't defend myself. And you are becoming a skilled wizard, but never think you can take me magically. Now, do we fight, or sulk, or do we talk this out?"

"I thought we are supposed to be friends, mates even," Harry went on when Ron said nothing. "I am certainly not going to choose between you and Hermione, because I care for you both, but I won't betray anything you want to talk about. So, for once, talk about what matters."

Ron sat up on his bed. A look of tremendous anger washed over his face, but then it drained away, replaced by shame. "I'm sorry, Harry," Ron said. "I don't know what's wrong with me, or what's wrong between me and Hermione. We were close last year, and then after we were both almost . . . killed, we just came together."

Ron stood and took off his shirt. Three of the scars from the brains were still visible on his upper arm and shoulder, and he rubbed an ointment on them. "Hermione's ribs are still tender from that hex. I still have nightmares from what the brains showed me, but I still don't understand them any better. I still have flashbacks to that night, just like you do, and I imagine the others do as well." Ron looked incredibly sad. "Hermione and I talked, really talked, when we were in the infirmary last June. We haven't been that close since."

He sat back on the bed, while Harry sat on his own bed, across from his friend. "I really care for her, Harry," Ron went on, "and I know she cares for me. But we really haven't become . . . closer once we got back to school. Except for that one night. . . ." He looked up at Harry. "Can we really talk about this?"

"I won't tell Hermione," Harry assured his friend.

"Okay, then . . . except for that one night she slept here, I've never seen Hermione without her top, let alone with less. That was the only night I could really touch her, really hold her. It's like we hit a nice, basic level, and we haven't moved on since then. Hermione likes to snog, and she's really good at it, but she's not even interested in doing that too often!"

Harry silently agreed with the assessment of Hermione's kissing skills. He thought that Hermione had been by far the best kisser of the eight girls he had played strip poker with, although kissing her deeply hadn't given him the spark that even his most casual kiss with Luna always did. Harry also knew he shouldn't mention that episode to Ron. He had seen a lot more of Hermione, more often, than Ron apparently had. Instead, he asked, "How far did you think you'd be by now?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know. A lot further than we ARE by now, that's for sure."

"Ron, please don't be offended, but one reason you're dating Hermione isn't because, since she's Muggle-born, she was never put under the Maiden's Charm, is it?" Luna had explained it to Harry fully the day before.

Ron flushed. "No, but I thought it might be a plus in the long term. And I figured she'd be at least interested in . . . the physical side as most of us." He looked Harry in the eye again. "How far have you and Luna gone?"

"Not much further than you and Hermione," Harry answered, flushing himself. Still, he couldn't leave it at that if he wanted Ron to open up. "We have done a few full-body massages," Harry offered, not about to reveal how 'complete' some of those massages had been.

"Ah," Ron said, "the reason why you smell like lavender so often."

"Exactly," Harry said. "We slept together. . . ."

"WHAT!"

"SLEPT, Ron, as in sleep, like you and Hermione did."

"Oh."

"So, we slept together a few times, clothed, over break." Harry gave Ron a dirty look. "If all you want from a girl is 'the old slap and tickle,' you probably don't want to be dating Hermione."

Ron again looked a bit shamed, but pressed on. "Is it too much to ask for a little real physical affection, Harry?"

"No," Harry agreed, "no, it's not. If this is really a problem, and it seems to be, you need to talk it over with Hermione. See how she feels; don't pressure her. In her own way, she's even more shy than the rest of us."

Ron looked offended. "I haven't pressed her once in all the months we've been seriously dating!"

"I know," Harry placated.

Ron gave a deep sigh and stood, putting his shirt back on. "I guess I need to find Hermione."

Harry sought Hermione's presence in the castle. "She should be in the Officers' room."

Ron nodded, grimly and picked up his old blazer.

"Good luck," Harry said. Ron turned to look at Harry, puzzled. "I want you both to be happy," Harry explained. "It would be nicest if you were happy together."

Ron managed a wan smile and left.

"This isn't likely to be good," Harry muttered to himself. Harry and Luna had seen that the snogging game had, if anything, made Hermione decide that the physical side of life was so seducing that she was likely to want to put it off until after Hogwarts, perhaps until she got her career started. Harry rushed off to the library, where Ginny and Luna were working with Gin and Georgia on a history project together. He briefed the pair as much as he could without betraying his conversation with Ron, and was back in the dorm room, reading a Charms assignment, long before a dejected Ron made it back into the room.

"What happened?" Harry asked sympathetically.

"We . . . Hermione said she wasn't ready to go further, and that if I was, we should. . . ." Ron plopped on the bed.

Harry walked over and stood next to Ron. "I'm really sorry, Ron," Harry said sincerely.

Ron gave Harry a very weak smile. "Thanks, I guess." He shrugged. "What can I say? Do you mind if I'm alone for a while?"

Harry gave his friend a twisted smile. "How could I, of all people, object? I **will** bug you in the morning if you're even half as mooney as I get."

"Thanks."

Harry turned to leave. He heard Ron sobbing quietly before he shut the door.

The next morning, Ron and Hermione merely nodded at each other, rather than kiss each other lightly on the cheek, as they had since they had faced the boggart together. All Sunday morning, there was a distance between them that had not existed since their Fourth year, but there didn't seem to be much tension between them, let alone any anger. It seemed both were more sad over the break-up than in any way upset.

The rest of the group took note, and by the end of breakfast, the other girls understood what had happened. None commented. Word was spread as the students trickled in from the winter holiday (not all the students came on the Hogwarts Express). By the March Monday morning, everyone seemed to reach an understanding of the situation, and Ron and Hermione led the Gryffindors into the great hall as they usually did.

Chapter 25

Tuesday, January 7, 1997

Draco Malfoy stalked through the ruins of the old abbey, with no particular aim or goal. He had much on his mind, and had had it there for nearly a week.

It was difficult to believe what Snape had told him. It was even more difficult not to.

Draco was not the type of teen to be introspective. Nor was he the type to be compassionate, sensitive, or anything except proud, complacent, and self-absorbed. His dealings with the Dark Lord and his minions, and his own father, over the previous eight months had certainly shaken his complacency, but it had not been totally eliminated, until now.

Donating a dose of the Marriage Night Potion once Pansy's pregnancy had been confirmed had not bothered Draco in the least. Ordering Pansy to donate blood had not bothered him either. Donating his own had cost him a tad more pain than the cut on his arm, but he had done it, confused by the lack of information.

Snape had given him the information.

Draco had not really slept since.

It was not that Draco cared much for Pansy. She had always been there for him, the most appropriate available female no more than two years older than him nor no more than four years younger. She had been his to use since the second half of their second year. There had been only one act forbidden, and since he had understood and agreed with the reason, that had been the one act he had refrained from. Pansy had yielded everything else he had demanded with joy.

What thirteen year old boy could resist that?

And how could he respect her, since he had never much liked her?

No, Draco Malfoy knew he did not love Pansy Malfoy. He knew, however, that she loved him. And he had developed a kind of affection for her over the previous three years.

This was why her fate bothered him. Could what Snape had told him possibly be true?

It was not that he put such an act past the Dark Lord, or his own father for that matter. It was not that Draco disapproved of murder, or even torture, being both a murderer and, in mild ways, a torturer, although he lacked the pure sadism that a number of the people surrounding him enjoyed. He did have trouble wrapping his imagination around the idea of cannibalism, let alone the live-cooking of the victim.

Loud laughing made Draco stop. It was Macnair and the two Crabbes. Draco looked, and saw that Goyle junior was there as well.

"What're we gonna butcher today?" Crabbe senior asked. Both Crabbes looked like they were eagerly awaiting the decision.

"Let's do the old sow," Macnair said. "We need to practice getting the piglets out and guttin' her without killing her or them."

"Why?" Crabbe junior asked.

Macnair and Crabbe senior rolled their eyes. They hadn't been told, but there was an obvious reason, even to them.

"You almost made it last time," Crabbe told his friend, ignoring the two young men. "You managed to partially bleed out the body, too. She shouldn't have to last long, just long enough."

"But no one will say how long," Macnair grumbled.

"Probably because no one is certain," Crabbe said in a hoarse whisper.

Young Crabbe looked puzzled; young Goyle looked worried. Looking up, Goyle and Malfoy looked in each other eyes. Goyle shook his head slightly, and Draco backed off slightly, out of sight.

"Go tell Goyle to bring the sow, boy!" Crabbe told his son. "Help him if he needs it."

Less than five minutes later, Draco heard the squealing sow. Its screams started soon after.

Although very intelligent, Draco did not have the most brilliant imagination. Never-the-less, it was very easy to imagine those screams as Pansy's, and the softer screams as his son's.

Draco did not have much of an appetite that evening.

Pansy was surprised that night when Draco came to bed and held her tightly, and actually made love to her, rather than his usual self-gratification inside her.

"Oh, Draco," she said, holding him afterwards, "I love you more than life itself."

"I know," Draco replied, realizing that this would indeed be the case, unless he did something.

Draco thought everything through on last time. Pansy and he had pledged themselves to act as one. Draco had few morals, but he did have a very rudimentary code of behavior. He couldn't just abandon his partner.

Pansy had given him everything he had ever asked from her; she had never complained about his sexually using her, and at times abusing her. She had accepted his taking the Dark Mark;

she had helped him plot against Potter and the Mudblood's spy squads. She had murdered with him. Despite her long-term jealousy of Tracy Davis, Pansy would never have struck out against her, let alone killed her, without Draco's desire to strike out against someone that day. He would have preferred killing Potter, the Mudblood, or any Weasley, but Blaise had been a satisfactory substitute. Draco had discovered Zabini was the one rallying some of the Slytherins against the Dark Lord, and himself, after all. Pansy had helped him. She had always helped him.

And she carried a Malfoy inside her belly.

Killing for a purpose, even revenge, made sense to Draco. Killing just for fun made little sense. Torturing for information or revenge made sense to Draco. Torturing for fun did not.

Slicing a girl's belly open and roasting her and her baby alive, just for a possible magical advantage, did not make sense to him either. After all, even Snape had to admit that the ceremony and potion might not work. There was no known record of the Sacrifice being performed, even in ancient Carthage or the other Phoenician cities.

Could Draco allow this to go on, when it might not even work?

Draco could see the power of the Dark Lord, but no longer saw Him as a path to political power for anyone. He had built a tremendous momentum for himself back in the Seventies and early Eighties, but Potter had accidently stopped him. Draco saw no signs of momentum now.

If he could be fairly certain that he could succeed in saving his wife and child, Draco decided, he would have no qualms of loyalty to hold him back.

But where could they go? Where could they hide?

There was only one safe place they could go that he knew of. Hogwarts.

Which meant accepting the rules of Dumbledore, and Potty.

Hogwarts, where he and Pansy were wanted for murder. Dumbledore would certainly not buy a claim of Imperius for either one of them. And the Ministry had already condemned them.

What would Dumbledore do to help if Draco didn't escape to Hogwarts with Pansy? (The idea of helping Pansy escape without his leaving to avoid any punishment did not occur to Draco.) If Snape knew, there was little doubt Dumbledore would at least have some idea of what was going on -- Draco had a much higher respect for Dumbledore's power than his father or the Dark Lord admitted to. Dumbledore wouldn't have Pansy killed; Draco was certain of that.

Dumbledore wouldn't; Potty wouldn't, and probably couldn't. Zoric would, and probably could kill them if the need arose, but only then. He had done more outrageous stunts in his career. And there was no place Draco knew of where they had any chance to be safe, other than Hogwarts.

So, his choices were clear. 1) Let Pansy suffer, possibly allowing the Dark Lord to triumph (which Draco was far from sure was a good idea). 2) Escape with Pansy to Hogwarts, and

hope they wouldn't be punished too much for the murders, and be under the protection, at least partially, of Harry Potter.

Pansy suddenly snuggled close to Draco. "Are you alright?" she asked softly.

"Just worried," Draco said.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"What would you do for me?" Draco asked in return.

"I've loved you; I've killed for you; I've followed you. What more could you ask?" she asked.

"Would you be humiliated for me? Would you love me if we were humiliated together? impoverished?" he asked, curious.

"Would we be together?" Pansy asked.

"Yes, if this happens, we would at least be together."

"I love you," Pansy said simply. "I killed with you; I was arrested with you. I would have been glad to spend the rest of my life in prison, even if you had somehow been free, as long as I could still see you and you stayed committed to me. I'll bear you as many children as you want. I don't care if we're as poor as those Weasleys." She paused. "I'd prefer not to be that poor, but if the choice includes you, I could even bear that."

"We'll never be THAT poor, even if we have twenty children," Draco assured her.

Pansy was not very smart, but she was far from stupid. Just average. A realization hit her. "Are they going to try and take our baby? For some ritual?"

"I think so," Draco said.

"I don't want to give him up," Pansy said, tears in her eyes. "I will, if you command me -- after all, we can have more -- but I really don't want to."

"Pansy," Draco said slowly, "the ceremony doesn't just sacrifice the fetus."

That took a few moments for Pansy to process. Then she clung to Draco, crying. "Do you . . . must I . . ." She looked up at Draco, although they really couldn't see each other well in the dark. "Shall I sacrifice myself for you, my love?"

"Would you really do that for me?" Draco asked, puzzled.

"Yes, my love."

"Why?" Draco asked, still puzzled.

"Don't you understand by now? I love you, Draco. You really do mean more to me than life."

Draco held her and gently stroked her hair. He suddenly realized something.

For the first time in his life, Draco Malfoy cared for someone other than himself. He wondered if it might even be love? "I don't know if I can fix this, but I'll try. We can't let on we know."

"I trust you, Draco. I know you can fix anything," she simpered.

Draco decided it was just affection, after all.

Friday, Valentine's Day, 1997

The spring term had progressed very calmly over the first five weeks. All four Quidditch teams practiced three times a week. Every Saturday, the Sixth Year Gryffindor Chocolate Club met, as did many other groups and associations. The Gryffindors Marched every Monday morning. The SDA still held practice on Monday evenings. Six mornings a week, over a third of the students went jogging (although they jogged inside the castle during the winter). The DA officers planned and worked out drills. The Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix sought information, and found little.

Classes proceeded with fewer problems and distractions than at any time since Harry's first year, and most of the students responded well (although there was still a fair amount of friction between Bellatrix Malfoy and her followers against Irena and Sudipta). Even Hermione was satisfied with her own progress, and the progress of those students she had a special interest in.

Harry had hoped that Hermione and Ron might come back together. Secretly, so had Hermione and Ron at first. Neither was willing to make the first move, however, and by the end of the second week of the term, each had given up on the other. Ron was flirting with a number of Fifth year girls (Gin Driver, and from Ravenclaw Merry Bishop, Deborah Smith, and Diana Sharp) by the end of January.

Hermione worked harder on her school work and the DA. Harry and Luna, and Neville and Ginny, made certain they kept her active in doing little social things.

The first night of the term, Dumbledore had announced a special Valentine's Weekend. Friday night would have a small feast and an exchange of cards and presents. Saturday would be a Hogsmeade day, and there would be an informal dance after dinner Saturday night for all students until 9:30.

Hermione had plunged into organizing the SDA for the Saturday in Hogsmeade. She had to make certain that couples were assigned patrols at the same time, but not on the same patrols. Since she was so willing to accommodate the first point, few made even token gestures of complaint about the second.

The great hall was decorated in pink balloons and multi-colored streamers that Friday and Saturday. Professor Flitwick had created a zone in a back corner where students could throw cards, small gifts, and even some preserved flowers. At 7:00 that Valentine's night, all would go and find their recipient.

As soon as the dinner was over that night, Hermione insisted on leaving. She had the feeling that Ron would be making the decision on who he was going to date, and she had no desire to actually see it. It would be difficult enough to deal with the result.

Going to her room, Hermione sat on her bed, dejected. Just as she had decided to go over the plans for Saturday one last time, a small pile of cards and candy appeared on her bed.

Harry, Luna, and Ginny had both sent her friendship cards and chocolate roses. Sudipta Patil, her crush still unrequited, had sent a card and a chocolate frog. A number of friends had sent her friendship cards as well.

And, she saw, her heart racing, there was a card from Ron.

Hermione opened it and read the message, *I will always be your friend, Ron*

Hermione stared at the card, and went to bed, crying softly.

Saturday, February 15, 1997

No one was particularly surprised that Ron and Gin Driver had become a couple the night before. Both seemed more interested in the 'flirting-snogging-petting' aspects of dating than the 'getting-to-really-know-you' aspects. Neither was looking for a partner, let alone a partner-for-life, and so they seemed well-matched.

Hermione stayed on alert the whole time the students were in Hogsmeade. She had improved communications between herself, the school, and the student patrols, but no incidents were reported. The few still-openly hostile Slytherins (all the remaining suspect students were in Slytherin) were either very quiet or, like Bellatrix Malfoy, too young to be allowed into town.

That evening, as the fairly successful dance wound down, Tomas Zoric approached Severus Snape, who was standing in a corner, where none could over-hear them.

"Severus."

"Tomas."

The two stood in silence for some minutes, watching the gyrations of the various students.

Finally, Snape spoke. "I must commend your apprentice," he said. "He's one of the few students not making a public fool of himself." Harry and Luna had 'danced' (or at least swayed in unison) to just three of the slower dances.

"They are both too shy to indulge in this type of dancing," Zoric said, adding with disapproval, "assuming that's what this is."

Snape gave a small sigh. "I believe we were about the last students who danced the more decorous styles of the past. Certainly not this . . . Muggle whirling."

"Muggles and wizards in the nineteenth century thought the waltz was even more scandalous," Zoric reminded his colleague.

"True," Snape admitted. "I really think Weasley and Driver will hurt themselves, if not their neighbors."

"Energetic, aren't they?"

"Very."

After a few more moments of watching, Zoric asked, "Any news on the special dinner?"

Snape almost winced, but still he answered. "I understand it is no longer a surprise dinner. The guest of honor would prefer to bypass the honor entirely."

"Understandable. And the other person concerned?"

"Would like to avoid it as well. However, there aren't many places they could afford to stay, where they could avoid any fuss."

"True," Zoric agreed. There weren't many places on earth Draco and Pansy would be welcome if Voldemort as well as the Ministry was after them.

"I expect to see them pass through, however," Snape added. Zoric merely nodded. Professor Sprout was coming towards them, and although she was completely trustworthy, she was not in the information loop on this issue.

"The Headmaster would like to see you both after the students are in their common rooms," she said, before moving on to break Ron and Gin from their passionate embrace for the just-started slow number.

"He must be back from the Ministry," Zoric informed Snape.

"He's been going there a lot. Maybe tonight we shall finally find out why."

Later that night, the four Sixth year Gryffindor boys sat on their beds, talking about the dance.

"I still think you and Ginny were dancing entirely too closely," Ron complained to Neville.

"It's been almost six months," Seamus complained. "Get over it, Weasley."

"This is none of your affair, err, business," Ron retort. "This is about Neville groping Ginny in public!"

"No one tried to make us move apart, other than you," Neville retorted. "McGonagall, Sprout, and even Snape walked past us without a word. How many times did they make you and Gin stop groping each other in the middle of the floor?"

"This isn't about me and Gin!"

"No," Seamus broke in, "it's about you having a double standard, and," he added, cutting Ron off, "since I have to hear about this damn near every day, that makes it at least partly my business!"

Ron sat on his bed in a huff.

"You didn't seem to be dancing with Parvati much," Harry commented to Seamus in the cold silence.

"No," Seamus admitted. "I like her, but Lavender and I have become more of a couple."

"I thought Lavender and Parvati were the couple," Ron said snidely.

"If they are, or were, it's really none of my business," Seamus said defiantly. "We're all going to stay close friends. . . ."

"Real close," Ron added.

"Look, Weasley, if you want to pick a fight, go some place else," Seamus retorted angrily. "I'm not interested!" Seamus went to bed and closed his bed curtains. Neville did the same.

"Do you want to yell at me, too?" Ron demanded of Harry.

"No, not especially," Harry replied. "You and Gin seem to know what you're doing, so I hope you're both happy together. And, since you seem to want my opinion, I don't know if Neville and Ginny are doing anything you should disapprove of or not, but they certainly weren't tonight."

"I guess not," Ron admitted. "But I don't like to see it."

"She doesn't like seeing you snog, either, but you don't hear her yelling about it," Neville's muffled voice said.

"Stuff it!"

Harry stood up, "Nox!" he called, extinguishing the candles. "It's late, and we still have to get up and jog. May I please ask that we all get some sleep?"

"Alright," Ron grumbled.

"Alright," Neville agreed.

"Alright," Seamus agreed, adding "after all we all have a lot of sweet kisses to remember in our dreams!"

Ron growled, but said nothing.

Tuesday, February 18, 1997

Draco Malfoy's eyes went wide. Crabbe, Crabbe junior, and Goyle were dragging a struggling, heavily pregnant, Muggle into the kitchen. He felt a presence behind him, and saw it was Gregory Goyle.

"You don't want to be here, Draco," he said, obviously in some sort of emotional distress.

"What?"

"Macnair will cast a silencing charm in a moment, and I have to go in there and help," Goyle said. "You must know by now what we're going to do, and why we're practicing."

"You've . . . you've done this. . . ."

"This will be the third one," Goyle said. "That wasn't roasted veal we had last Thursday."

Draco swallowed nervously. "Right. I'll let you get on with it." He paused before leaving. "You know I take Pansy on walks outside every morning? For her health? Father doesn't like us to go out alone. Maybe you can join us some mornings."

"If your father asks, I'll be glad to walk with you." Goyle disappeared through the kitchen door. As it opened and shut, the pleadings of the pregnant woman could be heard.

Draco hurried away.

Chapter 26

From Valentine's Day through the start of the short Easter Break, Hogwarts continued in its routine. Ron and Gin quickly earned the title of 'most overly affectionate couple.' So long as male/female couples did not take 'the last step' (and of course as long as no coercion was involved), no one was likely to interfere with any relationship at Hogwarts.

Hermione refused to talk to Ron, except on 'official' business, during that time.

Ginny and Neville were also one of Hogwarts' more openly affectionate couple, although not when Ron was nearby. Ron had little trouble criticizing Ginny for conduct he commended Gin for.

Other than that tension, as far as Harry could see life was going on much as it should around him. The terrible possibilities stayed far in the background, and, unknown to Harry, Dumbledore made certain they stayed there by making a certain few rumors reached the students. Harry's relationship with Luna was slowly continue to deepen. His lessons with Zoric and Lupin helped him feel stronger and more confident. His school lessons, even Potions, now seemed to bolster his abilities, not plague him with doubts. His jogging and work-outs made him stronger; his flying helped relax him.

There was one new addition to Harry's time: he also spent three half-hour sessions each of those weeks with Dumbledore, as the old man showed Harry some of the short-cuts he had learned over the many decades of his long life. This had worried Harry at first, but Dumbledore assured him that, barring the unforeseen, he planned on being around for a few more decades.

Harry was still uncertain of his opinion of and relationship with the aging Headmaster. Part of him admired and even loved the old man; and at times it was still obvious that Dumbledore still was trying to control Harry.

Still, so far as Harry was directly concerned, he hoped the hardest things on his immediate horizon were the final Quidditch games of the season in late April (Gryffindor had beaten Slytherin in late February, Hufflepuff had beaten Ravenclaw in mid-March) and the school exams in June. As it was, he was spending more time helping Luna, Ginny, Gin, and Georgia studying for their O.W.L.s than he was worrying about his own exams.

Snape had not been summonsed since the Sunday after Valentine's Day. The core group of Death Eaters were now being more secretive than ever. The fact that homeless, pregnant Muggles were disappearing from all over the country seemed to be a bad sign.

Easter Break
Saturday March 22 through Sunday March 30, 1997

As usual, most students were staying at school over the short holiday. Professors Dumbledore, Flitwick, and Zoric had finally been able to create an imitation dementor. SDA members formed groups and took turns facing it on Sunday afternoon and Monday.

The Fifth and Seventh years each engaged in four days of extensive study (Sunday through Wednesday, each Saturday they were to be allowed to go into Hogsmeade, with security provided by the SDA and staff), and were planning on using the rest of their break by taking one final rest before the final plunge before the big exams.

The auror potion class spent the Tuesday making a long, complicated potion in pairs. On the Wednesday morning, an impressed Snape agreed that the group, which had done the most complicated potions assigned, had all already earned their marks for the year. The two lowest that Snape posted that Thursday (Harry and Neville) still scored 91s.

Ron and Ginny were now not speaking to each other. Professor Sinistra had surprised five couples in the Astronomy classroom the first Friday of break. The classroom had six rows of seats in a semi-circle. The seats were on wide risers and the floor was somewhat padded. Long established custom, followed even by prefects like Hermione and Percy Weasley in his day, demanded that prefects ignore the classroom. Five couples could use it. The first couple would go to the far end of the back row, leaving a white handkerchief to mark their presence.

Sinistra had cleared out couples from using the observation platform atop the Astronomy Tower, and a number of nooks and crannies inside it, by the previous October. She had agreed to leave the classroom alone, in large part because of her own fond memories. The previous Monday morning, however, she had found a used condom in the classroom, hinting at the one activity which was over the unofficial line tolerated by even the most liberal members of the faculty.

One of the couples had been found that late Friday evening with seriously rumpled clothes. They had been docked 5 points per person. Ginny, who had been topless, and Neville, who had been literally caught with his pants down, were docked 10 points each and assigned separate detentions, along with two same-gendered couples who had been slightly further along. Ron and Gin, who had been caught in the act of sodomy, were docked 25 points each plus detentions. It would have gone harder on them, except that they admitted to using the condom for the same act the previous week.

The five couples were also ordered to spend the vacation week apart from each other. Ron made very certain he stayed well-away from Professor Zoric, who had been heard screaming for revenge on 'that red-haired despoiling pervert'. Both Ron and Gin were teased unmercifully, and would endure nasty jokes for some weeks, especially Ron.

Hermione told Ron she wouldn't speak to him until after the holiday was over.

The following Friday, Harry, Ginny, Luna, and Gin were supervising a group of First years flying. Had he been allowed to be near Gin, Ron would have joined them, but he was mostly hiding in his bed with the drapes shut, as he had for most of the holiday.

Harry had been having a good time, when he felt a disturbance in the magic of Hogwarts. Luna noticed immediately, and Gin and Ginny noticed a few seconds later.

"What's happened?" Luna asked.

"Someone portkeyed in near the Slytherin end of the castle grounds," Harry said. He turned to Gin, who accepted this as part of Harry's abilities as security prefect. "You stay here and get the Firsties down and off to lunch early after they get the brooms put away, okay?"

Gin nodded, and Harry told the flyers to come down and start putting their brooms away. He, Ginny, and Luna then moved off, carrying their brooms. Once out of the pitch, Harry turned to Ginny. "Fly up to the castle; alert any faculty along the way to Master Tomas' office if there are no students near by, but tell Master Tomas! Malfoy, Pansy, and Goyle are here. Go!"

Ginny flew off. Harry and Luna flew off to intercept the Slytherin trio, wands out.

"I never expected this," Goyle said for the third time.

Draco rolled his eyes and handed Goyle the old sock. "You can go back if you want. You should know how to reverse a used portkey, unless they keyed this for one use only."

"No, thanks! Prison is better than that place." The large young man shuddered. "You do NOT want to imagine what they had me doing."

"I have some idea, and you're right; we don't want to hear it!" Draco said, moving them to the castle wall.

"What are we waiting for?" Pansy demanded.

"We're wanted killers, Pansy. I doubt they would want us walking in and scaring the Firsties," Draco replied. 'Idiots! Why am I always surrounded by idiots?'

"Well, how long do we stand here?" she demanded.

"I'm sure the old man already knows we're here," Draco replied.

"I'm sure he does, too, but we were closer," Harry said from above them.

Looking up, Draco saw Potter and Lovegood, wands pointed at them.

"Going to stun us or kill us, Potty?"

"Since I can legally do either, perhaps you shouldn't tempt me," Harry retorted. "Goyle, put your hands down. Just don't make any sudden moves towards a pocket."

"Whatever you say," Goyle replied.

"We're here for sanctuary," Draco told Harry. "Not that you need to know even that."

"I know the whole story," Harry retorted. "I admit, I didn't know if you would have the guts or sense of responsibility, let alone the brains, to save her. Or perhaps I should say, save your son?"

Draco flushed. Potter indeed knew what was going on.

"I did expect, if you saved her, you'd manage to save yourself as well."

"Go to hell!" Draco snarled.

"Tut, tut," Harry teased. "Language. I wonder if you were officially expelled, or if I can dock points from Slytherin?"

"They were all officially expelled, Mister Potter," Snape drawled. "Come down here, you two."

Snape was standing there with Zoric and Flitwick. Harry could see Madam Pomfrey coming across the lawn.

"I expected you two some time ago," Snape told Draco. He turned to Goyle. "I was not expecting you."

"He moved our location three weeks ago," Draco answered. "It took a while to gauge where the wards would allow us to portkey. And, since we had to take walks with some third or even fourth person, it was easiest to go this way, but it took a while to arrange."

"Did you have to dispense with a fourth?" Zoric asked.

Draco nodded. "Crabbe went all the way over."

"He really enjoyed. . . ." Goyle started, but then, to everyone's shock, he broke down crying, collapsing on the ground.

"I don't know all of what he's seen, or been forced to do," Draco said simply, "but what I do know is pretty horrible."

Leaving Madam Pomfrey and Professor Flitwick to deal with Goyle, Harry, Luna, Zoric, and Snape escorted Draco and Pansy into the castle, via a rarely-opened back way.

"Well," Draco said to Pansy fifty minutes later, "at least it's a bit better than our last accommodations."

"But it's a prison," Pansy wailed.

"Look, here are your choices," Draco said brutally. "we can stay here and hope Potty and the old man defeat the Dark Lord, or we can go back. He'll roast you, and our son, alive! Choose!"

"I'm sorry, Draco."

"You are," Draco snarled, but then he admitted, "and so am I."

"Are you sure he's not here to undermine our defenses?" Harry asked.

"Do you, of all people, really find it so remarkable that anyone would risk saving their spouse and son?" Snape demanded. "Even a person you despise?"

"You tell me, sir, since I never knew him, would my grandfather have sacrificed my mother's and my life to please some megalomaniac?" Harry retorted. "But to answer your question honestly, no, even I don't find it totally implausible that Malfoy would save Pansy and their child, as long as he could also save himself. I'm just asking how sure you are that's what his motive is. Because I also think he has it in him to be acting under Voldemort's orders."

Snape ignored Harry's first question. "I do not believe the Dark Lord would risk His chance at having that dark ceremony. It would have to have been a total bluff from the beginning, and I don't see there being any chance at that. A good enough reason?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered sincerely, satisfied.

"What ceremony?" Flitwick demanded.

The faculty of Hogwarts was assembled in the faculty room, along with the House ghosts, Harry, and Hermione. It was the first that many of the faculty had heard of the evil ritual Voldemort had planned for the pregnant Pansy. Zoric and Snape took turns explaining it.

"I have never heard of such a vile thing!" the Bloody Baron declared when they were finished. "I am ashamed, of my House and the evil of our very culture!"

"I know few of you follow the Muggle news reports," Dumbledore went on, continuing the tale, "but a number of pregnant, homeless Muggles have gone missing since late January. Young Goyle confirmed that Voldemort had ordered them seized. Macnair and the two Crabbes, along with Goyle's father, raped them and then butchered them for practice. And yes, they were then cannibalized."

Several faculty members looked ill. "An' folk do say giants are evil," Hagrid complained. "I ain't never heard of such doings!"

"The important thing is, Mister Malfoy has separated his family from the immediate danger," Snape insisted.

"We have to publicize this," Hermione suddenly stated.

"No!" Dumbledore and Snape exclaimed together.

"Yes," Harry said back, determined.

"Why do you think this must be publicized?" McGonagall asked her grand-niece. Dumbledore's eyes went wide. It was rare for McGonagall dispute with him, even indirectly, on matters such as these. In fact, he realized with shame, the last major occurrence that came immediately to mind was her insisting Harry not be left with the Dursleys.

"Because Parkinson. . . ."

"Mrs. Malfoy," Snape broke in.

"Fine," Hermione nearly snapped, "because Pansy Malfoy is not the only virgin available, is she? What's to stop Voldemort from getting some other young couple?"

"You are partly right," Dumbledore agreed. "However, it would be much more in character for Voldemort to obsess over his loss and attempt to recover the Malfoys than to immediately think of replacing them."

"But can we take that risk? Isn't it better that the world know what He's planned, and what He has had done to those Muggle women?" Hermione demanded. "And what if they've acquired a taste for the torture and cannibalism?"

"Revealing this means revealing the Malfoys' location," Snape stated.

"It means revealing it to the Ministry," Harry said. "We hoped their escape would happen; did you think we could keep it a secret from the Ministry?"

"No," Dumbledore admitted. "We have the pair in a secure area, and they will stay there unless I release them. There is an adjoining area Mister Goyle can stay once he recovers. Ministry teams will question them, but I believe we can prevent the general public from learning they are here."

"Because you want the Dark Lord to know they're here, don't you?" Sinistra asked.

"You want to bring about the final battle," Vector speculated, "and for some reason you want it on Hogwarts grounds."

"True, on both counts," Dumbledore answered. "This is our home ground, and it is highly defensible. We can hide a number of aurors here if we have any advanced warnings. The SDA will provide protection for themselves and the younger students, and some of the DA will no doubt join in the fray. The staff, I hope, would engage in those roles as well."

The teachers looked around at each other, and, one at a time, led by Snape and McGonagall, they pledged themselves to defend the castle and students should the Dark Lord attack. Even Trelawney had no second thoughts.

"What about my people?" Firenze asked.

"While they still dislike us, and wish you ill, they hate Voldemort and his ilk far more," Dumbledore assured the centaur. "The centaurs, the spiders, the merpeople, and the other sentients will be made aware of the growing dangers. While they will not likely aid us directly, I believe they will all do their utmost to prevent any dark followers passage."

"The most likely lines of attack would be from the Forbidden Forest, where our wards end, but not too deep, or straight from the road to Hogsmeade," Zoric said.

"Agreed," Dumbledore said. "We shall discuss this with the Ministry and the Hogsmeade Council tonight."

"Could the elves help defend the castle itself?" Hermione asked. "Their defensive magic can be very powerful."

"That is not part of their magical subservience," Snape reminded her. "They can not be required to defend their masters; to do so is the one way to free them, other than granting them clothes. In fact, it's the only way house elves may earn their freedom."

"No, we can't demand that they defend us," Hermione retorted. "However, we can ask if they would like to help defend the castle itself, and the students within."

"We can, and you two may ask them, with my authority," Dumbledore said. "There are a few free elves employed. They have the right to leave, even if asked to stay."

"I don't think Winky or Dobby would leave, if Hermione and I ask them," Harry said.

"Very well."

"The ghosts shall be on constant patrol," Sir Nicholas stated.

"Aye," the Bloody Baron agreed. "All of us! Is that not correct, Binns!" Binns was nodding, but also starting to nod off. The Baron's rapier poked his backside. "Binns! It's time you pulled your weight!"

"Right!" Binns yelled. "Patrols!"

"We may not be able to fight, but we will serve as your eyes," the Fat Friar agreed.

For once, the Grey Lady spoke aloud. "We will protect our young ones."

"But what do we do about. . . ." Trelawney started, but then she stopped, and rolled her eyes back.

*"The time of the final battle nears,
The Boy-Who-Lived must have no fear;
The Darkness cannot withstand his Light,
As long as his loved ones are within Sight.*

*The girl of flame has loved him longest,
As his young sister, he returns the love;
Supported by the love of her life,
Her strength caresses his soul like a dove.*

*The girl of wisdom cares more than she shows,
Yet acknowledges her love for him as a twin;*

*The bravest maid in the House of the Brave,
If she shows her two loves she cares, they may win.*

*The Boy-Who-Follows must have the greatest care,
His feet have strayed from his sure, straight path;
Should this natural warrior acknowledge his love,
He shall smite many enemies with his great wrath.*

*The Boy-Who-Was-Injured has yet to be healed,
Yet his compassion will support the flame,
And together they may yet burn the evil star
To whom his injuries deserve the greatest blame.*

*The girl who sees all shall know her own path,
Her love shall never fail, its power shall grow;
Her sight should no more be doubted than her love.
Victory shall only be gained when to her it does show.*

*These five, and the others who care,
Must support the Boy-Who-Commands;
With his love, and his power, he bears
The ability to cleanse this entire land.*

*Should their love for each other fail
The Boy-Who-Lived shall die,
And the One-Who-Once-Died
Shall, to the horror of time, prevail."*

"Oh, bother," McGonagall said, as Trelawney slipped to the floor in a faint.

"I believe they usually do that," Firenze observed. "And the weaker the seer, the more difficulty they have in channeling the experience."

Chapter 27

Friday, March 28, 1997

"I thought you weren't talking to me?" Ron demanded hotly.

Hermione glared up at Ron. "This is it, Ron," she said softly, Ginny and Neville supporting her from the back. "Are you going to sulk, or fight?"

Ron went pale. "Tonight?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, but soon. The officers, especially the sextet, have to meet and talk." She hesitated, but then told the three, "Trelawney has made another prediction. It concerns the six of us. And, some other things have happened we need to talk about."

"Alright," Ron agreed. "The usual room?"

Hermione just nodded. "We'll meet half an hour after dinner. Try and be inconspicuous."

"Right; after all a dozen or so people sneaking about are so inconspicuous," Ron muttered.

The sextet plus Ernie, Justin, Susan, Hannah, Padma, Lisa, Anthony, and Terry met in the DA officers room. Hermione explained about the finding of the secret room, and then the translation of the old codex. The eleven students who hadn't known of the ritual were of course shocked and even sickened by the idea. When Harry explained how several pregnant Muggles had already been cannibalized for practice, Ginny and Padma nearly lost their dinners.

"And why do we finally get to learn this?" Ernie demanded.

"Right," a very pale Justin agreed. "Did we really need to know this?"

"You need to know because Malfoy, Pansy, and Goyle escaped this morning," Harry told them. "They're being hidden somewhere in the castle for the time being."

"That took a lot of nerve, even for Malfoy," Ron said. "Showing his murdering face here! If it wasn't for the benefits this ritual might give Riddle, I'd say send 'em back!"

"Ron!" Ginny protested. "How could you be so cruel?"

"What?" Ron demanded. "They're a trio of murdering scum! No, Pansy doesn't deserve to be tortured to death; no one does. But they brought this on themselves, and I for one don't feel sorry for them! I don't like the fact they might not be punished for killing three students and I don't like that they're here. I accept it, but I don't like it."

"Well, in that case we're probably all in agreement," Harry said drily.

"Are they going to move Malfoy, or leave them here to lure Riddle and his forces to us?" Justin asked.

"They couldn't!" Susan and Terry protested.

"They are," Hermione told them.

"Why?" Terry demanded.

"Because we can defend the castle against the Death Eaters," Harry replied. "Riddle will have to attack first with his giants, and maybe the dementors, to distract us while the Death Eaters batter down the wards. Master Tomas told us that as far as anyone can tell, the vampires have refused to join. Still, I'd say an attack is possible any time after the news of the planned ritual is printed, perhaps even before. Master Tomas is working things out with Minister Bones as we speak. Professor Dumbledore is talking with the Hogsmeade Council. Unless they somehow portkey in on boats, the only paths of attack are from shallow positions from within the Forbidden Forest or from the road to Hogsmeade. A special set of wards has just been activated. Anyone, even Dumbledore, who tries to portkey onto the grounds or into the castle directly will be directed to secure areas in the dungeons. Master Tomas has already provided six operatives to keep an eye on them -- they arrived just after dinner. He'll bring in a few more operatives to help us, and a number of aurors and hit-wizards will be brought in over the next week, along with some associates of the Headmaster. Mad-eye Moody, for example, arrived just before we called the meeting."

Justin and Ernie looked at each other. "We await your order, Commander," Ernie said. Both boys were serious. To a degree, both had anticipated something like this since the previous August.

"This is it, isn't it?" Susan asked.

Terry slumped in his chair. "I had hoped. . . ."

"We all did, but the time has come," Harry said simply.

"We'll meet tomorrow morning at Nine," Hermione said. "When the attack comes, most of the SDA, including all the Fourth years, should be defending the younger students and some key parts of the castle. A few of the DA will be outside. We can use you in either place. Let us know your preference in the morning. Spread the word, but keep alert; we might need to see you later tonight."

The eight DA officers left, after a few more minutes of general discussion.

"Somehow, I think I have less of a choice," Ron observed.

"As I said, Trelawney had a prophecy," Hermione said. "Even Firenze thinks it's genuine."

"Let's hear it," Ron said stoically.

Hermione produced a small quill. She flipped it into the air, and it wrote out the first paragraph of the new prophecy in golden letters in the air:

*"The time of the final battle nears,
The Boy-Who-Lived must have no fear;*

*The Darkness cannot withstand his Light,
As long as his loved ones are within Sight."*

"I think we can all understand the first paragraph?" Hermione asked.

"Who are Harry's loved ones?" Neville asked.

"Well," Hermione went on, "this should give you one hint."

*"The girl of flame has loved him longest,
As his young sister, he returns the love;
Supported by the love of her life,
Her strength caresses his soul like a dove."*

"I guess that's me," Ginny acknowledged.

"And me," Neville stated firmly, putting a hand on her shoulder. Ron snorted.

*"The girl of wisdom cares more than she shows,
Yet acknowledges her love for him as a twin;
The bravest maid in the House of the Brave,
If she shows her two loves she cares, they may win."*

"And I guess we know who that is," Ginny said, looking at her brother.

"I guess," Ron muttered.

"Harry knows how much I care for him, I think," Hermione said. Harry merely nodded his agreement. "Do you, Ron?"

"I know how much you care for Harry," Ron muttered.

"No, you great effing idiot, I love **you!**" Hermione screamed, and then blushed at her language.

"Hermione, language," Ron teased in a mean voice. "I should take a point. . . ."

Harry and Neville stopped Ginny from slapping her brother. Hermione merely ignored him, and the next stanza appeared.

*"The Boy-Who-Follows must have the greatest care,
His feet have strayed from his sure, straight path;
Should this natural warrior acknowledge his love,
He shall smite many enemies with his great wrath."*

"Oh," Ron said simply and quietly. "So I'm just the Boy-Who-Follows?"

"In this, yes," Luna replied. "You have supported Harry in nearly everything. Leaders can not lead without followers and companions. Harry leads, but you are the field commander."

"Ron," Harry said equally quietly and going to the heart of the matter, "I know you are attracted to Gin, but do you love her, or Hermione?"

"I love you," Hermione said. "I'm sorry I'm not ready for any of the things you and Gin have been doing. . . ."

"Pain-in-the-arse," Neville said softly.

"Neville, that doesn't help," Harry warned.

"Sorry."

"I care about you, and yes, I love you like a friend," Ron told Hermione. "I don't know if I just love you like a friend, or if I still care for you, well, love you, more. I do like Gin an awful lot. I love you both; I don't know who I'm love with, if anyone. Gin and I were just having fun! Just trying to learn about each other and . . . stuff. Merlin! I'm the only one of age, and that just barely! Why the hell does everyone think we have to make life commitments now?"

"Haven't you made one with Harry?" Ginny demanded. "I have. I love Harry, even though I love, and am in love, with Neville. I believe in Harry, and I will follow him into hell. I will go to hell to save him. I will kill for him; I will die for him! Will you?"

Ron looked away from the group, pale from shame. "You know I will. I would for all of you, even Neville."

Hermione merely nodded, and the quill wrote the next stanza. Hopefully all that was enough acknowledgment to fulfill the prophecy.

*"The Boy-Who-Was-Injured has yet to be healed,
Yet his compassion will support the flame,
And together they may yet burn the evil star
To whom his injuries deserve the greatest blame."*

Neville looked worried by the prospect of confronting Bellatrix Lestrange, but said nothing.

*"The girl who sees all shall know her own path,
Her love shall never fail, its power shall grow;
Her sight should no more be doubted than her love.
Victory shall only be gained when to her it does show."*

Luna nodded her understanding.

"So that means not to trust we've won until she says so?" Ron asked.

"Apparently."

*"These five, and the others who care,
Must support the Boy-Who-Commands;
With his love, and his power, he bears
The ability to cleanse this entire land."*

"Well, we knew that," Harry muttered.

*"Should their love for each other fail
The Boy-Who-Lived shall die,
And the One-Who-Once-Died
Shall, to the horror of time, prevail."*

"And that," he growled.

Ron turned his attention away from the prophecy. "So the story on Malfoy will come out when? Sunday morning?"

Hermione had recovered her composure. "Yes; the attack could come at any time after that. It should take Him a day or so to move the giants who are allied with him."

"Snape will send word to Riddle late tomorrow night," Harry added. "Riddle could be ready at any time after Sunday afternoon."

"What if he guesses before then?" Ron asked. "We know he had some plans for the giants; maybe he just delayed them while this scheme evolved. He could attack at any time, really. It's not like there are any safe places to hide Malfoy in Britain or even Western Europe other than here!"

"You're right," Harry acknowledged, pleasing Ron, "especially if Riddle has managed to trace them here already."

"Let's just hope it's not until after Sunday evening," Hermione said simply.

"Why?" Neville asked.

"Because most of the Order members will be here or in Hogsmeade by then, as will most of the aurors and hit-wizards," Harry responded.

"And because the vacationing students will be back," Hermione answered. "Less chance of His taking hostages."

"That's why I think he will attack sooner if he possibly can," Ron told them. "Remember, all a student has to do in daylight is invite someone across the wards. And, in case you haven't noticed, there is one special student who went to visit her mother over the vacation."

"Bellatrix Malfoy!" Neville exclaimed.

"Exactly."

Harry thought a moment, realizing Ron was again right. "Ron, would you please explain our conversation and your ideas to the Headmaster? He probably knows all this, but I do know he discounted the possibility."

Ron flushed, but nodded. It had been his idea, after all.

"Since he might still be in Hogsmeade, could you go to the Hufflepuff common room before that and tell the DA officers to be on alert status two starting tonight at ten?"

"All right," Ron responded. "Do you know their new password?"

"Oak leaf,' Harry answered. "Dumbledore's is 'praline'."

"Right." Ron took off.

"Luna, you alert Ravenclaw; Neville, Gryffindor. Ginny, inform Professors McGonagall and Lupin. Go!"

They went.

"What about us?" Hermione asked.

"We need to talk to the house elves, remember?"

"That's right."

As usual, the elves crowded around the pair of students. It still took Harry and Hermione a few minutes to actually get their attention. Finally, however, they quieted down.

"At some point soon, Hogwarts may come under attack," Hermione answered when one elf asked what they could do for the students. That brought a gasp of terror from the elves. "You are not required to fight to defend the castle, the students, or even yourselves. However, Professor Dumbledore has authorized us to give you full permission to protect yourselves."

"We may use our magic against . . . wizards?" one amazed house elf asked.

"Yes," Hermione said firmly. "Protect yourselves."

"These are the . . . evil wizards that follow He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" another asked, her voice quivering.

"Yes," Hermione stated, "and probably even Lord Voldemort himself."

Most of the elves huddled together, shivering.

"You all have the power to defend yourselves," Hermione scolded. "Use it!"

"Just ourselves, Miss Hermione Granger?" Dobby asked.

Hermione paused, trying to think exactly how to phrase it so they would not take offense.

"All we can require of the elves owned by Hogwarts is that you defend yourselves," Harry said. "If you wish to do more, if you wish to help defend the castle and the students, you may. We would be very grateful."

"But . . . then we would. . . ." one elf started.

"Where, oh where could we go!" another wailed.

"You could go wherever you want. . . ." Hermione started, which made most of them join in the wailing.

"Or," Harry said firmly, "you may stay here!"

That caught their attention. "If you do not help protect the castle and especially the students, there may be no place for you to work. If you don't help defend all the students, there will be no one to work for. Agree to defend the students, even if you are not called upon to actually do so, and yes, you will be free. . . ."

The elves, who had been paying close attention, started shivering again.

"You will be free to go, or you are free to stay here and continue your work," Harry concluded. "All would be welcome to stay!"

"But then, house elves must be wearing clothes, and being paid!" an elf wailed.

Harry had been thinking of this for a while. "Paid, yes. Absolutely. Clothes? Well, if you are free, you would be free to wear whatever you want. You could even wear those tea towels you wear now, if you want, or you could design something else."

The elves looked at Harry for a moment, then started talking amongst themselves, all at once and in a language the two students didn't understand.

"Miss Hermione?" Winky asked, stepping around the chattering elves.

"Yes, Winky?"

"Could . . . could Winky work for Miss Hermione, after Miss Hermione leaves Hogwarts? If Miss would not require clothes, Winky would work hard for Miss, even if Miss paid."

Hermione looked shocked by the idea, but she had grown fond of the elf over the previous months. "Yes, Winky, you may."

"May Winky help Miss Hermione in the battle?"

"You are a free elf, Winky. You may help as Commander Potter or Headmaster Dumbledore commands, if you wish to fight."

"Mister Commander, sir?" Winky asked, turning to Harry.

"I'll let you know, as soon as the other elves decide," Harry answered. He and Hermione then noticed the elves had stopped talking.

"House elves wish to inform Mister Commander Harry Potter, sir, that house elves wish to help to help very much, if a bargain may be made. Mister Commander is authorized to do this by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore?"

"Hermione and I are authorized together," Harry said.

"And Mister Commander will also agree, as Champion of Hogwarts?"

Harry wasn't totally surprised they knew of his relationship with the castle.

"If I agree to your terms, it will also be as the Champion of Hogwarts," Harry said.

"We want a sickle a day pay and one day off every month," the spokes-elf asked.

"That's less than twenty-two Galleons a year!" Hermione protested.

"Too much?" the elf asked, worriedly.

"Six sickles a day, eighteen days off a year, but only two sickles paid for each day off," Harry said. Hermione frowned, but said nothing.

"Mister Commander Champion drives a difficult bargain," the elf said.

"Elflings," an elf hissed.

"Yes," the spokes-elf said. "What are elfling rights?"

"What rights do you have now?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"Female house-elves have half a year off to have elfing; female elflings belong to mother elf owner. Male elfling belong to father elf owner. Female must provide substitute elf. Both must ask owners' permission to mate," the spokes-elf said.

"Elves must negotiate leave with the Headmaster ahead of time," Harry said. "Elflings born to free Hogwarts elves may have the right to work at Hogwarts. The same, err, gender assignment applies. Substitute elves will be paid the same as regular elves, free or not. Elves on leave will be paid half their usual amount."

"We are yours to command, Mister Commander Champion Harry Potter," the spokes-elf said.

"First, just call me 'Commander Potter' until after any battle," Harry said. "Second, how much food do we have in the castle at any given time?"

"Three days of fresh food, and much preserved," the spokes-elf said.

"Do you know preserving spells that work well for fresh food?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Commander Potter, but while edible, many fresh foods start losing a little taste after three or four extra days."

"Try and have at least three or four extra days worth of food, in case we're under siege," Harry suggested. The elves nodded.

"You will be responsible for keeping the kitchens and any of your own areas, and the access to them, free of intruders and getting food and water to everyone. If you can, you are also free

to aid any student or staff who is injured to safety and aid, and to attack any enemy of Hogwarts you come across. If the basics are taken care of, you may defend as you see fit within the castle."

"We understand, Commander Potter!"

"There are also going to be a large number of additional people coming to help," Harry told them. "We'll need food and beds for perhaps another hundred people by Sunday."

The spokes-elf nodded. "Anything else, Commander Potter, sir?"

Harry shook his head. The spokes-elf turned away. "We go! We work!"

"WE GO! WE WORK!" the elves responded, as if it was their battle cry, and they went to work.

"What about Dobby, Harry Potter, sir?" Dobby asked. "Will Harry Potter take on Dobby on those same terms?"

Harry smiled. "If I survive, yes."

Dobby smiled. "Have faith, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby has great faith in Harry Potter, as much as Miss Luna or Miss Hermione Granger or Miss Ginny Wheezy!" Dobby snapped his fingers and disappeared.

"We could have paid more," Hermione said. "That's less than a hundred and twenty-five Galleons a year."

"Probably, but we'll try to make up the difference in some other ways -- if we survive. Maybe we can look at their quarters and see if we can improve them in ways they'd like?" Hermione thought about it, and decided she was satisfied for the moment.

Coming out of the kitchens, Harry and Hermione ran into Fred and George Weasley. Protesting they were hungry, Harry dragged the pair off to see what kinds of mayhem the tricky duo could prepare.

Hermione gave Harry a worried smile, and then went to the library. That morning she had remembered a mention of a ceremony which might be useful. She hurried away, determined to do everything she could to assure Harry's survival on the day of battle.

Chapter 28

Friday, March 28

A few minutes after 11:00 that evening, eighteen Fifth and Sixth years gathered in Hogwarts' deepest dungeon, so deep that there was living rock for a floor.

"Chilly," Ron muttered.

"Yes, it is, and wearing almost nothing doesn't help," Daphne Greengrass agreed.

"We're going to try a ceremony," Hermione told the group. "As many of you know, Harry's scar connects him to the Dark Lord. Both practice Occlumency to prevent the other from influencing the other."

"What I'm going to try to do is replicate the early stages of the interaction," Harry told them. "At first, I could observe Him, and He was unaware of me. And, back then, this was the time of night when he did a lot of his planning. For this to work, I need the psychic support of at least a dozen friends."

"If you all agree, we will form a circle," Hermione told them. "I know it's a little uncomfortable." Under their work robes, they were all just wearing thin vests and shorts, along with their slippers. "We need to sit on these cushions, our bare feet on the bare rock, our feet touching. We interlock our arms and hands. All we need to do is think positive thoughts about the two people we're touching. That should create a positive aura, which will support Harry's contact."

"Why am I here?" Daphne asked.

"We need at least one Slytherin to be totally complete," Luna said simply.

"Oh," she said. "Does anyone really like me?"

"Of course we do, silly," Luna said with a warm smile. Daphne flushed.

"I think it would be best to go Harry, myself, Ron, Gin, Ginny, Neville, Susan, Daphne, Hannah, Lisa, Morag, Ernie, Lavender, Seamus, Parvati, Padma, Georgia, and then Luna next to Harry, unless anyone has a better arrangement?"

No one did.

The group stripped off their robes and sat in a tight circle. Harry ordered the lights to dim. The group took what almost amounted to a collective breath, and relaxed.

The group sat there, warm together despite the chill room. Each slowly sank into feelings of support and affection with the people next to them, and with many of the other people in the circle as well. It took Ron the longest to concentrate, torn as he was between his attraction and affection for both Hermione and Gin.

Slowly, each member could feel the magic growing between them. Harry let down his defenses.

He could feel himself travel towards Voldemort, but he was able to stop himself from entering the Dark Lord. Instead, as during his first years at Hogwarts, he hovered behind Him, listening.

Harry listened for as long as he could, and studied the written plans Voldemort was discussing with Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy, until he could feel the magic supporting him starting to waver. He didn't hesitate a second, and withdrew back into his own body to make certain Voldemort had not noticed him. He had been gone for over ten minutes.

The magic spell-circle fell apart. Their hands came unclasped, and all they leaned back on their cushions, tired from the effort and the mere time of day.

"Did you learn anything, Harry?" Ernie asked.

"Yes," Harry said, sitting up straight, despite a slightly stiff back. "I learned almost everything we need to know." He sighed. "I'll talk to the Headmaster before breakfast, so don't wait for me. No jogging for anyone tomorrow."

He looked over at Daphne. "All the suspect Slytherins went home for the holidays, didn't they?"

"Everyone but me," she answered.

"We trust you, Daphne," Hermione said firmly.

"In that case, there are thirty-nine of us here, and I'd say I'm the least reliable. Some of us aren't thrilled by most of your positions, you and the Headmaster, but we do disapprove of or are against the Dark Lord's even more."

"That being the case," Harry said, teasing her gently, "I'd say we're all reliable enough to defend ourselves, if not join in the counter-attack."

"Thank you, Harry; thank you, everyone. You can count on Millicent and me to do whatever you say," Daphne said, tears in her eyes.

"Can you at least tell us when?" Susan asked, nervously.

Harry hesitated, but then said, "Sunday morning, just before Seven."

The room was silent for nearly twenty long seconds.

Then Harry looked at Ron. "So, like I said, no jogging tomorrow morning. Tomorrow we March."

Ron straighten his back. "Yes, sir," he responded sincerely, with not a trace of irony.

Harry looked around. "We leave our common room at Seven fifteen." He zeroed in on Ernie. "What about Hufflepuff?"

"I say Hufflepuff marches at Seven fifteen." He looked at the other Hufflepuffs. "Agreed?"

All agreed.

Harry turned to Padma and Lisa. "And Ravenclaw?"

"We march at Seven fifteen," Lisa stated firmly.

Harry looked at Daphne. "Will you ask your fellow Slytherins?"

Daphne squared her shoulders. "I won't tell anyone about the time of the attack, except Millicent. We will ask the others." She hesitated, then said, "I'll go and ask before everyone falls too deeply asleep."

"Have everyone wear a work robe tomorrow morning." Harry turned to the others. "We all wear robes tomorrow. Now, I need to spell the owlery shut. You should all go to bed."

"Harry?" Luna asked.

"I'll be fine," he said. "We'll talk in the morning." They all nodded. "And Ron? Tell Fred and George I'll need to talk with them after I see the Headmaster, or at least after breakfast."

"Right."

Harry did visit the owlery, but on the way back to Gryffindor Tower, he made a stop in a lavatory.

"Who's there?"

"Myrtle? May I have a word?"

"Harry! How are you!" Myrtle came fully out of her toilet with a slight splash.

"Did Sir Nick or the Bloody Baron talk to you?"

"Yes, and I'd like to help, but I don't see what I can do," the teen ghost said sadly. "They aren't likely to attack through the pipes."

"But they might attack through the Chamber. The entrance can't be detected, and we don't know if the tunnel is still blocked or not."

"It was still blocked a little more than a week ago. I go there fairly often; it's so nice and gloomy. I'll watch it, for you."

"Thank you, Myrtle," Harry said sincerely.

"Was that nasty Tom Riddle really the one who had me killed?"

"He was," Harry answered.

"And now he's this nasty wizard?"

"He is," Harry agreed.

"And he's going to lead an attack, and you have to defeat him?"

"That's the prophecy," Harry admitted.

"If you fail, you can still share my lavatory," Myrtle told him, "but I hope you win."

"Thank you, Myrtle." Harry leaned forward, and kissed her frozen cheek. Myrtle giggled, and disappeared into the sink that hid the Chamber of Secrets.

"It seems strange doing this without Harry," Hermione said.

"I know; but he was already gone when we woke up," Ron replied.

"Is everyone ready?" Hermione called, knowing they should be. Ginny and Lavender had been getting them excited for almost ten minutes.

"READY!"

"Who are we?" Hermione called.

"GRYFFINDORS!"

"WHAT ARE WE?" Ron demanded.

"THE BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE!"

"REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!" Hermione and Ron called out.

"AND ALL THE INNOCENTS, SLAUGHTERED!"

"Let's go!" Ron ordered.

Within seconds, the thunder was crashing through the castle. Ron noticed the suit of armor near the Gryffindor common room was missing, but was too preoccupied to say anything.

The Ravenclaws and Gryffindors descended from their towers, and the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins ascended from den and dungeon. All four met at the entrance hall. All the suits of armor now lined the huge entrance hall, pounding in time to the resolute marchers.

Harry was standing in the doorway, wearing a bright golden robe. A gesture brought the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs through the door together. Harry soberly shook hands with each

of the marchers on the inside columns. As each student went through the door frame, their robes turned silver.

The Gryffindors and Slytherins then marched in together as well, after Hermione and Millicent Bulstrode shook hands. Harry also shook their hands.

All the staff were assembled, all in silver robes as well (although with golden sleeve bands), except for Dumbledore, who was in gold and scarlet, matching the colors of Fawkes, who was on his shoulder. The visiting aurors and hit-wizards were in green, the members of the Order of the Phoenix in orange. Tonks was there, and her hair matched her robe. Most of the ghosts were circling the hall.

"REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!" the Hufflepuffs roared.

"AND ALL THE INNOCENTS, SLAUGHTERED!" the entire student population screamed in response.

The staff and visitors all sat, except for Dumbledore. The students then all sat.

"Tomorrow morning, we believe Tom Riddle, who calls himself Lord Voldemort, will attack Hogwarts. Yes, tomorrow morning." The slight noises in the hall went totally silent.

"We can not be absolutely certain. However, I believe you will understand why we can not allow word of our foreknowledge out. The owlery and the fire-talking network are closed. Students are confined to the castle today. At Ten o'clock tonight, all students are to be in their common areas. All First through Fourth years, unless specifically tasked by Commander Potter, will be confined to those areas or nearby corridors until the attack is over, or until we see the chances of an attack have passed us by. Food will be delivered to the common areas by the house elves."

The younger students stirred in protest. "Should any battle go well, yes, you will be left out. Should any battle go badly, you will need to defend yourselves and that will be best done in your common areas." That quieted the noise.

"Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh years have three choices. They may stay inside the common areas to help defend the Houses; they may join their heads of House and selected Fourth years in defending the approaches to the common areas; or they may join us either defending the castle or on the field of battle. We would like at least one student capable of producing the Patronus aiding the heads of House. Fortunately, house elves are capable of defending against dementors, and three will be assigned to each House."

"Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh years may stay after breakfast to confer with their House captains and the other DA officers." Dumbledore gestured at the visitors. "As you can see, we have additional defenders, from both the Ministry and from the general magical community. We shall have more by the time we seal the grounds tonight. Now, I give you our student commander."

Dumbledore sat, and Harry stood up. "Perhaps nothing will happen tomorrow. Perhaps the only real battle of this war will happen tomorrow. Perhaps only the first battle of a long war will happen tomorrow. Whatever happens tomorrow, I will go on as long as there is need. I cannot ask that any of you come with me; I can only say you are all welcome to follow to

wherever tomorrow leads. Whenever we win the final victory, then we will have to rebuild a better society, one where our disagreements are argued out, not fought out."

"If the battle continues after tomorrow, then we can only pursue one policy. To fight; to fight until victory is won! Tomorrow we fight on the field of Hogwarts. If we are not totally victorious, we shall not flag or fail! We shall go on to the end! We shall fight in Hogsmeade; we will fight in the air! We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength and we shall defend our culture, whatever the cost might be. We shall fight from Hogwarts, Hogsmeade, and Diagon Alley; we shall fight in the fields and streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender! We shall never, never, never give in!"

The students, led by Ginny and Luna, stood and applauded. Harry leapt up on the staff dias.

"Hermione reminded me the other day of a Muggle play, Henry V, by William Shakespeare. Who else knows the King's speech? If anyone does, feel free to join me!" Zoric, McGonagall, Lupin, Flitwick, and, to everyone's surprise, Snape moved to back Harry. Moody and two aurors Harry didn't know came over, as did Bill Weasley and a few other members of the Order of the Phoenix. Hermione, Justin, and five other Muggle-born stood in front of the dias. Even the Bloody Baron joined them.

After a brief conference, Harry started, and slowly, each member joined in as their memory caught up:

"We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.
This day is call'd the feast of Saint Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall see this day, and live old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors
And say, 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian.'
Then he shall strip his sleeve and show his scars
And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispian's Day.'
Old men forget, yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feat he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words,"

Harry went on alone. "Harry, the Weasleys, Hermione, and Snape; Zoric and Lupin; students, friends, and staff!"

The group went on. "Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd,
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;" "And sisters," Hermione murmured.)
"For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now a-bed

Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day."

The students applauded again. Millicent Bulstrode stood up as the applause quieted. "As of today," she declared, "there are no Pure-Bloods; there are no Mudbloods, Half-bloods, or Mixed-bloods. There are those born to the culture with the gift; there are those born with the gift who have to learn the culture! It must be the duty and honor of those of us born to it to HELP those who embrace it!" She looked around the room. "You all know who I am; you all know what I've done and how I've thought in the past! All of you, all of us, who are Pure-bloods! Some time today, shake the hand of at least one Muggle-born or mixed-blood and thank them for joining our culture! I don't know where any other Pure-Blood will be tomorrow morning, but I will be standing wherever Harry Potter puts me! No matter if it's guarding the fire place in the First years' dorm or standing point in the front line!" She gestured around the room. "Pure-Bloods! Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh years! Hogwarts students, wizards and witches all! Who else follows Harry Potter?"

Every person in the great hall stood, cheering. Every student cheered. Aurors and hit-wizards cheered. Those who disliked and feared Muggle culture and influence sincerely cheered. The pacifists cheered. Even Severus Snape, although his were by far the quietest, cheered.

As the cheers lessened, Hagrid could be heard to misquote, "For King Harry and the Wizarding world! Cry havoc! and let loose the dogs of war!" The cheers went on again.

The rest of breakfast was noisy. By a little after 9:00, however, Harry, Hermione, the House captains, Zoric, Dumbledore, and Moody were able to hear the students volunteer for the duties the following morning. Harry would inform them that night of their assignments.

Fred and George met with Harry after the crowd had cleared out. He took them into the small room off the great hall, where the school champions had met over two years before.

"What do you need, Harry?" Fred asked.

"Did you ever come up with the antidote for that Sleepy Time Mist you told me about?"

"Sure, but why would we need that? We never came up with a good delivery system," George answered.

Harry whistled, and Peeves popped into the room. "Commander called?" the poltergeist asked.

"Have you thought about our offer?" Harry asked.

Peeves nodded. "Peeves agrees to all conditions; no tricks. Any tricks, and Headmaster Dumbledore or the Young Master here will banish Peeves from Hogwarts." Peeves shuddered. "No where else would I have the magic to feed on to have so much fun!"

"Alright," Harry answered. "The Headmaster and I agree. Do you still have a supply of balloons for some water balloons without water?"

"Yes! What shall be in them? Ink? Sour milk? Cat's pee?"

"Our Sleepy Time Mist!" George proclaimed.

"Exactly."

"Oooo! Master Weasley Wheeze! Peeves may knock out evil attackers where?"

"The area around the greenhouses are yours. And Peeves?"

"Yes?"

"Once the great enemy of the Headmaster is knocked out, if there are no others awake near you, do what you want with the Death Eaters and other followers anywhere, until they're officially captured."

"Oooo! Peeves likes Harry Potter!"

Harry turned to the twins. "Snape says the Mist should even work on any giants."

"Giants!" Peeves exclaimed. "Peeves has never pranked a giant! thank you, Harry Potter!"

"I'll get Professor Snape to let you into the auror potion lab," Harry said. "Peeves can collect the Mist when?"

"Three o'clock," George answered.

"Go!"

Most of the work that day fell to the heads of House, Moody, and Zoric. Dumbledore spent most of the day in Hogsmeade, setting up a 'drill' for the next morning. Twelve more people came through from the Ministry; four aurors, four hit-wizards, an unspeakable, the Minister herself, Amos Diggory, and Percy Weasley. Six more members of the Order came, as did six additional members of Zoric's agency. A slightly larger number of Ministry and Order people came to visit relatives in Hogsmeade, or to stay the weekend in various small cottages. The two pubs' guest rooms were full.

Everything was ready, should Voldemort actually show up.

It was Hermione who went to Dumbledore late that afternoon. Normally, she would have blushed to broach such a subject, but she decided that the Bravest Maid had no reason to blush.

Dumbledore listened, considered, and agreed.

Hermione went to the Ravenclaw common room (all the entrances to the common rooms would be open until 9 to allow for friends to visit). Hermione dragged Luna out and to near the entrance of Gryffindor. She dragged Harry out a few minutes later.

"I talked with Dumbledore. Go to your private area. Dobby will wake the two of you up at Five fifteen."

"But. . . ." Harry protested.

"Just go, Harry," Hermione said.

Harry started to turn, then reached out and drew Hermione into a hug. "Be careful tomorrow, Hermione." He handed her the final assignment lists.

Hermione reached up and pulled Harry's mouth to hers, and they kissed. "You be careful, too," she told Harry. Hermione and Luna exchanged a more chaste kiss. "I love both of you," Hermione said, and then she fled into the common room.

"There's going to be a lot of that tonight," Luna said thoughtfully.

"Kissing?"

"Yes, but that's not what I meant," Luna answered. "People are going to be hurt tomorrow. People are likely to be killed tomorrow. We have to get through tonight, and one way to do that is by telling people how we feel."

Harry thought about that. "Let's pop back in for a few minutes, okay?"

Luna smiled. "It sounds like a plan."

Harry went through and thanked every Gryffindor, and wished them good luck on the morning. Some thanks were more emotional than others, especially with Ron and Ginny. Harry and Luna went to Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and even Slytherin, and did the same.

Harry then went to the situation room, where a number of people were finalizing the plans. Harry thanked Zoric and shook his hand. He embraced Remus Lupin. Then he took Luna's hand, and they went to bed.

After Hermione watched Harry and Luna walk away from Gryffindor, she posted the assignment sheets. The first sheet read:

Students Assigned to the Three Attack Squads:

A

Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Ginny Weasley, Katie Bell, Abdul Hasan, Jacqui Spenser

B

Ernie Macmillan, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Padma Patil, Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, Seamus Finnigan, Georgia Anderson, Gin Driver

C

Lisa Turpin, Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, Kevin Entwhistle, Mandy Brocklehurst, Morag McDougal, Mitchell Connerly, Merry Bishop, Mark Pebbles

Chapter 29

Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997

Voldemort appeared down the road from Hogwarts, the early morning dawn just brightening the day. "All the attack forces should be in place," he told Wormtail. He handed his servant what looked like a bottle rocket. "Take this over the rise and cast the Dark Mark on the fuse at the correct time."

"Yes, Master."

Wormtail took a deep breath and followed orders, accompanied by Bellatrix Malfoy, who would walk through the wards first, and then invite all in. If all was going according to plan, Hogwarts should be silent on a Sunday morning. This betrayed sloppy intelligence -- Voldemort hadn't asked about any early morning group activities and no one had told him about the jogging club. Even without Harry's spying, the attack wouldn't have been an absolute surprise, although it would have been a near thing.

Wormtail's eyes weren't what they used to be, and the great entrance to Hogwarts was nearly a mile away. It almost appeared as if there were some shining objects in front of the castle, but they didn't appear to be moving.

Wormtail shrugged, and set the bottle rocket into the ground. He checked his watch, and then cast the Dark Mark on the fuse. The rocket instantly launched over three hundred feet above the castle, exploding into a huge Dark Mark.

It was 6:55.

Within seconds, the ground began to shake slightly. Wormtail trembled, but resisted the temptation to turn into a rat. That would be about his worst move under the circumstances. He didn't dare turn around. Peter Pettigrew closed his eyes and hoped the day would soon be over.

"Come on! Come on in!" young Bella called.

Fifteen giants and thirty mountain trolls went past Wormtail. Two other groups, with the same elements, were attacking from more directly out of the Forbidden Forest.

"Come, little Worm," Bellatrix Lestrange said from behind Wormtail. "I have revenge to exact."

Approximately thirty Death Eaters would come up from behind each attack group. At 7:30, all 303 of Voldemort's dementors would appear over the lake, and glide into the attack. "Stay here, my niece, and watch our triumph!"

Atop the small turret over the grand entrance gate, Justin Finch-Fletchley sat with five younger Muggle-born and Mixed-blood students. Each had experience with the Muggle sport of cricket and/or with firearms. In other words, each had been selected by Justin for their

excellent aim. There were three other attack teams like this, overlooking the grounds. Justin was the only Sixth-year in a balloon group, leading the team against the force Voldemort should be joining.

"There's the Mark," a Second year Ravenclaw said. He was manning the spyglass. "Wow! I can see why they're called giants! I count . . . fifteen giants and thirty trolls."

"Relay the information," Justin calmly told Luna Lovegood's roommate, Deborah Johnson. "Everyone put on their goggles." Deborah keyed it into her SDA Galleon, modified by Hermione for the purpose. They would launch the attack either when the giants started getting too close, or when they were given the signal giving them a forty-five second warning.

"Giants, a hundred yards," the Second year warned.

"Giants, a hundred feet," he said a few seconds later.

"There the signal!" Deborah announced.

All six students stood, knowing they had just 45 seconds to neutralize the giants.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

Six water balloons levitated, and then found their marks with perfect accuracy on the giants. The balloons of course contained the Weasleys' sleeping mist. Hitting a giant in the forehead, each balloon released a mist which would put them to sleep for at least a day, unless the antidote was inhaled. The mist started to drift downwards towards the trolls, and the six giants collapsed.

Three more barrages were sent off, the last volley into the core of the Death Eaters, when the sun disappeared, and a near-total darkness descended.

"That was supposed to happen," Justin reminded them. "Don't move; get another balloon and wait."

A very dim, soft glow from behind them allowed them to find their next load. "I know the darkness means the Dark Lord is inside the wards," Deborah said, "but why? What does it mean?"

"Somehow, the Headmaster has affected time," Justin told her. "All of Hogwarts is a second out of synch with the universe. So, nothing, not even light, can get in or out. Any of His forces still outside will be cut off, including the dementors. Thank goodness He came in during the first wave!"

"No dementors; that's a relief!"

"And we have forces outside to mop up," Justin said. The townspeople and visitors would take care of the forces between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, and there was a special squad from the European Ministries to deal with the dementors. While Justin didn't know the full plans for any Death Eaters left in the forest, the centaurs had agreed to take care of one area. Hagrid, Grawp, and Aragog's children would take care of the rest. Justin had shivered when he learned there were giant spiders that close to Hogwarts.

"Ah," Justin said, "they're lighting fires. Make certain anyone you aim for hasn't got a bubblehead charm on! We can't waste these."

Five of the students sent their balloons. Justin, seeing Voldemort had produced the charm, left fly a "Stupefy!" At that distance, the curse, coming from a young wizard of at best average power, wouldn't stun the Dark Lord, and Justin knew it. It still gave the Dark Lord a sharp sting, and knocked him down for a second.

And at that moment, the suits of armor (six sets on either side of the door) started banging swords on their shields in unison. The other suites of armor did the same around the perimeter of the castle, signaling everyone to be prepared to fight. While they couldn't actually do anything, Harry said the students liked the noise. Within five beats, the very castle echoed the sound.

"YOU CANNOT ESCAPE," Dumbledore's voice proclaimed. "YOUR ONLY CHANCE IS TO SURRENDER!"

"Give us the girl, and we won't attack!" Voldemort cried back, standing.

"FIND HER IF YOU CAN, TOM!"

"AVADA KEDAVRA"

12 Minutes Earlier

"Let's hope He comes over the wards soon," Ron grumbled.

"He will," Luna answered. "All is exactly how it must be."

Harry ignored the by-play around him, and after he made certain everyone had taken the antidote for the mist, he addressed Winky and Dobby.

"All house elves are ready, Commander Potter, sir," Winky interrupted before Harry could even say anything.

"Good," Harry said, not caring if she meant all the elves or just the six with his attack group. "Winky, please look after Hermione."

"Winky will do her best."

"Dobby. . . ."

"Dobby will protect Commander Harry!"

"No, Dobby," Harry said firmly. The two elves stared at Harry in puzzlement. "Dobby, if you feel you owe me any favors, please, look after Luna."

Dobby looked at Harry for a second, then smiled. "Dobby understands."

"Thank you both; Luna and Hermione mean everything to me." Harry wished he could assign someone extra to protect Ginny as well, but hoped Neville would be able to do so. He knew all three girls would be more worried about helping him than looking out for themselves.

"Dobby and Winky understand," Winky agreed.

Harry smiled and went to address the rest of the group. Including himself, there were eight Gryffindors (three Seventh years, four Sixth years, and Ginny from the Fifth year) and Luna. There were six aurors and hit wizards, although the only one Harry knew was Tonks, four of Zoric's operatives, and Zoric and Remus.

Harry moved everyone into position. Ron would be on the extreme right, Hermione on the left. They would be in charge of calling out cues to the others. Harry positioned Neville and Ginny together, then went to Tonks.

"Can you AK someone, Tonks?" Harry asked.

"I've never killed a person, but I'm well acquainted with using it," she answered, uncharacteristically serious. "Someone in particular?"

"Your Aunt?"

"Bellatrix or Narcissa?"

"Lestrangle."

Tonks' face hardened. "She tortured my father once. She killed Sirius. Her, I can kill."

Harry nodded and positioned her between Neville and Ginny, then addressed the group. "When the signal is given, I'll suspend the anti-portkey wards for a moment and we'll be transported into battle. We'll be behind the enemy. All students, 'stupefy!' The rest of you, this is the one sure chance you'll have to AK anyone, but it's up to you."

He was looking at Tonks, who nodded. That trio would appear behind Bellatrix. "Put on your goggles!" Harry called. These special goggles would allow the defenders to see in the darkish area outside; plus their robes, still colored from the day before, would show up more clearly, making it less likely they would hit each other in error.

Harry knelt on one knee between Lupin and Zoric. "I'll send an AK right down the middle at Him. If we're very lucky, one of us will hit the bastard."

The trio nodded.

"Remember," Harry called out, "if Riddle's and my wands connect, don't try to interfere! In fact, the phoenix song cage will deflect any spell upwards! Feel free to use it as a safe backstop to fight from!"

The signal came that the time spell was engaged. A few moments later, the group portkeyed out, all the adults and Harry screaming "**AVADA KEDAVRA**" within a second of materialization.

There was only one direction Voldemort could have gone without being hit by one of the three Death spells, and that was to fling himself straight down on the ground. Unfortunately, he did just that.

Harry's sailed six inches over the Dark Wizard and struck a dozing giant. It wasn't quite strong enough to kill the giant, but it was enough to keep him in a coma for a week.

Zoric's Avada struck and killed two trolls. Lupin's hit a very surprised Wormtail.

Harry just had time to see three curses striking Bellatrix Lestrange before attempting to stupefy Voldemort, who had rolled to his knees and who had done the same. As they had over 21 months before, their spells locked and within seconds the glowing tendrils of phoenix song surrounded them, cutting them off from the battle.

"Well, boy," Voldemort sneered, "I'm surprised to see you have the courage to face me, now that I am at my full strength!"

"I have no reason to fear you," Harry exaggerated, but with as much conviction in his voice as if it was the absolute truth. "I know the full prophecy -- I know I'm the one chosen to destroy you, to kill you in fact."

"You think I can die?"

"Prophecy says so, and you certainly tried to verify it!"

"I MUST NOT DIE!"

"Oh, even if I fell dead right now, you'll die some day, Riddle! The only question is when? It might be in five or ten thousand million years, when the sun expands and engulfs the Earth." Harry smiled, ignoring the growing heat in his wand. "What would you do for ten thousand million years, Riddle? By then you'd have long killed off everyone, because you'd be afraid someone or something would evolve that could kill you. And you'd be all alone, and you'd still die, fried slowly by the expanding radiation from the sun."

Harry's smile widened. "Or you might die in the next five minutes. Either way, you ARE going to die. That's the one universal truth. In thirty thousand million years or so, even the universe is going to die. What? You didn't know that? Not kept up with the latest in astronomical news, huh? Well, that's not surprising, since this was all work done by Muggles."

"You try me, boy!"

"So," Harry went on, "you ARE going to die. Why be afraid? YOU aren't a full Muggle, after all. You know there are ghosts and echoes, so there has to be something, we just don't know what, or how long it lasts or if it leads to something eternal. For a Muggle, it's just a matter of faith that when we die we just don't blip out. What's the old expression? Eternal sleep? Sleep without dreaming and never waking up? In short, non-existence? That's what you fear, isn't it?"

Harry's face hardened. "Well, get used to the idea that you're doing to die. You might get lucky and last a while, but even a million million years comes to pass sometime. You're meat, and in a few minutes, you're dead meat."

"Brave words, boy," Voldemort tried to sneer.

"I nearly killed you twice, you slimy bastard; don't count on staying lucky!"

On the face of it, it should have been an unequal contest. Voldemort was an incredibly experienced, even more incredibly powerful and ruthless wizard. He had been living soft of late, however, caught up in what had been even for him an amazingly sadistic and sick plan. He had been caught by surprise that the attack had been anticipated, and that his retreat had been so completely, and inexplicably, cut off. And worst of all, Harry had triggered the one fear Voldemort had, that of non-existence.

Harry was in near-perfect training, and if currently perhaps slightly less-powerful, at least equally driven.

For nearly five minutes, their contest was a draw. Both fighters were concentrating on the seven beads of power that had accumulated along their conjoined streams of power. Neither took any real notice of the figures outside of the shell of phoenix song.

Until Harry noticed that one was Luna. Harry didn't dare take a full glance in her direction, but he saw her hair moving from the corner of his eye.

Risking a quick glance, Harry saw it wasn't just Luna fighting to his left. It was Luna and Hermione, standing over an obviously injured, perhaps dead, Ginny, with no sign of Neville in sight.

"My, my," Voldemort said, the strain in his voice belying the mocking words. "That's the little Weasley girl, isn't it? I shall have to make her direct acquaintance. She already knows me, doesn't she?"

Harry said nothing.

"Do you fancy one?" Voldemort asked. "I shall have to have all three to dinner, after the battle."

"You sound like a mad, bad film," Harry muttered.

"Which do you love, boy?" Voldemort taunted. "Think about it, and if I defeat you without killing you, she'll be the last, and slowest, to go."

Harry felt the pressure from Voldemort's mind, but he fought admitting him for a moment. He used his training to fight Voldemort while thinking about Voldemort had asked. Whom did he love?

He loved Luna Lovegood. With her, he felt whole, complete. Harry knew little of poetry except what he had been forced to memorize as a Muggle student, and he knew less about music -- but just knowing Luna made him want to burst into song and poetry. He loved her

with passion. Even though they had not had full sex, when he looked at her he was reminded of the phrase from the old marriage ceremony, 'with my body, I thee worship.'

He loved Hermione. He couldn't fully define how he felt; she had really grown into 'non-sexual partner and twin.' He just knew that he hadn't been shocked when Luna had said the night before, "No matter what happens tomorrow, we can never let Hermione be alone; she needs love and, in the future, children."

While Harry could not imagine being married to Hermione, somehow a vision of a little girl with Hermione's old teeth and even wilder, darker hair had appeared in his mind, countered by a vision of what his and Luna's children might someday look like.

He loved Ginny. She had been more his little sister than Ron's that year, and she was by far his most loyal follower. He loved her as a sister; fondly, protectively.

The three loves of Harry's life were battling for their lives twenty feet away from him. Worry about them was buried by the deep feelings he had for those three girls.

Harry loved Sirius; he would have loved his parents had he had the chance. He cared for Ron Weasley, although he never would dare use the word 'love' in connection to Ron, let alone Neville, Fred, George, Tonks, Gin, Georgia, Padma, Parvati, Sudipta, Irena, Susan, Hannah, or his other friends. To himself, he might admit to loving Remus and Hagrid, and perhaps Master Tomas and his wife, Mister and Mrs. Weasley, and even Dumbledore.

In the back of Harry's mind, he realized his mistake the previous October -- he had tried to destroy Voldemort with pain. Voldemort was the master of pain. The previous June, he had defeated Voldemort with love, just as his mother had in 1981, and just as his mother's love had defeated Voldemort/Quirrell in 1992.

Harry thought of all his loves, brought all those feelings fully to the forefront of his mind, and then let the floodgates of his love rush through him. The beads of power shot along the stream and exploded Voldemort's wand. His feelings rushed into Voldemort's mind, and burned out his synapses faster than touching Harry's skin had burned the Quirrell/Voldemort hybrid's skin at the end of his first year.

This time, there was no ghost. There was no essence of evil.

There was just a husk that fell to the ground.

Voldemort was dead.

Harry quickly noticed that the battle wasn't over when a hex flashed past his ear. He heard a scream, and saw both Hermione and Luna fall to the ground, partially covering Ginny. Harry didn't register the scream of anger from behind him, let alone recognize it as coming from

Ron. Nor did he hear Ron, Winky, and Dobby all stun whomever it had been who had hexed Luna and Hermione.

Instead, Harry saw red. Literally.

He was never certain what happened next. Harry could never explain it, and neither could anyone else, but he absorbed all the surplus magic available to him through the castle. For over a minute, even the paintings would be stilled as he channeled the magic.

Suddenly, Harry was standing in the middle of the rolling lawn, his arms up-raised in anger. He was also towering 195 feet above himself. Both Harrys screamed out in anger and anguish, each movement mirrored in both.

While those fighting in the front had stopped when confronted by a 195 foot tall Harry Potter, it took the thunderous scream to draw everyone else's attention, at least of those outdoors. Six of the remaining conscious trolls soiled themselves and passed out.

Harry later said he could see from both perspectives, and that it was difficult to coordinate his movements. This probably saved lives, as both Harrys were obviously angry and looking to crush something. As the projected 195 foot Harry reached down to crush a Death Eater, Goyle senior threw his wand down and begged for mercy.

The other remaining Death Eaters in all three groups threw their wands down as well. From a window in the astronomy tower, Argus Filch decided to go ahead and submit his resignation, effective at the end of the term.

Harry just managed to restrain his giant self from crushing Goyle like a cigarette butt. He saw the pro-Dumbledore group collect the wands and bind the Death Eaters.

Seeing the Death Eaters captured, both Harrys let out another scream. Giant Harry disappeared, and Harry collapsed on the ground, crying. Since he found himself near the obviously dead body of Jacqui Spenser and the still forms of Ginny, Luna, and Hermione, Harry could not muster enough energy to fight the feeling of vertigo that swept over him. He followed the feeling into darkness.

Chapter 30

At first, Harry thought he must be dead. After a moment's reflection, he decided he wasn't. While Harry had no expectations about what death would be like, he decided that once he was dead, every cell in his body shouldn't hurt.

"No!"

'Oh, good,' Harry thought, 'at least Winky isn't dead.'

"No one is allowed to visit the family of Master Harry!"

'Dobby made it, too,' Harry thought. 'I'm glad some one else did.'

"The house elves shall take care of Master Harry and his family," Dobby stated firmly, in answer to some distant-sounding voices. "They shall recover best under house elf care."

A chorus of elfin voices joined in. "We protect the Champion. We protect the Champion's family."

'Oh, great, another fan club.' Harry sighed to himself. Then, a thought hit him. Who else was here? Who was Harry's family?

Harry managed to open his right eye. He realized the elves had partially opened the walls between the lounge and the bedroom on the landing of his and Luna's hide-away, and he was in a bed in the former bedroom. Harry sighed, wishing the pain would go away, and that there didn't seem to be a weight on his chest.

Harry then realized that someone was actually curled up next to him, and the weight was that someone's head. He tried to open his left eye, and a wave of dizziness hit him. Harry closed both eyes until the feeling went away, and then tried just opening his left eye.

That worked much better, and Harry saw Luna was sleeping with him, under the sheet. Despite a black eye, she looked beautiful. He smiled and fell back asleep.

When Harry woke up again, he felt a little better. Even if the pain hadn't receded slightly, he still would have felt himself better off, knowing that at least Luna had survived.

Feeling her presence, Harry managed to move enough to kiss the top of her head, although she was partially laying on her arm, and so he couldn't hug her.

"A little late to be kissing me, Potter!" a familiar voice said.

"Ginny!" Harry managed to murmur, while attempted to move his arm to hug her. "I was afraid you were . . . dead!"

"I was hit by two stunners," Ginny admitted. "I was out almost a whole day."

"What day is it?"

"Late Wednesday morning," she told him. "Dobby and Winky moved us all from the battle field, but they brought you, Hermione, Luna, and me here, and the rest later. It caused quite a stir, since they forgot to tell anyone."

"Is Hermione alright?"

"A little better off than me; a little worse off than Luna." She paused. "Have you talked with Luna?"

"No, but she was where you are when I woke up for a few minutes."

"Oh, good. She should be back soon."

"Why are you in bed with me?" Harry asked. He managed to open his eyes and saw she was dressed in her dressing gown and was atop the sheet. "Not that I mind."

"The elves said you temporarily drained yourself of magic, and that you need to be in close proximity with your loved ones. Ron and Neville weren't thrilled by the idea of being this close, so Hermione, Luna, Georgia, and I have been taking turns." She smiled. "Probably there would have been other volunteers, but none of the other students were brought in here, and none are allowed in now. The elves are pretty protective."

Harry gave a large sigh of relief.

"Was that a sigh of relief because they're alright, or one of regret because they aren't here in bed with you?" Ginny teased.

"Both!" Ginny moved, and Harry was finally able to move his arm. He hugged Ginny close. "How bad is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Ginny admitted as she snuggled close. "None of us have really been outside of this area. I didn't even know where we were until Hermione filled me in. Professors Dumbledore, Zoric, Lupin, and McGonagall have stopped by, and Mum and Mrs. Zoric were here Monday afternoon when I woke up and again yesterday. And of course Madam Pomfrey's been here a few times. So I can say Fred and George are fine. Percy never got into the battle, but he has impressed Minister Bones by how hard he's worked to help them clean up the mess. Ron is a major hero, although I'm not exactly certain why. Neville ended up with a broken arm and his face was pretty smashed up. He was sent to a Muggle hospital this morning for something called reconstructive surgery -- we don't want him to end up looking like Moody! I think everyone had bruised ribs and such. Gin was hurt pretty badly -- internal damage -- but she'll come around in a day or two. Anyway, the girls and I have been helping the elves take care of you and Gin since Monday evening. Winky said you should wake up sometime today, and that Georgia and I could leave tonight if we wanted to, which we don't and aren't."

"Could I have some water?"

"Of course you can!" Hermione said, walking up to the bed. She was also wearing her dressing gown and slippers.

"Hi," Harry managed to say.

"Hi, yourself," she told him, as she and Ginny helped prop him up in bed.

"Merlin, I'm weak!"

"You apparently put a lot your power into frying Riddle, and then what you had left creating the gigantic version of yourself," Ginny said bluntly. "It takes a while to come back from that."

"Winky, Madam Pomfrey, and Professor Dumbledore have all said you will be almost back to normal by tomorrow morning," Hermione told him.

Harry finished drinking the small glass of water, glad he hadn't dropped it. "That's good to know."

"I'll tell Luna you're awake, and then tell Dobby and the others," Hermione said. "Dobby will let the professors know, and then maybe they'll tell us who all . . . was hurt."

Hermione started to turn, but then stooped and kissed Harry's nose. "Thank you, Harry," she said simply, and left.

"Thanks for what?" Harry asked Ginny.

"For saving the wizarding world? For trusting us enough to let us help you? For admitting that we have the right to love you, and that you deserve that love? For loving us?" Ginny sat up and then kissed Harry lightly on the lips. "Thank you for all of that, Harry. And thank you for saving my life four years ago, thank you for sharing your life with me, and thank you for helping to bring me and Neville together. You're the best brother a girl could have."

"It hasn't escaped me that you, Hermione, and Luna have been my most enthusiastic and steadfast supporters," Harry told her. "I couldn't have done it without your feelings for me, and the help you three, and the DA officers, especially Ron, gave me. To tell you the truth, it was my love for the three of you that really allowed me to destroy that monster."

"Well then, we have a lot to be thankful for," Ginny said with a smile.

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked.

Ginny twisted around. "You can't see, but our beds, except for Luna's, were in the other part of the room. Gin's is the furthest from here." She waved her arm, and a few seconds later Ron appeared.

"Oi, you look like shite," Ron said.

"Thanks," Harry said. "How are you doing?"

Ron shrugged, and glanced to where Hermione had disappeared. "Well, I'm doing alright, but I guess my personal problems haven't been solved. How about yours?"

"I have a life ahead of me, instead of a possible death sentence," Harry answered.

"The Minister said that you, and anyone you recommend, have automatic acceptance into the aurors' program," Ron said.

"That's not fair," Harry said sincerely. "Everyone else in the auror potion class, plus Hermione, Ginny, and Luna, deserve that offer if I do. Especially you and Hermione."

"Will you tell her that?" Ron asked.

"Of course," Harry said sleepily. "Remind me . . . when I wake up."

"Did you really think he would forget he had help?" Ginny demanded.

Ron shrugged. Ginny wanted to reprimand him, but held her tongue. She curled up next to Harry while Ron stalked away. Luna, fresh from a bath, sat down on the other side of Harry a few moments later.

"He was awake?" Luna asked.

Ginny nodded. "He said he woke up once before, and you were beside him.

"That's good," Luna said, taking her dressing gown off and slipping under the sheet and holding onto Ginny and Harry. "Hopefully tomorrow we'll learn everything we need to know."

Thursday, April 3, 1997

Harry woke up feel warm and secure. He realized why when he saw that Luna was again cuddled up with him.

"Master Harry is awake!" Dobby said quietly but happily.

"Master Harry has to pee," Harry grumbled.

"Sit up slowly, Master Harry," Dobby encouraged.

Harry did so, and after Dobby helped him with the dressing gown, Harry managed to stagger to the lavatory. "Little buggers must have enlarged my bladder," he muttered.

When Harry finally came out, the others were already stirring, except for Gin, who was still deep in a healing sleep. The elves had put the full walls back, making it a two room suite once again, and had a breakfast table conjured in the old bedroom.

The six students ate quietly, Dobby having told them that the Headmaster knew of their awaking and that he or some other faculty member would arrive soon to talk with them.

Tomas Zoric and Remus Lupin arrived just as they were finishing their breakfast (except for Ron, who was on his third helping of everything).

"Feeling better, Harry?" Remus asked.

"Compared to the first two times I woke up, I feel great," Harry answered. "On the other hand, I still feel pretty weak."

"Harry, there aren't more than a handful of wizards who could expend in a day as much power as you did in about ten minutes," Tomas said. "It will be another day or two before you're back to your usual physical strength and about another week before you're back to full magical strength."

"Most people would still be asleep after expending that much of their power," Remus agreed.

After a moment of silence, Harry said, "Just come out and tell us what we managed to do, and how much it cost us."

Tomas and Remus exchanged glances, and Tomas started. "Voldemort had a hundred and thirty-two people (including himself), three hundred and three dementors, fifty-four giants, ninety-three trolls, and nine goblins."

The students exchanged glances at that. "Dumbledore kept the time spell going until about Seven forty-five. That allowed the international aurors to take out a hundred and twenty-six of the dementors. The others escaped, and are currently trying to negotiate a return to Azkaban."

Ron snorted at that. The others ignored him.

"The two forest groups killed the twenty-one Death Eaters, three trolls, and nine goblins who were left to guard the forest. The Order and townspeople captured the twenty-one Death Eaters between the village and school. So far as we know, our side on the outside suffered minor injuries, except for three of the spiders getting killed."

Ron and Georgia both shuddered.

"Of the ninety trolls that attacked, thirty-nine were killed, all the rest captured. Nine giants were killed, the others captured. Thirty-two of the Death Eaters and Voldemort were killed, the other fifty-seven have been captured. Macnair, Pettigrew, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Lucius Malfoy were among those killed."

"Our side suffered fewer fatalities," Remus took up the story, "in large part because Ron managed to set us up right after the firefight started so that twelve of the Death Eaters actually killed their fellows and because of the opening volley you set up. We lost twenty-four people. I don't think you know any of the Order or Ministry people. The only faculty member killed was Trelawney, when a giant collapsed on top of her. For the students, Jacqui Spenser, Terry Boot, Kevin Entwhistle, Mitchell Connerly, and Mark Pebbles were killed. Abdul Hasan, Susan Bones, Lavender Brown, Anthony Goldstein, and of course Neville and Gin were the most seriously injured of the students. We saved the vision in Neville's eye and the Muggles

should be able to mend the appearances of Neville, Lavender, and Susan. Abdul lost his left hand. Just about everyone was beaten up pretty badly."

"You'll be able to tell the twins apart now," Tomas said. "Fred lost half of the little finger on his left hand."

"And we're sure the bastard is dead this time, right?" Ron demanded.

"We promise," Tomas said in his most dead-pan voice, "Voldemort is not only merely dead. . . ."

"He's really most sincerely dead," Harry, Hermione, Luna, and Ginny finished with him.

Georgia rolled her eyes. "It's a Muggle thing," she told the confused Ron. "We'll show you the video this summer, if you visit us."

"Video?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"We'll explain that, too," Tomas assured him. He gave Ron a hard look. "Maybe we can discuss it sometime . . . soon. In private." Ron turned very pale.

"When will I be able to see the Headmaster?" Harry asked to divert attention.

"He and the Minister will be down before dinner," Tomas said. "We need to debrief you know, unless you prefer to be grilled by the Ministry people for the next week."

"Great," Harry groused.

"Mister Potter!" Minister Bones greeted Harry with a handshake and a hearty backslap.

"Careful!" Dumbledore warned, as she nearly knocked Harry to the floor.

"Sorry," the Minister said, catching Harry and propping him up. She helped him to sit in one of the three chairs set out on the landing. "Now, I need to talk with you, because we need to set out appropriate awards, and everyone jumped down my gullet when I thought about doing so without talking to you first."

Harry eyed the hearty Minister, and she didn't look either thrilled about being there, or angry. "Like saying I could be passed into auror's training, but other students would need my recommendation?"

"It was just a suggestion," Bones said.

"Has it been released?"

"No," Bones told him. "I agreed to talk to you first."

"Could the announcement just list us in alphabetical order?" Harry asked. "The DA officers and the aurors' potions class members, plus anyone else who was outside the Faculty recommend?"

"Since Susan would likely be near the top of such a list, that might not be best idea."

"I guess you may list my name first, followed by Ron Weasley and then the rest in alphabetical order." Harry knew he couldn't get away with having Ron's listed first, so he didn't try.

"Alright. We'd like to give you the Order of Merlin, First Class, as well."

Harry thought a moment. "First Class for Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, and at least Second for the other DA members. I would hope all the students who were outside would get at least a Third."

Bones nodded her agreement. "Anything else? If so, now is the time to ask, Potter."

"Hermione has an idea about a monument," Harry told them. "And since all the students who were here volunteered to fight, even if we all didn't actually have to, we should all receive similar amounts of House points," he told Dumbledore, who nodded.

"Will you talk with the press?" the Minister asked.

Harry handed her two sheets of parchment. "This can be released either by you or Professor Dumbledore, or even by my Master Teacher. Mister Lovegood will have something similar in next week's Quibbler. I presume Master Tomas gave your people the results of his and Professor Lupin's interview this morning?"

"We did, and it was very thorough," Madam Bones admitted.

"I'm sure Harry will answer any reasonable number of questions submitted in writing," Dumbledore told him.

"I see." The Minister looked at Harry. "Do you intend on taking us up on the offer of auror training?"

"Absolutely," Harry said firmly. "Master Tomas has offered me a position with his agency afterwards, if I don't want to join after the training."

"Really? And is that what you think you'll do?"

"That depends, at least in part, on how the Ministry acts over the next four or five years," Harry pointed out. "We made a small start here this week in bringing the old families and the Muggle-born together. That's the real challenge, assuming all the Death Eaters are under arrest, for the next few years."

"I understand," the Minister said, catching some of the underlying currents. She had been impressed at how loyal all the students seemed to be towards Harry. He could become a major political force in a decade or so, if he felt the necessity.

It would be best for her career, and the magical community, if Harry Potter was satisfied with the way the community in Britain was being managed.

Bones looked at Harry. "We did catch all the surviving Death Eaters who accompanied the Dark Lord here. My understanding is there may have been as many as thirty Death Eaters on other missions, who were unable to make it here on short notice. We will do our best to catch them, and ask our sister Ministries to assist us."

"And what about the Malfoys and Goyle?"

"Best evidence suggests that it was young Crabbe who murdered that student," Minister Bones told him. "Goyle has confessed to two assault charges. The information he gave us on the . . . attacks on the Muggle women will likely buy him some immunity. The Joint North American Ministries have agreed to hold the Malfoys under house arrest, at their expense, for a term of thirty years."

"I don't think that last was . . . the punishment they deserved, but I won't raise a fuss, unless they buy themselves total luxury," Harry told her."

"Any other problem areas, Mister Potter?"

"Can anything be done about the anti-werewolf legislation, Sirius Black's conviction, and house elf rights?"

"Yes, yes, and I understand Miss Granger has some ideas, which I will assure you will receive a fair hearing." She smiled at Harry's frown. "Really; it's time to end the actual enslavement. It ended in some countries over a hundred years ago. It will take some time to enact, but we will."

"If you move Percy Weasley out of his father's office, I hope you'll make certain there's a good replacement."

The Minister laughed. "Mister Potter, I promise you, Arthur will never be left short-handed again. I intend to integrate the Muggle-born and Mixed-bloods of all types into our society. So, no Muggle-baiting, and I hope we shall prevent at least some of this hatred that has grown up over the last two centuries."

"I hope so; that's the type of culture to be proud of," Harry told her.

The two shook hands, and Dumbledore led the Minister away.

Harry stayed seated until Luna came to help him go back to bed to rest.

Harry needed to sort out where his life might be going, now that he could foresee a real future. With a little luck, he might have a century and a half of life or more ahead of him. He had a love, he had a family (Remus, Hermione, the Zorics, the Weasleys). While they weren't related by blood, Harry had in a sense fulfilled the desires the Mirror of Erised had shown him, just as Ron's desires to be Quidditch Captain and Prefect, if not yet Head Boy, had been fulfilled.

Harry laid down, and smiled. Luna laid down next to him, and again felt his contentment, now mirrored by her own.

Epilogue

Wednesday, March 30, 2072
6:55 am

It was a gloomy, overcast, chilly day in northern Scotland. Could Muggles see the scene, they would have seen a robed man emerge from the huge castle. To Muggle eyes, the man would appear to be a very fit shortish man in his late 50s, although he was in truth four months shy of his 92nd birthday. He was headed towards a large granite memorial.

In twenty minutes, students, staff, and visitors would stream out of the castle, but none dared intrude on the man's right to visit the memorial alone. No one called Harry Potter, once 'the Boy-Who-Lived', the greatest sorcerer alive, as Albus Dumbledore had been called until his death just over forty years before. They did acknowledge him as the most powerful, and perhaps most dangerous, sorcerer of the century. He had, after all, killed the most powerful Dark Wizard of the past three centuries, killed four other major would-be followers of Tom Riddle's example and defeated and captured seven others over the previous seventy-odd years, plus killing or capturing dozens of their minions.

He was not a wizard to be trifled with, although his Muggle-born students sometimes mistook his mild manner for weakness. When they heard in the History of Magic class how Professor Potter had killed twelve Dark wizards with one spell in 2006 (the so-called Deadly Dozen, led by former Death Eater Antonin Dolohov, who had killed auror Ron Weasley a few weeks before), they tended to treat their Defense teacher with more respectful caution.

Harry's eyes searched out Ron's name first. Harry had always wondered about Ron's death, if he had just been sloppy because his and Hermione's divorce had just been finalized. They and Justin had been the only members of the aurors' potion class to make it through training. Ron had joined, while Harry did a stint working for Tomas Zoric. In 2002, Harry took over the DADA position from Remus, who had replaced Binns when the ghost finally drifted off.

Dumbledore had gone on until 2010, when he had finally retired. McGonagall had taken over, and Hermione had come to take over Transfiguration and to Head Gryffindor.

The sunlight suddenly highlighted Sybil Trelawney's name, and Harry smiled. She had never seen her own death. Harry would never be Minister of Magic, although, like Dumbledore, he could be if he ever wanted it.

She had over-estimated the number of his children, as well. He and Luna had married in 2000, and would have five children over the next 20 years. After Ron's death, Luna had insisted Hermione and her son by Ron (Robert) move into the manor house they owned just outside Hogsmeade. Everyone suspected Harry was the father of Hermione's other child, but few knew that it had been Luna's idea -- just as it had been Luna who had convinced Harry to 'help' Padma and Georgia, who were not only still together but hoping to start a family.

It had also been Luna who had suggested that Harry help out Neville and Ginny. As best the healers could tell, the cumulative effect of all the botched potions Neville had been forced to self-test in his first four and a half years at Hogwarts had rendered him sterile. Fortunately,

Hermione had discovered a Muggle procedure which restored Neville to full function, and all six of Ginny's children were Neville's.

When the stories of Padma's and Georgia's children broke, Hermione had written an article, describing in very boring detail how Muggle artificial insemination worked. No one noticed that nowhere did any one say that was how any of Harry's children were created.

Harry smiled, as he nearly always did when he thought of his children, and now his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Harry smiled often, and it was nearly always over his children or their children, his loves, and the children of his friends. Ginny and Neville's. The Weasley twins, Bill and Charlie, and even Percy. Gin, Parvati, Lavender and Seamus, Justin, Ernie, Susan, Hannah, Lisa, and even Daphne -- all their children and grandchildren called him 'Uncle Harry.' Even Millicent and Gregory Goyle, who married when he was released from prison in 2005, had Harry stand as godfather to their three children.

That brought to mind the names of two students who had chosen paths not to be there: Draco and Bellatrix Malfoy. He privately always thought it was more amazing that Draco and Pansy had produced four intelligent, nice daughters than one evil son. He had broken up their Alliance for Pure-Blooded Power in 2047. Marcus had gone down fighting; Bellatrix was still in the Lucius Malfoy Hospital Prison for the Criminally Insane, Draco in still prison.

"Beloved?"

Harry turned around and saw the light of his life, and smiled. "The Headmistress wishes to know if your meditation is over," Luna inquired.

"And I'm sure Hermione said it exactly like that," Harry said, still smiling. He waved his arm, and the students, staff, and visitors poured onto the great lawn.

Monday, March 30, 2172
6:55 am

Three elderly witches slowly walked out of Hogwarts Castle, which stood as it had stood for over 1200 years. They moved slowly, as they were over 190 years old. They were the last three surviving fighters from the battle of Hogwarts, and three close friends from even before the battle.

Their hair, once so different, were all shades of gray and white; all three were still slim and stood straight.

"This is the one day I miss him more than on his birthday," Ginny said.

"I think I miss him most on the First of September," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"I just miss him," Luna said. "I hope he found answers on the other side."

"I miss him, and I miss Neville even more," Ginny said with a sudden smile, "but I'm still in no rush."

Hermione heard the students coming out from the castle. There was no one even working at Hogwarts who had been at the battle, who remembered it, other than Peeves, Myrtle, the Bloody Baron, and Nearly-Headless Nick. Even the Fat Friar and the Grey Lady were gone, replaced by other ghosts.

"Aunt Hermione?" a voice said from behind them. The trio turned, and saw Harry Lupin, Remus and Tonks' eldest grandson and Hermione's successor as Headmaster thirty years before. "It's time to start the ceremony."

Saturday, March 30, 2497
6:55 am

Four students, one from each House, met in front of the Battle Memorial.

"It's hard to believe we're each direct male descendants of someone who fought here," Daniel Weasley, the Seventh year Gryffindor, said.

"Not to mention having a direct descendant of Harry Potter himself!" Warren Macmillan, a Third year Hufflepuff enthused.

"It's a pain in the butt sometimes," James Potter, a Sixth year Ravenclaw grumbled.

"Apparently, there weren't any Slytherins out here," James Trowbridge, a Fifth year Slytherin said. "Mine was bombarding giants from the Astronomy Tower."

"It all helped," James said.

"Why do we come out early like this every year?" Warren asked, this being his first time out first.

"This is when Tom Riddle launched the attack," a fifth voice said. "Harry came out here at this time every year while he was alive. After that, the three women who were his most faithful followers came out first. After the last died, three hundred years ago tomorrow, a representative from each House comes out, to stand for unity."

"Hi, Aunt Ginny," the four students said, welcoming the Gryffindor ghost.

"You haven't done a full Telling since my First year," James told her.

"I will Tell the Story this afternoon and tonight," Ginny said with a smile. "The story of a powerful, amoral wizard who was afraid to die, of the most powerful and broadest-trained wizard since Merlin, and of a small orphan boy who inspired the magical world. I shall tell the tale of the Philosopher's Stone, of the Chamber of Secrets, of the Marauders, of Cedric Diggory and the Tri-Wizard Championship, and of the Three Prophecies."

The students and staff of Hogwarts had gathered around them, and the helpful ghost called Aunt Ginny by all, once again a reflection of her beautiful self at 17, smiled at them all. She would keep the memory of all of them fresh as long as she could. In the end, all would be forgotten, but even then, perhaps little tendrils of goodness would grow from this story. "Most

of all, I will tell the story of Albus Dumbledore and especially Harry Potter, and the pledge they, and we students at the time, made. A pledge that has insured that, because we have kept it, we have had no wizard as evil or powerful as Tom Riddle, although a few have tried. I shall tell the tale, so that in the telling, you shall what?"

"REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!" the Hufflepuffs shouted.

"AND ALL THE INNOCENTS, SLAUGHTERED!" the students and staff responded.