

# **Harry and Hermione pt. III -- Finishing their Sixth Year and Into the Summer**

By

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## Table of Contents

Harry and Hermione pt. III -- Finishing their Sixth Year and Into the Summer.....	1
Chapter I.....	3
Chapter II.....	13
Chapter III .....	22
Chapter IV .....	30
Chapter V .....	38
Chapter VI.....	46
Chapter VII.....	56
Chapter VIII .....	64
Chapter IX .....	73
Chapter X .....	82

## **Chapter I**

Monday, February 10, 1997

With a final slash of his wand, Harry Potter threw his third consecutive opponent against a wall. "Had enough?" Harry demanded.

Professor Law simply sat on the floor, trying to collect his thoughts. Doctor Powell managed to stand up and limp over to his uncle. "You okay?"

"Barely," the retired hit wizard admitted. "I think I'll be sitting on an extra cushion for the next day or two."

"How about you, Lupin?" Powell called.

"I think I shall just lie here for a few hours and meditate on the folly of the last two weeks."

Harry, standing straight and looking powerful, looked over to the group standing by the door. "Well?"

Dumbledore, Flitwick, Moody, and Mistress Merry looked very proud; all had been giving Harry the benefit of their considerable experience. McGonagall, Tonks, and Hermione had a mix of horror and pride on their faces. Minister Bones just looked a bit awe-struck. Two of the three law-enforcers with the Minister looked impressed.

"They were pulling their punches," the third one declared.

Harry smiled. "Prove it, Harold."

The two faced off next to each other, although this was a fight, not a duel. "You're going down, yob."

"Not on you, no matter how sweetly you ask," Harry said with a grin. Harold frowned and backed away.

On the signal, Harry shot twenty stingers in less than six seconds, five times the number most wizards could produce. Harold easily blocked all but the first, and he was surprised how much it hurt.

The flaring on Harold's shield revealed it to be a standard, neutral shield, so Harry sent off something a bit different. "Patronum!"

The Patronus Dart smashed through the shield, just missing Harold's head. Harold went into a roll, and six more hexes just missed him before Harold could get his first shot off. From that point, the duel began in earnest.

Over the next fifteen minutes, Harry nearly drove Harold into defeat twice, but each time Harold just managed to fight his way out. Harold didn't have Remus' stamina, and wasn't as

agile. He was slightly more skilled than Remus or Powell, however, and had more agility and stamina than Law.

Harold was not surprised by Harry's reflexes -- that can't be faked, and he'd observed Harry take on three very skilled and powerful duelists. What surprised him was Harry's power. He had thought the trio opposing the boy had been exaggerating his hits. He knew better now.

Hermione was staying calm through all this only because she didn't want to distract Harry. She had confidence in Harry, but it was still unnerving to see him fight. She still wasn't comfortable with how he was being trained since their return. January had been a very strange month. Harry's power had jumped at least 50% in the first two weeks. Mistress Merry and Dumbledore had merely nodded wisely, saying they had hoped such an occurrence would happen, and happen soon. Harry had grimaced when they'd said that, but held his temper.

Harry's power jump frightened Hermione. She had never noticed that great a change in a fellow student's power over that short of time. She had never seen anyone operating at Harry's new power-level, except Dumbledore of course. Only the Headmaster was more powerful, and the Headmaster had said Harry would likely match him by the summer.

This meant Harry would probably be facing Voldemort sooner rather than later.

To make time for his longer training, Harry had mostly dropped out of tutoring nearly all of the other students, although all the other defense groups gathered under the DA umbrella were still meeting under Hermione's direction. Harry now only spent three hours a week tutoring a small group, that is some his close friends and the others amongst the Sixth years who were leading the tutorials of the younger students.

Harry's power surge took him to the top of the practicals in Charms and Transfiguration and had really jump-started his wandless magic, although Hermione still reigned at the queen of theory. She wasn't jealous; she remembered what she had said back at the end of their First year. Harry was becoming that great wizard she had somehow foreseen him as all along.

Harry maneuvered Harold into an inferior position a third time, but then seemed to hesitate. Harold managed just enough effort to cry, "Expelliarmus!" Harry's wand flew into Harold's waiting grasp, but Harry was not flung backwards. Instead, he was merely rocked a bit and stood there, smiling.

Harold stared at Harry, confused.

Harry lifted his right hand, pointed, mouthed a word, and Harold dropped, stunned. The spell hadn't even been seen. Harry then silently summoned his wand and then Harold's. He walked over and handed Harold's to Madam Bones. "If there's nothing else, I'd like to take a shower before dinner," he remarked to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore looked around, and no one objected. Harry held out his hand, and he and Hermione silently walked out of the training dungeon.

"Exactly how powerful is he, Dumbledore?" Bones asked in shock. "I've never even heard of a wandless stunner, let alone seen one! Or rather, NOT seen one!"

"Although Harry is not the natural student I, or Tom Riddle, was, he is approximately as powerful as I was at that age. I believe he is slightly more powerful than Riddle was."

"Can he defeat Riddle?" she asked.

"We can only hope," Dumbledore said. "Power is only one factor. He still needs experience. I have great confidence he will at least survive the next encounter."

"What's the hurry, Harry?" Hermione huffed. Along with Harry's increase in magical power had come an increase in stamina. He now ran the hardest, fastest, and longest of any of the morning runners, while Hermione was just slightly above average.

"I need to get to our room," Harry replied.

"Why?"

"Because I'm still on the adrenaline rush. As soon as I stop moving, I'm going to collapse if I don't get some sugar. Our room is closer, and I really do need the shower, and something for a snack, before I collapse. Otherwise I won't be able to make it to dinner."

"Really?"

"Really. I'm still not used to channeling this much power for that long a time. I'll need something like chocolate milk and pie."

"Does Dumbledore know?"

"Probably. My trainers do, anyway." Seeing the way clear, they went behind the mirror, and in less than ten minutes, Harry was in the shower, while Hermione called for Dobby and asked for chocolate milk and pie.

Harry just stood under the jets of hot water, willing his body to relax but not collapse. He jumped slightly when he felt Hermione's arms go around his waist, and then her nipples rub against his back.

"Shall I wash your back?" she asked.

"I love it when you wash any part of me," Harry admitted.

"Just stand there . . . spread your legs a little." She started washing Harry's back. "Do you really like this?"

"Not as much as I enjoy washing you," Harry replied, "but I do. I think I better not tonight, though. Too tired."

"Down boy," Hermione commanded. "Your master is too tired."

"The rest of me is," Harry admitted. "We'd better stop now, so I can drink some milk, or I might fall asleep during dinner. Harold would be so pleased."

"Quite right," Hermione answered, rinsing Harry and then turning off the water, "we can't show weakness to Harold."

They dried themselves off and slipped on heavy bathrobes. Harry plopped into one of the chairs near the fireplace. "Pumpkin? You'd think with all the pumpkin juice we drink, you wouldn't like the pie so much."

"They didn't have carrot cake, and I love pumpkin pie," Hermione answered. "Now, get enough sugar into your system so you can make it through dinner without giving Harold a thrill."

Chatter at the dinner tables that night were a bit lighter than it had been through most of the previous month. The January dance had been canceled as Slytherin House had been in mourning, the weather had been gloomier than the average January, and a tiny Irish village where all the residents were magical, mixed couples, or squibs, had been attacked by dementors and destroyed. The only positive news had been that Voldemort's giant allies had gone back to central Asia to try and convince the neutrals to come into the battle. The other giants had refused. In the resulting four day battle around Christmas, all of Voldemort's giant allies had been killed, as had most of the neutrals.

A body count on Christmas Day had shown that all of Voldemort's werewolves had been killed or incapacitated in the attack and then captured and destroyed. On the negative side, seven of the eighteen registered vampires in Britain and Ireland (all the defectors had been wizards or witches in their former lives) had tried to go over to Voldemort. In the resulting battle, one of the defectors had been destroyed, as had eight of the other eleven.

In short, it was believed Voldemort still lacked the power for a major attack. His only assets besides his own power and knowledge were perhaps two to four dozen followers, six magical vampires, the dementors, and perhaps some trolls. These were more than enough, however, to allow Voldemort to continue his terror attacks.

Therefore, it was not surprising that talking had been down in general, and mostly confined to school and defense topics. Laughter was rarely heard in the Great Hall. That was one reason Dumbledore stood in the middle of meal time and called for attention.

"Life is serious. That is something that we would wish you knew, but not so well as we know these days. However, just because life is serious it does not mean we must be serious at all times! Therefore, dinner will be early this Friday -- that's Valentine's Day, in case any of you young gentlemen may not have noticed."

Some slight laughter, mostly feminine, greeted that sally.

"As I was saying, a light dinner will be served from Four-thirty until Five-fortyfive. We shall have a masked party and dance starting at Six-thirty, which ALL students are expected to attend. Students shall stay until their year curfews: Nine-thirty for First and Second years;

until Ten for Third years; until Ten-thirty for Fourth years; and Eleven for Fifth, Six, and Seventh years. To make certain all costumes are non-obscene and otherwise appropriate, everyone will be in pre-set attire and masks. Speaking from vast experience, I suggest cards and candies be exchanged well before or after the dance. The dance will be held in a special dungeon we are creating for the purpose. All students will be entering singly -- finding your friends will part of the fun."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Ron muttered. No one disagreed.

Friday, February 14, 1997

"I still don't get it," Ron complained, to vigorous nods from Neville. Each dorm room came down separately, and the Sixth year Gryffindor boys were on their way to the dungeon, following a map sent to them.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what the old goat is up to, either."

"Old goat?" Dean asked. "Bit peeved, are we, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess. He's up to something, but there are so many possibilities."

"Just be glad, you two," Neville scolded. "No offense, Dean, but you'll be easy to pick out unless we're totally masked, with gloves. And Harry, you're the only person with those eyes."

"Afraid Padma will find you before Parvati, or hoping?" Ron teased.

"And whatever we're wearing will have to be pretty shapeless for us not to find Lavender!" Seamus proclaimed.

"You'll never grow up," Dean said mock-mournfully to his friend.

The five teens walked into a room with five doors, with a house elf standing outside. "Misters Ron, Harry, Dean, Seamus, and Neville," the elf squeaked pointing them to the different rooms. "Change and then walk back through the door. You will be in the cellar ball room, entering at random times."

"Huh?" Neville asked.

"We're going into the rooms and change," Harry said. "Somehow, when we come back out the doors, we'll be entering the dungeon at random times."

"Sounds . . . odd," Ron said, doubtfully.

Seamus shrugged. "Why not?" He walked into the designated room. The others followed.

Harry found a complete set of clothes, right down to shoes, and a note:

- 1) Teachers **will** know which student is which; proper decorum is expected;*
- 2) Blue robes for straight boys, red for gay; green for straight girls, purple for gay; white for bi-sexuals; please note that third years and under, and some older students, have been diverted to their own activities in an adjoining room; staff will be in orange;*
- 3) enjoy the dancing*

Harry shrugged and got dressed in his blue robes. He had recently started sensing magical auras. Not many people's, but a few. He wondered if that would help him tonight. Harry frowned at the mask -- he wouldn't be able to wear his glasses.

Harry was surprised to see that his mask corrected his vision. Glancing in the full-length mirror, Harry was slightly surprised to see his eye color wasn't changed. He took a deep breath, and walked out.

Dozens of students were already dancing in a large room. There was a table set as a buffet at one end of the room, and there was a corridor at the far end of that wall, no doubt leading to the younger students. Students were emerging from the wall behind Harry, although he couldn't see any doors or portals.

Harry decided he probably should be dancing, too. He took two steps towards the nearest unattached green robe when he stopped himself. The whole set-up was wrong -- the dance, the location, and above all his desire to dance with anything in green.

"Compulsion spells," Harry muttered. Somehow, for some reason, he was being compelled. He needed help, and there were only two people who could help him. He glanced around, looking first for Hermione.

'Drat,' Harry thought. Then he noticed three orange robes heading towards him. Harry saw he was the only person not dancing within a few seconds of coming out of the wall. Few people could fight the Compulsions, but it was less powerful than the Imperius Curse. The staff could probably guess who the only person was who wasn't dancing.

No, Harry realized, there was a thin figure in white who was also avoiding dancing and Harry recognized the aura. Harry moved quickly, and had Luna in his arms before she really realized what was happening.

"WHAT??" Luna almost squeaked.

"It's me, Luna."

"Oh, Harry! Thank goodness . . . I think. Harry, why are we dancing?"

"Because if we don't, we'll stand out."

"I see." They danced once around the room, Harry's eyes sweeping the room. Then Luna asked, "And do you know why everyone else is dancing?"

"We're under a Compulsion."



"Exactly. The room itself is set-up with the Compulsion, and I do believe these clothes are amplifying it."

"Really?"

"It would work out best that way," Luna said thoughtfully. "Hermione would have to explain the arithmancy."

"Alright. Would the clothes be hexed, or set with runes?"

"Runes might work best . . . most likely in the shoes."

"Then an ending spell wouldn't work, would it?"

"Not as such. There must be a specific ending spell that would work. But Harry, you've been working on wandless magic. If you can sense the location of the runes, you can cancel the active runes by breaking one without the staff seeing you use your wand. If we work together and find one, we can break the rune and that will cancel the effects, ending the spell. Once you find one, you can easily find the same thing on anyone else. Once we know where the runes are set, it might even be possible to send people into the toilets to do it themselves, if the Compulsion doesn't prevent it."

"True."

"But how do we work together?" Luna asked. "I don't see an easy way to stop dancing. There are teachers all over the place, especially around the buffet."

"There is a way, but it's rather . . . intimate."

"Really?" Luna thought a moment. "You mean, we'd merge our magics?"

"Exactly."

Luna looked at Harry. "That is more than just intimate, Harry. It's intimate like sex or mutual Legilimency is intimate. You're very powerful, Harry. You could hurt me -- mentally, physically, emotionally. You could ravish my very soul, you might even be powerful enough to damage my magic."

"That's all true," Harry acknowledged. It was also the last step in the full bonding ceremony, done after a number of binding spells and during intercourse. Merging magics during sexual intimacy was famous for enhancing the experience. "Hermione and I have done it twice, and I can control the power. Haven't you and Ginny at least tried it?"

"We have," Luna admitted.

"Trust me?"

Silvery-blue eyes met bright green. "Alright," Luna said shyly.

The music continued through three songs before Harry could even try to locate the minute magical signal of a rune. Harry and Luna were blending their magics with ease, however. As Luna had said, in some ways it was as intimate as sex, although without intimate physical contact the pleasures were purely emotional. Their feelings started to blend as well during the third song, and their hearts and breathing matched. Luna relaxed and luxuriated in the feelings, although she was also aware of Harry's raw power as never before. She hoped Harry could control it, and her respect for Hermione went up.

At the end of the fourth song, though, their combined subconscious found the key rune, located in the heel of their shoes. Once found, the magical signature stood out like a beacon. Harry quickly slashed the runes with a touch of wandless magic.

Instantly, the pressures mostly lifted from their minds, and they managed to stumble into a ring of slower dancers. "That was . . . amazing," Harry said. Luna's magic had felt very different than Hermione's. Not better, just very different.

"Thank you," Luna said.

"For what?"

"That was . . . slightly more intimate than what Ginny and I experienced. You're a very sweet and wonderful person, Harry Potter."

Harry blushed under his mask.

"Harry?"

"Yes?" Harry asked, anxiously.

"Did it seem while we were dancing that the effects were less over by the buffet?"

Harry smiled ruefully, then he thought about what she had said. "You know, I think you're right."

"We still don't know why all this was set up, though."

"Oh, that's pretty clear."

"An attack on Hogwarts?"

"Probably a dementor attack. All the positive energy this dance is generating would keep the dementors out of the dungeons."

Luna considered this, and agreed it was the most likely explanation. "What do we do?" she asked.

"We need Hermione, Ginny, Ron, Dean, and Colin to have clear heads, at the very least."

"Anyone else?"

"Probably, but we at least need Hermione and Ginny."

"Here come Colin and Ginny," Luna said, referring to an approaching couple in red and white as the waltz changed into something slow and modern.

"It will go faster if you do Ginny while I do Colin," Harry said.

"All right." Luna was so attuned to Ginny that she should have little trouble getting through to her, and Colin would no doubt listen to Harry, no matter how powerful the enchantments.

"Find Hermione," Harry pleaded.

"We will, Harry." Luna kissed Harry softly, then they swept near Ginny and Colin and switched partners.

"Excuse me, are you color blind?" Colin asked politely

"No; are you?" Harry asked, looking into Colin's blue eyes.

Colin looked up and saw the bright green eyes of his adopted brother and first love. "Harry!" Colin enthused, hugging him closer. "I'm so glad! I never thought you'd dance with me! I can't find Dean, and Ginny couldn't find Luna, and. . . ."

Harry cut into Colin's happy yet nervous chatter. "I was dancing with Luna, so Ginny's with her now. Right now, we have a problem."

"What's that?"

"We're all under a Compulsion to dance."

"I thought it was a bit strange everyone is dancing, and dancing so well, at that," Colin said thoughtfully. "Why? Is it an attack? Here?"

"No; more likely there's going to be an attack upstairs. I can free you, if you want."

"Of course I want! How?"

"Well, we can't really stop. So, you can try to sneak into the boy's toilet. There's a rune on the heels of our shoes. I could burn a slash into it with wandless magic, but since we can't stop to do it properly, I would have to do it through your magic."

Colin looked at Harry, puzzled. "How?"

"I can merge my magic with yours. Hermione and I have done that -- it's a form of wandless magic. It can bring people . . . very close, so if you don't want to. . . ."

Colin remembered all the warnings Flitwick had given them about trying merging magics, and all the rumors on why it was exhilarating. "Harry, you are one of the few people I would allow inside my soul."

"Haven't you done this a lot?"

Colin shook his head. "Just once. Dean is a little afraid to experiment with it again."

Harry just looked at Colin.

"Alright, I've been a little leery, too."

"Ready? Just relax and let me do the work."

It took a little longer for Harry to blend his magic with Colin. However, once he had, it only took Harry a few seconds to burn out the runes on Colin's shoes. Harry wished there was an easier way, but all the easy ways were too difficult to do while dancing.

Colin almost collapsed in Harry's arms. "God, Harry, that was almost as good as an orgasm."

Harry smiled. The combining of magic told you a lot about a person's hidden true self. Hermione's magic was as powerful and logical as anyone would think, but also as passionate as only Harry really knew. Luna's magic was not quite as powerful, but it was even more deeply ingrained in her soul and as passionate. Colin was even less powerful, although still slightly above average. His dark feelings were stronger, reflecting the hurt his families murders and his lycanthropy caused, and the hurts caused by his rejection by so many because of his heritage, his lycanthropy, and his slightly effeminate homosexuality. He was as passionate as Luna and Hermione however.

Colin had been bowled over by Harry's sheer power, and his innate honor and goodness. Colin wasn't quite as sensitive as Luna or as attuned to Harry as Hermione, so he missed many of Harry's small dark spots. Colin was overwhelmed by his feelings, and pulled Harry down into a deep kiss. Harry, equally affected, returned it.

"Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome. Check out the lavatories, and when you dance, keep an eye out for Dean and Hermione. Steer them towards Luna or myself."

"Alight."

Harry spun Colin off the dance floor, and took up with a girl standing near by, looking for anyone to dance with.

## **Chapter II**

Within an hour, Luna had merged with Ginny and Hermione, trying to free them. Colin had merged with a white-robed Dean, who had been dancing with several girls. In each case, it had taken the efforts of both partners, each touching their wands (although not being able to pull them and do the magic directly) several minutes to accomplish what it took Harry only a few seconds to do. In each case, it had been a very emotional contact, and none could imagine sharing the experience with anyone outside of the small group, other than Ron, who was refusing to let anyone cut into his dancing with Susan Bones.

In the same period, Harry managed to find Padma, Parvati, and Lavender, and sent them off to the toilets to investigate. They found the area well supervised. Only Padma managed to cancel the runes on her shoes, but it took some fancy maneuvering to avoid the teachers and other adults doing WC duty. Until Harry found out more information, the girls agreed to keep quiet, sharing only with Hannah, Ernie, Seamus, and Neville, if they could be found, as the Compulsion sent Parvati and Lavender back into the dancing students.

By then, the small band had discovered that many of the most powerful teachers -- Flitwick, McGonagall, Law, Powell, Lupin, and of course Dumbledore, were missing. There were also six more people in orange than the staff would account for. After Padma had managed to report back to Harry, he decided to confront a teacher. He of course made a bee-line to Hagrid.

"Hagrid, how much longer is this going to go on?"

"Hi-ya, Harry. Why aren't ya dancin'?"

"Because after detecting the Compulsion, I destroyed the runes in my shoes."

Hagrid frowned, which was just visible behind his mask. "Ya shouldn't ought ta 'ave done tha', Harry."

"I shouldn't have been left down here, Hagrid, at least not without information. I'm the only one who can defeat V . . . Riddle, and the Headmaster knows that."

"Well, it weren' totally up ter Dumbledore," Hagrid admitted. "An' You-Know-Who ain't suppose' ta be here."

"All right. How much longer?"

"Before Nine-thirty, we hope."

"I'll spread the word."

"How many of the students have ya released?"

"Me personally? Two. If any dementors or Death Eaters make it down here, you'll be glad we've released more."

"Harry . . . we ain' exactly a' Hogwarts."

"Where . . . where are we?"

"I don't rightly know," Hagrid admitted. "I do know if'n the spell's not broke by Nine-thirty, we'll be hurled forwards in time an' sen' ta the Ministry tomorrow mornin'."

"Great," Harry complained. "I'll let everyone know they can stop worrying that we'll actually be able to DO anything."

"So, I see you have partially figured out the Ministry's little plot, Mister Potter."

"With some help, Professor," Harry said, turning to Professor Sprout.

"Are any of mine aware?"

"We made Susan aware when she was dancing with Ron, but they can't stop dancing long enough for me to release them or to try and release themselves. Padma Patil managed to free herself after we told her, and she should have informed Ernie and Hannah by now. We decided to limit the people in the know until after I talked with a professor."

"Why Hagrid?"

"There are six people in orange too many. Who else could I talk to, knowing who it was?"

"Good answer. Collect all those who have broken the runes and bring them over here, then you and Miss Granger collect the others who are aware and bring them here as well. I'll break their runes, but no body else's We don't want any more; if this gets out, it will cause problems."

"Problem?" another orange robe asked from behind Harry.

"Well, Professor," Harry answered Trelawney, "the problem depends on your view point." He turned and left.

The small group of freed students quickly gathered behind the buffet. With a little persuasion, they also managed to get Ron, Susan, and Lavender off the dance floor. Harry and Sprout quickly slashed the runes in their shoes. The staff and Ministry people had them join in patrolling the parameter, making certain than any students who were acting fatigued were escorted over to the buffet.

"Harry. . . ."

"Yes, Angel?"

"Luna and I. . . ."

"I know," Harry said. "She's pretty amazing, isn't she?"

"How was Colin?"

"Not as amazing, but very sweet," Harry admitted. "I can't believe it, but he kissed me, and I liked it almost as much as I did kissing Luna."

"I don't think I'm bi," Hermione said, "or you, either. But it does give us some insight into them, doesn't it?"

"True, but it also showed me, no matter wonderful they are, you're still very special."

"So are you. This is a pretty slow, sexy song starting. Shall we?"

Harry moved Hermione onto the dance floor. "Merge with me, Harry," Hermione whispered in his ear. "Let me feel your soul."

Madam Hooch came over to Professor Sprout. "If Severus were still alive, he'd be having fits," she said, nodding towards Harry and Hermione swaying past them, their auras actually visible and intertwining, showing their power and that they had a very great level of intimacy.

"I know. Merging in public like that! it's almost obscene!"

"Especially at that level of power. I've never actually SEEN auras merge."

"True; that is rare. And they're far from the only ones, even if we can't see it. Whomever's bright idea this dance was, they certainly didn't realize that so many couples would. . . ."

"Stay as couples throughout most of the dance, becoming more and more involved? Well, we didn't think of it, either. I just hope no one . . . merges in the physical sense. Once you've merged your magics, you either love or hate each other."

"And that merry band all merged across dating lines. I hope that doesn't form . . . complications."

Hooch shrugged her shoulders. "If I'd been in their position, I'd have tried it, too. Few people docilely accept orders or situations, and that group is even less inclined than most."

Sprout merely nodded and checked her watch. 9:12. They obviously weren't going to be released as early as some of the Ministry people had thought.

The 'all-clear' signal came through at 9:22. The staff released the runes after the current song had finished. At that point the music stopped in the main room, and Professor Sprout addressed both groups of students. "It is almost Nine-thirty. First and Second years, please be prepared to go back to your dorms. The rest of you may unmask if you wish, and you may also leave after the First and Second years have left. The Great Hall is not available. You may either go to your common rooms or the library only! The music will resume in ten minutes." The library and Great hall were of course the only places students could easily meet across House lines.

As the masks came off, many people were startled by whom they had been dancing with, some exclusively the entire time, or close to it. Years and Houses were well-mixed up.

Harry's group came up to Sprout. "I take it you're leaving?" she asked.

"Is that a problem, Professor?"

"Are you going to your common rooms?"

"Would it be possible for us to go to the DA room?" Harry asked, "and would I be able to see the Headmaster?"

Sprout thought a moment. "Yes and no. Go to the DA room as a group. Do NOT roam the halls for any reason singly. I will let the Headmaster know where you are. He'll send for you if he can see you."

"Thank you." The group swept from the room to the now-revealed exit.

Hermione, Ginny, and Susan had picked out some other students from the group, and so it was a moderate-sized group that met in the DA practice room under the Ravenclaw Tower. All the Sixth year Gryffindors were present, along with Ginny and Colin. Seamus' Fourth year girlfriend and Millicent Bulstrode represented Slytherin. Ernie Macmillan, Susan Bones, and Hannah Abbott represented Hufflepuff, while Padma, Anthony Goldstein, and Luna represented Ravenclaw.

For those who were not totally in the information loop, Harry filled them in on everything he had learned. Without exception, everyone was angry at being put under a Compulsion. Whatever trust the students had entertained towards the Ministry dropped. Even Susan Bones was upset.

After waiting forty-five minutes, many of the students decided to wait until morning to find out what was going on. By 10:40, only Harry, Hermione, Luna, and Ginny remained.

"You don't all have to wait," Harry told them.

"We have to stick together, so that no one is wandering the corridors alone," Hermione said firmly. Harry shrugged.

After a few minutes of silence, Ginny spoke. "Harry . . . would you . . . would you merge with me?"

Harry looked at Ginny, surprised.

"You merged with Luna, and Luna merged with Hermione. Hermione and I might never have merged, but we've been . . . close enough." Harry looked at Hermione, who shrugged her shoulders. "Please?"

"But . . . why?"



"Because I'd like to know you better," Ginny answered. "Because I want to share myself with you."

"Perhaps we should try something different," Luna suggested.

"A group?" Hermione asked.

"It might be best," Luna said, "if nobody minds."

Harry looked at Hermione, a look mixed of doubt, confusion, and desire on his face. "Well, we'd still be within the rules," Hermione said doubtfully. They were sober, consensual, in their Fifth year or higher, and within eighteen months of age. The informal rules also held -- they trusted each other, and for good reasons. They liked each other. She and Harry were lovers, as were Luna and Ginny. She and Ginny had experimented at Grimmauld Place that one summer to the point where Hermione had become afraid Ginny would transfer her crush from Harry to her. Hermione had been about the only person not surprised to see Ginny take up with Luna.

"Hermione . . . you know how I feel about you and Harry. I think Luna feels the same way. I know both of you are attracted to Luna, even if you love each other. If you, both of you, feel anything for me, then please?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, but were spared an immediate decision when Lupin knock on the chamber door. "Harry, I need to take you to the Headmaster. Hermione, Ginny, walk Luna back to Ravenclaw, then go back to Gryffindor together. I know you all know the castle was breached. We think we caught everything that got in, but we can't be certain."

"How bad is it?" Harry asked when he noticed they were moving towards the Infirmary instead of the Headmaster's office.

"Bad enough," Remus answered. "On the plus side, our trap worked nearly perfectly. As best we can tell Voldemort committed nearly all his dementors, perhaps all of them, and all that came were destroyed. We did not count on thirty trolls being in the first wave as well, or thirty-three Death Eaters coming in soon there after, along with all his vampires except perhaps one, and then Voldemort himself."

"We won, and won big in some ways," Remus went on. "As I said, possibly all the known rogue dementors were destroyed, as were all the vampires that we know were here. It's possible one snuck in that we didn't detect. Nine Death Eaters were killed, fifteen captured. Voldemort was hit with a number of killing spells, and he left injured but alive -- they either don't work against him in his current form, or only your's would kill him. Nine other Death Eaters escaped, and all were at least slightly injured. On our side . . . losses were almost as heavy."

"Dead?"

"A number of aurors and hit-wizards were hit, and some are dead. The Headmaster and Voldemort dueled again. Both were seriously injured. I hope Dumbledore survives."

Harry swallowed nervously. They went into the Infirmary. Remus led Harry through the bustle to one of the small private rooms. Remus merely opened the door, but did not follow Harry in.

Dumbledore looked asleep. Part of his magnificent beard was gone, and Harry could see the residue of burn-unguents on his face, neck, and shoulder. The right side of his face was also swollen, although Harry guessed the injury had likely been much worse shortly before. The old man's left leg was set in a splint.

Harry just stared. Dumbledore finally opened his left eye, and waved Harry closer. "Ah, my boy. Thank you for returning the visit. It seems usually I visit you here." Dumbledore's voice sounded very old and tired.

"Yes, sir," Harry said softly.

"Even though you are not yet ready to face Tom for your final battle, I did ask that you be present tonight, just in case he came after all. I would have felt much better, knowing you were there to help with the fight. Amelia apologized to me a few minutes ago." He closed his eye. "We shall do better next time."

"I'm sure we will, sir."

Dumbledore's mouth quirked at Harry's tone, but he did not open his eye again. "My dear boy, it is possible that it is time for the next great adventure, but I do not believe it. We do not always get to finish what we start, but I have a feeling I shall be here when Tom goes. However, just in case, I wanted you to know I wanted you with us tonight. I wanted you to know how proud I am at everything you have so far accomplished and how sorry I am that my plans have caused you pain. And I wanted you to know . . . that I love you like the grandson I never had."

"I hope you outlive Mistress Merry's record," Harry said.

"That I doubt," Dumbledore said weakly. "I do hope to at least live long enough to not only know at least one of your children, but to have them really know me."

"I'll let Hermione know, sir."

Dumbledore almost was able to grin. "The Minister was very contrite. Remus will be talking with you about a possible plan for the summer, if I don't myself."

"You will, sir."

"I think I need some sleep, and you do as well," Dumbledore said.

"Sleep away, sir," Harry stated, pulling up a chair.

"Keeping an eye on me, my son?"

"It's one way not to get left behind."

Now Dumbledore did smile.

"Where's Fawkes, by the way?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I don't know. Do not wander the corridors at night, especially tonight. Take someone to my office and check on Fawkes when you can." Dumbledore was soon asleep.

Saturday, February 15, 1997  
12:40 am

It was just after midnight when Madam Pomfrey came in. "Have you advanced so far in your medical studies that your attendance is necessary, Mister Potter?"

Harry roused himself. "I don't know enough to do anything, but I do know enough when to yell for help."

She smiled at him. Harry would never make a healer, but neither would he ever do anything stupid with an injured person. Then she frowned. "No Fawkes yet?"

"Not yet. I'm supposed to check his office as soon as someone is free to go with me," Harry told her, somewhat unhappy.

"Mister Potter, not even the hit-wizards are walking alone tonight. I'll see who's available."

Twenty minutes later, Harry and Remus were hurrying through the corridors. "Is there any way to really destroy a phoenix?" Harry asked worriedly.

"Not that I know of, but there's probably some way."

Harry gave the password -- and the door didn't open.

Remus gave the password, which he knew had been in use that evening. The door remained closed.

"Come on," Harry said.

"Where?"

"We can't break in -- Umbridge had some experts try last spring. We need to find a painting of a Headmaster."

Confused, Remus followed Harry down the corridor, knowing where he was going, but not why. "Over here, Harry," he called.

Harry veered around and followed Lupin down an adjoining corridor, where they finally came upon a portrait of a sleeping wizard in late fifteenth century dress. "I hope they haven't been silenced again," Harry muttered. "Hello!" Harry called.

The wizard opened his eyes. "Ah, Mister Potter. One of my other selves was hoping you would be by. Please wait while we exchange." Harry hadn't been able to say a word before the man was gone.

Remus frowned. "I don't understand."

"That's one way the Headmasters seem to know everything. All the paintings report to the paintings in the Headmaster's office, plus the paintings there may enter any portrait of the same person, no matter where they are located."

"I see," Remus said. "At least, I think I do."

"Ah, Mister Potter. I am Ifon Trowbridge We were hoping you would be the one to show up. We have a visitor, a rather powerful one."

"The missing vampire?" Remus asked.

"Yes. She showed up just as the attack started, saying that she believed the attack would fail. She seemed very surprised when the Dark Lord arrived in the Great Hall. When the Headmaster was injured, she was . . . trapped."

"And Fawkes is trapped with her," Harry said.

"That is true. She invites the pair of you in to discuss a deal. That will then allow Fawkes to leave."

Harry and Remus looked at each other. "Let's do it," Harry said.

"I go in first," Remus stated.

"Deal."

The pair approached the guardian. Remus again gave the password, and the door slid open. Remus pulled out his wand; Harry already had his out. Remus walked up to the stairs and Harry followed. Fawkes flew past them, a mere blur of scarlet.

The door into Dumbledore's office opened, and a high clear voice called out, "Come in. If you do not attack or try to expose me to daylight, you have nothing to fear from me."

"On those conditions, and since you released Fawkes, we agree," Remus stated.

"I was unaware of the need for the phoenix. I hadn't thought of it, and the paintings did not mention it until you contacted one. Come in. A werewolf and the friend and brother of a werewolf should not fear another creature of the night."

Remus and Harry walked into the office, which was ablaze with candle light. The vampire was a young woman, perhaps 18 when she had taken the Gift. At first, she reminded Harry a little of Hermione at the start of the year, about the same size as she had been then and with a wild head of chestnut brown hair. Her nose was a bit sharper, and her face more angular, and of course she was marbly white.

"I am Cassandra. Shall we talk?"

### **Chapter III**

"What should we talk about?" Remus asked.

"I shall talk first. I understand you know something about vampires." Remus shrugged modestly. "What happened a few weeks ago was more about a long-standing disagreement between two factions of our little community than anything to do with you and your world. Taking sides for or against this Voldemort was incidental to most of us, especially me. What mattered most to me was who was going to win. I picked the winning side that night, and I believe I picked the winning side tonight."

"How so?"

The vampire's shoulders moved in a minute shrug. "I did not attack anyone tonight. I caused no damage. Even my three surviving colleagues that claim to have taken your side can only complain that I did nothing to help them and their allies in the earlier confrontation."

"And what is it you want?" Remus asked.

"Ah. All you need to know is that I made a deal with your Headmaster several weeks ago. I was one of his sources of information about tonight's attack. I shall NOT be going back to Voldemort, although I may have to deal with a small problem with his forces, and with my colleagues who decided to continue their alliance with him."

"They are all . . . destroyed," Remus stated.

The vampire blinked rapidly from the surprise. "That is . . . surprising. All five?"

"All five accounted for. One of the vampires allied with us was also destroyed."

"I see." The vampire sat in thought for over a minute. Finally, she looked up. "I made a deal with Dumbledore for sanctuary. I expect that deal to be fulfilled. It was made in this office. For what it is worth, these paintings can verify the deal."

Remus turned to the painting of Headmaster Dippet. "Sir?" he asked.

"It is true," Dippet's image stated. "The Headmaster gave her his current password that sealed the office, and we were to only allow young Potter here in, besides the Headmaster, without a special code or Madam Cassandra's permission. We could not do so, since you were with him. We hoped that he would think of asking one of our other selves, which he did."

"While there is a cupboard in the other room I could hide in, I would really prefer to be some place . . . safer for daylight," Cassandra stated.

Remus and Harry looked at each other. Finally, Harry said, "My passageway?"

Remus chewed his lip in thought, then he nodded. He looked at Cassandra. "I want your oath that you will harm no one who is not directly attacking you, or feed off of anyone, while you are here."

"I could use some sustenance, but I agree," Cassandra stated. "I further swear that young Mister Potter here is under my protection."

"Very well. Harry, show her to your room."

"How long have you been a vampire?" Harry asked as they approached the mirror.

"I was made in Constantinople in the year 996," she answered. "You seem surprised."

"That was a long time ago."

"True," she acknowledged. "As one of the Muggle fantasists who writes about us has pointed out, many of us are not as able to handle an extended existence as we think when we are made. Half of us are destroyed before we last a century, and most of the rest of us are either killed by our own kind or choose to die off between the ages of two and three hundred."

"Yet you made it to a thousand," Harry pointed out.

"So I have," she acknowledged. "Very few witches are ever made vampires. I was made by accident. My father was a wizard, my mother what you would call a Squib. He was out of the city in the summer of 996, when the vampire caught sight of me and fell in lust with me. Our town house was run on Muggle lines, and we used weak wandless magic there when we used it at all, so he did not realize what I was, for he had been a Muggle. So he kidnaped me, fed on me, raped me, and made me a vampire." She smiled wryly. "I destroyed him two months later."

"I thought vampires were required to be loyal to their makers," Harry asked, showing her into the classroom that served as Hermione's study.

"If I had consented, I would have been. I had NOT consented, and therefore was not made an outcast." She looked around. "Very attractive. This is yours?"

"Technically and practically, no. Technically, this is just an abandoned and hidden set of rooms. Practically, this is my girlfriend's study, and our refuge is next door." Harry showed her into the bedroom.

"Very good taste. Yours or hers?"

"Our elves', actually," Harry told her.

Cassandra peeked into the next room. "A lovely bath. I may use it after I wake. . . ." She spun around at the scent she had suddenly come across. She looked on, stunned, as Harry stood over by the stuffed chairs and table, his wrist bleeding into a wine glass. "What are you doing, boy?" she demanded, her high voice a bit shriller.

Harry said nothing as the small wine glass filled to just over half. Then he healed his wrist with a spell they had just learned in the medical class and held out the glass. "You said you needed something to . . . drink. It isn't much, but I understand vampires of your age only need

a pint of blood a week or so to maintain yourself." Less than that, and the vampire would slowly become more mindless, until it gorged on enough blood to regain its sanity. Harry held the glass out.

"Yes," Cassandra said, "and I am a bit behind." She swallowed drily. "Set it down. Step away from the glass. I don't . . . I do not wish to lose control."

Harry did as she asked. Cassandra almost flung herself at the glass, and swallowed the blood in one long gulp. Still holding the glass, she backed into the bath, coming out a few seconds later with a glass of water in her other hand.

"I didn't know vampires drank water," Harry said clinically as she sipped some of it.

"We do not need water to sustain our existence. It does make it easier to talk." Some blood had collected back in the bottom of the wine glass. Cassandra tipped the glass, and shuddered with pleasure as the drops oozed onto her tongue. Harry was reminded of a game he and Hermione had played on New Year's Night. She had reacted to his semen the same way Cassandra was to his blood coming from the same glass.

Cassandra swallowed again with a smile, then poured a little of the water into the wine glass, swirled, and drink that down as well. She rinsed the glass more thoroughly, and drink that more slowly. "You taste marvelous," she whispered. "Young, powerful, even tangy. Thank you." She kicked off her boots and laid on the bed. "Dawn is not coming soon, but still I shall sleep now." Within seconds, she was as still as a corpse.

"This had been a very weird twelve hours," Harry mumbled in the classroom. He called for Dobby, and told him the suite was off-limits until further notice. Dobby acknowledged the order, and left.

Harry first took himself back to the Infirmary. A visiting nurse refused to let him see Dumbledore, but did assure Harry that the Headmaster, and many of the others, had been visited by a phoenix, and that all were healing and resting.

Coming out of the Infirmary, he was met by Minister Bones coming in. She took him out to a classroom. "Ah, Mister Potter . . . I managed to talk with Dumbledore last evening, after the . . . attack. He was right in his assessment. We should have had you there. Between the two of you, Voldemort might not have been able to inflict such damage." She frowned. "And it was him. We could have destroyed or captured all the others. It was Voldemort who made the difference. We should have had an all-out victory, not a bare win." She frowned again. "We shall not make the same error again. The Headmaster has a plan for your training this summer. He should explain it to you in a day or two. If you agree to it, I shall."

"Thank you," Harry said. "Did we lose many?"

"Several, and perhaps a few more. Harold will likely survive, but I doubt if he'll ever be able to come back full time."



"You think a lot of Harold, don't you?" Harry asked, realizing as he did so that he didn't even know Harold's full name.

"I do. No sense of politics, and knows enough to usually keep his mouth shut. Now, why don't you go some place other than the Infirmary? I am. The Headmaster will call for us when he needs to see us."

It was just after 5:00 am. Harry went into the Great Hall and wrote a note for the elves to wake him at 6:30. He conjured a reclining chair and took a nap.

The entire school was coming together for an early breakfast, called by their Heads of House. Harry noticed that Ron had waited at the entrance, until he could talk with Susan Bones. Susan smiled shyly at Ron, kissed his cheek, and walked to the Hufflepuff table. Both she and Ron had smiles on their faces.

"New girl?" Harry asked when Ron sat down.

"Yes, actually," Ron replied.

"She won't be as . . . accommodating as Henrietta," Hermione pointed out, sitting down as well.

"Probably not," Ron acknowledged, "but then, I was never in love with Henrietta, and she was never really in love with me."

"And you're in love with Susan?" Harry asked, in a disbelieving tone.

"I . . . I . . . maybe," Ron finally admitted. All eyes were then drawn to Professor McGonagall, rapping gently on a juice glass. She started off by apologizing on behalf of the Ministry, the MLES, and the Headmaster and staff, and then fully explaining why the apologies were necessary. There was quite an uproar from the students over the Compulsions. When the outcries finally died down, McGonagall went on to explain the battle that had taken place. Harry noticed that McGonagall was clear that there had been only five vampires who had sided with Voldemort.

Remus had caught Harry just before he had sat down, and told him that Bellatrix and Wormtail had been two of the Death Eaters who had managed to escape. McGonagall now informed the students that there was a possibility that one Death Eater, an animagus able to turn into a rat, could still be present at Hogwarts. Any rats seen should be stunned by the students, and brought to the attention of the staff, one of the nine aurors now assigned to the school, or to Alastor Moody, who would also be present the rest of term as an additional security consultant.

Then, to everyone's shock, McGonagall announced who it was that had planted the portkey targets in the students' robes the previous November 1 -- Marietta Edgecombe and the Seventh year Ravenclaw Prefect Julia Collins, who had done the same thing the night before to allow Voldemort's forces in. Their best friends, Cho Chang and Su Li, were also being held for questioning. The relief from Slytherins was nearly as great as the anger from the

Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, although it did not match the consternation or embarrassment or feelings of betrayal felt by the Ravenclaws.

After breakfast, Harry was called to meet with McGonagall, Tonks, Remus, and Moody, where he was told he would meet with the Headmaster at 4:00, and would likely meet with Cassandra before dinner. Harry nodded, and went off to explain to Hermione why she couldn't use her suite that day.

Harry announced his determination to nap until well into lunch. His fellow Gryffindors nodded their acknowledgment after he told them about seeing Dumbledore and having to stay up all night running errands. Harry was glad the twins had left school -- they would have decided this was a good time to play a joke on him.

Harry woke up to a pair of hands massaging his neck. "That's good, Hermione," he mumbled, "but you shouldn't be here."

"It's me, Harry," Colin said. Harry tensed. "Relax. I . . . I need to apologize for last night."

"Colin. . . ."

"No . . . I was wrong. I took advantage of the . . . intimacy created by the merging. I could tell how upset you were."

"You did take advantage, and I was upset," Harry acknowledged. "But Colin, I was more upset at myself than I was with you. I don't want you to get the wrong idea, or to think I'm leading you on."

"You're not," Colin assured his adoptive brother. "Maybe you should acknowledge that you at least lean a little to the bi-side."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. I never thought about kissing a boy like that before, but at that moment, I wasn't seeing you as a boy." Colin's magic and aura hadn't seemed masculine or feminine to Harry. Harry had responded more to Colin's attraction to Harry than having any real physical attraction to Colin.

"I understand. I'm glad you're not upset."

"I'm not." "But I'm going to make sure I **NEVER** merge my magic directly with another guy!" Harry swore to himself.

Harry presented himself at Dumbledore's hospital bed promptly at 4:00. He was sitting up, and Fawkes was perching nearby. "Ah, Harry. I need to apologize for being a touch . . . dramatic last night."

"That's alright, Professor."

"I understand you have met our . . . guest."

"You mean Cassandra? Yes, I have."

"Good. Would you be willing to visit her? We don't want her to feel imprisoned. Madam Pomfrey assures me that I will be able to meet with the Ministry people Monday morning. You need only visit her briefly tonight and tomorrow."

"Of course, sir."

"Good. We'll speak a bit more on that before you go. Now, about this summer."

"Yes, sir?"

"With your approval, we shall ask your aunt that you be allowed to stay with them over part of Easter and the first week of the summer vacation. At that point, we will move you to a secure location for intensive training."

"Back to the cabin in the valley?"

"No," Dumbledore said firmly. "It shall be overseas, but that's all I should say at this time. The question is, who should go with you?"

"Hermione," Harry said firmly.

"Of course," Dumbledore agreed, "providing Miss Granger and her parents agree. I was originally thinking of a small group, perhaps just Miss Granger. Then, I had a thought. It is possible that Voldemort will be able to set the final challenge soon after you attain your majority. In that case, yes, the small group, coupled with intensive training for you, might make the most sense. However, it is also possible that you will not be facing Voldemort for well over a year. In that case, the intense training would actually ruin you for your final year of schooling and further more perhaps not enhance your chances against Voldemort in the longer-term. Intensive training cuts corners, corners that usually exist for good reasons. There is every chance, Harry, that should you live as long as I, you shall experience two or even three more Dark Wizards. Even if you do not think you will face them directly, you shall likely be targeted by them, and would-be imitators, just as I have been."

"Wizards trying to gain a quick reputation, you mean?"

"Exactly. I was lucky. The wizard who was in many ways my predecessor took on many enemies, before dying in 1915."

Harry sighed. "I'll do whichever you think best, sir," Harry stated.

"Then start thinking of whom you might wish to join you this summer. Name as many as you wish. We shall go through them and consider them all."

"I shall, sir."

"Now, about our guest. . . ."

Harry looked around the class room. "I have a purpose, calling you all here. First, I need everyone to take a drink of pumpkin juice."

"Why?" Ron asked before anyone else could.

"First things first. First, I promise you that this is just pumpkin juice, and I will explain as much as I can. Second, I am doing this at the request of the Headmaster. This brings us to number three. Hermione has created a contract for us. I think you all know what that entails?"

The group did, and grumbled about it. "Sign or don't," Harry told them. "I promise to burn this as soon as I can, which will release us. I also promise that signing only commits you to silence. There is a course of action involved, but you do NOT have to participate."

"Why don't you sign first, Harry," Dean suggested.

"Alright."

Harry signed, then Hermione signed as well, saying as she did so, "I'm signing, and I have no idea what is going on. I trust Harry." The rest of the group followed: Ron; Dean; Colin; Parvati; Padma; Lavender; Seamus; William and Anna Lloyd; Neville; Ginny; Luna; Susan Bones; Millicent Bulstrode; and Daphne Greengrass. Harry had thought about a number of possible people to ask. He finally asked Anna because she and Seamus had recently become a serious couple, William because he was a close friend of Colin's. He had decided to ask Millicent and Daphne so that Anna wasn't the only Slytherin. He had decided to ask Susan so that he could involve at least one Hufflepuff, and asking the Minister's niece might be a good political move, unless it backfired.

Harry then explained the presence of Cassandra and the role she had played. "And you'd like us to, well, donate?" Millicent asked, shocked.

"Yes," Harry answered. "She's going to try and work against Voldemort. If she feels she can get close enough, we might be asked to donate again, as she won't have time to feed. If she cannot, we will not be asked, and I should be able to destroy the agreement by Easter."

"How much?" Daphne asked, "and are we all going to donate?"

"Colin can't donate, due to his condition," Harry pointed out. "At her age, just over a millennium, she needs just a pint a week."

"One fluid ounce from each of us, then?" Ginny pondered.

"About that, yes."

"I'll do it, if the rest of you will," Susan stated.

"I'll do it, if Granger or Longbottom does the cutting," Millicent growled. "I don't trust any of the rest of you with a knife."

"You'll trust me?" Neville asked, surprised.

"Even in potions, you never mishandled a knife," Millicent pointed out, "no matter what else went wrong. Must be all that pruning."

With that, everyone agreed. Harry produced a beaker which would keep the blood at body temperature. In less than forty minutes, they were done, Hermione adding a few drops of an acceptable anti-coagulant along the way. As they were going through the procedure, Dean approached Harry. "Why is Colin here?" he asked, as he and Harry drifted off to the side of the room.

"I didn't want him to feel left out, and this way we can talk about what's going on in front of him."

"That makes sense." Dean looked Harry in the eye. "I need to talk to you in private."

"Tonight, in our room, around Seven-thirty?"

"Sounds good."

## **Chapter IV**

Harry paused at the door of the classroom. While this was in some ways his and Hermione's place, Cassandra was living, or at least staying, there. He opened the door and then knocked.

"Come in, Harry." Harry was again struck by the high-pitched voice, and fairly accentless speech. She could have been a teen from any English-speaking middle-class place.

Harry came into the bedroom, and saw Cassandra sitting on the bed wearing only Hermione's robe, drying her hair. "I woke up at twilight and thought I should bathe." She sniffed. "You brought me a gift?"

"We thought you could use this," Harry told her, holding out the covered beaker.

She opened it and sniffed. "Ah, a nice mix." She drank a quarter of it. "And you contributed. And a brother and sister -- no, two pairs." She gave Harry a twisted grin. "Siblings; always a treat."

Watching Harry, the smile disappeared. "Sorry. I rather imagine that, what's the phrase? freaked you out?"

"I suppose. You naturally have a different view of the world that I do."

"Well said, Harry. Your idea?"

"My girl friend, actually. Something she said about Remus a few years ago."

"Is she in here?"

"Of course. All my best friends are, although not my brother."

"Your brother? Ah, yes; another werewolf. Thank you for that. Werewolf blood does not exactly poison us, but it does taste terrible." She sipped again. "Very healthy group of friends you have. And you are right, I have a very different view of the world. It is deeper. I have lived for over a thousand years. I had a rather narrow view of the world when I lived. I have expanded it; that's why I still exist. And I live only at night. I have brought weakness and death. That is very different than you as well."

"Do you regret killing?"

"I regret the necessity. A young vampire your size would have to drink at least a quart of blood a night for your first six months or so, and you are drawn to drink more. It usually meant mentally enslaving a mortal and drinking from that person for a few days until they die, especially back in the old days. I do not regret killing, only its necessity. Does that repel you?"

"A little."

"Then perhaps I should tell you about the last person I killed, since you knew her."

Harry's head snapped up. "Who?"

"Do you know exactly how a vampire is made? And how that vampire acts at first?"

"You feed off the victim to the point of death, and then feed the blood back. The victim then goes into a coma for several days as their body changes. When they wake up, they are weak. If they are left in a grave where they can't get out, they will slowly go insane, and when they finally escape, they may be little better than a zombie, gorging on blood and even flesh."

"Very good," she said with genuine approval. She took another slurp of blood. "There are two variations. One, or even more than one vampire, may exchange the blood once or even several times. The powers of a vampire grows over time. If I were to make you a vampire, I may exchange blood with you up to six times in an hour or two without harming me. More than that would weaken me and seriously sicken you. Two or more times, and you would wake up nearly a full vampire, which normally takes up to a year to achieve. A vampire made the way you describe is easy to kill, and has no real power for some time. A full vampire can easily influence the average Muggle, and of course after a century our animagus power starts to grow."

She drained the rest of the blood, and let what little remained around the beaker pool back towards the bottom. "Interesting beaker, keeping it warm. And just a hint of anti-coagulant. Anyway, the six of us made six of Voldemort's Death Eaters a month ago. I made Pansy Parkinson."

"Pansy-the-Pug is a vampire?"

"She was," Cassandra acknowledged. "I exchanged blood with her twice. More than that suppresses a new magical vampire's magic for a few months. However, less than four times leaves the new vampire vulnerable to vampire attack. I was the last one to leave from our location. Pansy had been begging for another exchange. After the first few weeks, like all other vampires, exchanging blood with an older vampire always strengthens the younger. I had been refusing, but pretended to agree. I completely drained her, and then beheaded her, setting her body on fire. I set fire to the others as well, but doubt they were seriously harmed. Had I known Voldemort was going to appear here instead of there, I would have destroyed them all."

"Then why are you so hungry?"

"Vampire blood is the most delicious blood, but it is not very nourishing, unless they have recently fed very well. We were trying to start weaning them off of daily gorging, and they hadn't eaten in two days. They were to feed on a new set of homeless Muggles after we left." She upended the beaker and the blood drizzled and dripped into her mouth. She went into the bathroom to rinse the beaker a bit. She came out smiling. "Thank you, Harry." She walked close and caressed his chin. "If you didn't have a girlfriend, I would offer you a good time. You are the cutest, nicest male I've run into for decades."

Harry blinked. "Vampires can have sex?" Then he remembered Cassandra had said she had been raped by the vampire that had made her.

"Of course, dear boy, although only after a decent feeding. The blood warms us, and engorges our sexual tissue." She smiled. "Male vampires have to feed quite a bit. Vampires who like

boys may also perform oral sex on them. Not very nutritious, but very tasty. No doubt that's how the legend of the succubus got started."

Harry decided to change the subject. "So are you going after the other five new vampires?"

"I am. Dumbledore is arranging a meet with the three vampires who went with your side from the beginning."

Harry decided to let Dumbledore tell Cassandra one of the three vampires had been killed. "Are you likely to have any problems with them?"

"Probably not. The two who would be the most unreasonable were defectors to Voldemort, and are destroyed."

"What are you going to do the rest of tonight?"

"Nothing. The easily bored do not make good vampires. I shall rest. Why?"

"Would you mind talking with Hermione? She's a fanatic for any type of knowledge, and she'd love a chance to speak with someone who's been around for a thousand years."

"This is your girlfriend?"

"Yes."

Cassandra sniffed the robe. "I shall speak with her tonight, if she desires. And I swear she shall be safe, Harry."

"You already promised Remus," Harry pointed out.

"That only applies to this visit. Your girlfriend is safe from me, forever."

"Thank you."

Cassandra kissed Harry's cheek. "Go. Night comes early this far north this time of year. You probably haven't even had dinner."

"Just some pumpkin juice before we donated," Harry agreed.

"To make certain the sugar levels were stable? Very smart. Enjoy your dinner. Thank you, for mine."

Harry and Dean both showed up early after dinner. Harry recreated two copies of an over-stuffed chair. "Wow, Harry . . . that's some transfiguration!"

"Not really. I can't make anything up new, just copy. Hermione's starting to come up with variations."



"Oh." Dean fell silent for a moment, then sighed. "I suppose you're wondering why I want to talk with you?"

"I can think of a couple of possibilities."

"Like what?"

"Like your being bisexual instead of gay and dancing just with girls at the dance. Like my dancing and merging with Colin. Like how dangerous it is to be this close to me."

"That pretty well covers just about everything," Dean agreed, "although I'm not worried about being your friend. That's how I feel, and it's the right thing to do."

"What doesn't it cover?"

"I believe Colin's finally seduced, or perhaps re-seduced, his friend Wills."

"Really?"

"Really. I think Wills experimented with Colin at the end of their Second year, but I don't know how far they went. I saw them snogging the other day. Padma and Hannah caught them doing more."

"Maybe they weren't actually doing much."

"Colin was on his knees and had him all the way down his throat."

Harry grimaced. "Is that why you haven't wanted to merge your magic with Colin?"

"We did, once before. I'm not certain I would want to again," Dean admitted. "Harry, I'm no swinger. I've kissed five people and had sex with two. Colin isn't settled, and hasn't been, even before last summer. I don't know what's going to happen between me and Colin. If we stay together, fine. If not, I thought I would try the other team."

Harry stood up. "Well, no matter what does happen, I hope you know I'll always think of you as my friend."

"Thank you, Harry. That really means a lot," Dean admitted.

"And don't worry, I know you can afford it, but I already took care of your fees for next year. As for this summer, you may still come with us -- I gather Dumbledore has something like last summer planned, but on an even larger scale -- or you can use my house. The elves can take care of you. Or, if you want and they do open Hogwarts, I'll take care of that, too."

"You don't have to do that!" Dean protested.

"No, I don't. But you're my friend, and I've always thought of you as **my** friend, not as Colin's boyfriend."

"Thanks, Harry. I promise to paint your and Hermione's magical portraits when I've been trained."

"I'll hold you to that."

After Dean left, Harry took out the Marauder's Map. Harry had been surprised to learn the previous semester how interactive the Map actually was. It only showed a Marauder (or now himself) upon specific command -- a security device the map makers had included in case the Map fell into the wrong hands. Harry checked, and didn't see Pettigrew.

He could also selectively check areas or check for names. He looked at his and Hermione's area, and saw Hermione, Cassandra, and to his surprise Luna, were all there. Harry then looked for Colin, and saw that he and William Lloyd were just going into a broom closet. Expanding the search area, he saw that Padma and Hannah were again patrolling, and would probably find the pair in fifteen minutes or so. Harry closed the map and hurried out.

Harry had a brief word with Hannah and Padma. The pair of prefects easily undid the locking spells, and caught the pair with their pants still around their ankles.

Colin and Wills were trying to sweet-talk the two prefects when Harry walked into sight. Colin blushed, while Wills went very very pale. "What's going on?" Harry asked.

"Harry, tell your little brother to stay out of closets," Padma said.

"I thought he'd come out of the closet," Hannah said with a giggle.

"And I thought he'd come out with Dean," Padma snipped. Harry gave her a dirty look.

"Seriously, Harry, this is the second time. I'm spreading the word. Next time they get caught, it will be serious points." Padma turned to the embarrassed pair. "That's five points from each of you."

"If you two don't mind, I'll take care of things from here."

"Harry. . . ." Harry glared, and Colin shut up. The two prefects walked away, shaking their heads.

"Colin," Harry said very quietly, "please go up to my dorm and wait for me."

"But Harry. . . ." Harry simply stared the boy down. Colin gulped and hurried away.

"So, William, you're gay now?"

"No . . . not as such."

"Was this your idea, or Colin's?"

"Bit of both, I guess."

"And it didn't bother you that Colin and Dean are a couple?"

"If it doesn't bother Colin, why would it bother me?"

"William, you know better than that."

William shrugged. "We've been . . . doing this every once in a while since the beginning of our Second year, Harry. I'm sorry if Dean gets hurt, but that is between Colin and Dean. I'm not forcing or begging Colin. He asks, and sometimes I say yes. It's not that I'm gay; I don't even think I'm bisexual." He shrugged. "I can't explain it."

Harry frowned. "Alright, William. I guess I need to speak with Colin. Just remember this, if you're not gay, if this is just for fun, remember who Colin is now. If the press gets a hold of this, they'll blow it up to the point where it will appear in your obituary a hundred and fifty years from now."

William blanched again at the thought of his little flings following him around the rest of his life. Harry left William to ponder his actions and went up to talk with Colin.

"I suppose you think you can tell me what to do, don't you?" Colin snapped.

"No, I can't," Harry said mildly. "But let me remind you of what you took on when you agreed to become a Potter." Harry launched into a lecture that would have done Hermione proud. Never directly criticizing Colin or his behavior, Harry pointed out how the media would pick up on his activities sooner or later and how they would use likely use it. Harry pointed out how Colin's actions affected William, affected Dean, and how Colin's actions would affect the dynamics of all the people around them.

Harry finally wound down. "Now, I can't make you do much of anything, Colin. You do what you think is best for you. Becoming a Potter means you have to grow up fast. I guess I should have explained what it meant last August."

"No," Colin said, "I knew. That doesn't mean it's easy. It hasn't been easy for you, either."

"It hasn't," Harry agreed. "And Dean didn't make things easier by just dancing with girls, even though he was angry with you, and I didn't help matters any by merging with you and kissing you."

"So plenty of blame to go around, right?" Colin said hopefully. His shoulders sagged.

"Alright, plenty of blame to go around, most of it on me."

"Work out something with Dean," Harry urged, "even if it's just staying friends."

"Thanks for not yelling."

"I'm disappointed with you, not angry."

Colin winced at that. "Are you going to tell anyone?"

"Hermione. Should I talk with Ginny or anyone else?"

"No, please don't."

"Alright, then I won't, unless I have to for some reason."

"Like what?"

"Like someone putting out stories that are worse than the truth, for example," Harry retorted. For some reason, Colin blushed. "This has been a pretty traumatic weekend for everyone. Why don't you and Dean take some time off?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean take the week off from each other. See if that makes your lives easier or if you miss each other."

"I guess that might be a good idea."

"Stay here; I'll send him up."

"Did you mention this idea to him?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I just thought of it."

"Then I guess we'll talk."

"I guess you will."

Cassandra left shortly after sunset Monday night. The school, and the British magical community, was still in an uproar over Friday night's events, which had come out in full Monday morning. The fact that Michael Corner and Zack Smith had turned out to be the masterminds behind Friday night's infiltration, using Cho and her friends as the delivery system, had rocked Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff on top of all the other traumatic events. The main culprits were under arrest, Cho and Su Li were expelled.

The battle was being presented, and mostly accepted, as a strong, but not decisive, victory. Unfortunately, Voldemort himself was still at large, although presumed seriously injured. There were over two dozen dementors unaccounted for, as were nine Death Eaters who had been in on the attack (including Bellatrix Lestrange and Wormtail) and three others where they had no information. Six others, it had also been announced, had been made vampires, five of which were still at large. If Voldemort had any other followers or resources, they were unknown.

So the community rejoiced, but they were also concerned that the war was far from over. Much of the magical community, which had been in hiding or at least living in well-populated and warded areas, started talking about going back to their remote houses and cottages. At Hogwarts, where before many of the students had hoped to stay over the summer, now few were willing to entertain the idea.

By the end of February, participation in the different student defense groups started falling off, especially the amongst the Ravenclaws. By the time Easter Break started on Saturday, March 22, Luna, Padma, and Anthony Goldstein were the only Ravenclaws still participating.

About a quarter of the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs had also dropped out. The remaining Slytherins and Hufflepuffs were in part motivated by revenge -- the Hufflepuffs were still motivated by Cedric's death, the Slytherins looking to avenge their friends and their House's reputation.

The Gryffindors all stayed loyal, however. If any had any doubts, the other Gryffindors' enthusiasm kept everyone working together, and helped keep some of the wavering Hufflepuffs and Slytherins involved as well.

Harry had now taken over much of the practical teaching for the Sixth year's DADA class, with Law providing the theory. He still used nearly all his free time to practice dueling and defense. He now worked out an hour a day with an active auror or hit wizard, whomever was available that day. Hermione had given up on most of her extra defense work, other than her wandless magic. She was spending her extra time helping the Fifth year Gryffindors and Luna study for their O.W.L.s and researching for spells to help Harry.

Dumbledore had mostly recovered by the end of February. Remus reported to Harry that the Headmaster tired easily, but other than that was in fine form. The other staff members who had been injured recovered faster and more completely, as they had not been as seriously injured in the first place.

As the short holiday approached, Fifth and Seventh years, as usual, protected that the year was going past too fast, and reluctantly gave up any hope for going home. Generally about a third of the other students would go home for the week. This year, it would only be a fifth of the other years.

With plenty of security, Harry and Hermione joined that fifth. Ron, his relationship with Susan progressing slowly (having just now reached the light snogging stage), had been invited to join her. A very nervous Ron had agreed. Neville invited Parvati, Lavender, Dean, Seamus, Padma, and Anna Lloyd to visit. Ron and Susan would join them the following Thursday. Colin, Ginny, and Luna, like nearly all the Fifth and Seventh years, were staying.

## **Chapter V**

Saturday, March 22, 1997

Unlike most of the students leaving, who took the train, Harry and Hermione were allowed to portkey to Grimmauld Place. Moody and two aurors checked to make certain there weren't any tracking spells on their luggage, such as Hermione's had had the previous summer.

To Dobby and Winky's disappointment, they were staying at Hogwarts until the next Friday to help out with the many students who were staying over. There were now twenty-four discarded elves living in the Grimmauld mews, so the pair wasn't really needed.

A quick inspection of those elves allowed Hermione and Harry to declare eighteen of them ready for more active work. Harry's parent's house at Godric's Hollow had been partially destroyed back in 1981. The shell had been physically restored, along with the water, drains, and electricity. It, and five other long-neglected properties, were now ready to be cleaned, painted, and generally made ready. (The other five were farm houses. The farms had been producing, but the houses themselves left empty for a variety of reasons.) Harry and Hermione had also decided to buy up the other 21 houses on Grimmauld Place and renovate them. The elves would have plenty to do.

Each day, one elf would go the Weasleys, to help Mrs. Weasley. The other elves would spend the week making surveys, and then could begin the preliminary work in the abandoned houses (cleaning and scraping) and some other house work at different approved homes. Harry and Hermione, with input from Dobby and Winky, would then decide what else had to be done at the previously abandoned houses. The Western European wizarding world had undergone a minor baby boom since 1982, and if Voldemort was defeated soon, Harry would be able to rent out to magical couples looking for out-of-the-way locations to raise their families in the near future.

After lunch, however, the pair had to finally say goodbye for a short time. At precisely 12:55, the ancient Rolls Royce pulled up, and Harry and Hermione got into Mistress Merry's limo. Grimmauld Place was located in the northeast of Greater London. It was less than a forty-five minute drive into Essex to the Grangers' new home. The pair said a quick goodbye, and then Harry was driven to Little Whinging (not that he was in any great hurry). The traffic was fairly light, and it was still before 4:00 when Harry was dropped off.

Harry knocked politely, and Petunia opened the door quickly. "You made good time," she said in a slightly disappointed voice.

"Yes, we did," Harry agreed. The house was unusually silent. "Where is everyone?"

"Vernon is at a sales meeting in Berwick," Petunia explained. "Dudley is at Mary's. You're leaving tomorrow afternoon, correct?"

"At Four," Harry agreed.

"Good. Mary and her family will be here tomorrow at noon. We will eat at One. You WILL be leaving in some normal way, won't you?"

"Yes and no. I'll be leaving the house normally, but I'll be leaving the neighborhood . . . oddly. I'll leave a little after Three-thirty, telling them I'm stopping at my old baby-sitter to say good bye, and that I'm leaving from there." There would be a one-stop floo connection between Mrs. Figg's and the Grangers between 3:45 and 4:15.

"Fine." Petunia hesitated. "Do you have any real money?"

"I have thirty pounds, why?"

"I'm going to be busy from now until almost noon tomorrow. I want this dinner as perfect as it can be without Vernon here. Why don't you walk down and get some take-out."

"Does any place deliver? I'm really not supposed to be anywhere that far from Privet Drive."

Petunia frowned but walked over to the telephone stand. She dug in a drawer until she found two flyers. "Pick one."

"Do you have a preference?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, shall I order you something?" Harry asked.

Petunia looked shocked, then a little embarrassed. "I'd prefer Cantonese. Egg drop soup and one spring roll."

Harry placed the order and waited downstairs until it was delivered. He dropped his aunt's dinner off in the kitchen, grabbed one of Dudley's sugar-free Fantas, and went up to his old room.

It had obviously been cleaned up and rearranged for Mary's visit over the winter holidays. Dudley's broken and discarded toys had been thrown out, which by itself had freed up a great deal of space. Dudley's old clothes which had been stacked, waiting for Harry to almost fit into them, were also gone. Harry's small cot had been replaced by a small bed, and a small television was sitting on the dresser.

Harry sat his borrowed magical valise down, pulled out his pajamas and dressing gown and dropped these on the bed, then sat at his desk to eat supper. It was strange to be back, but it didn't feel nearly as bad as he would have predicted back in July or August.

Sunday, March 23, 1997

Harry woke up early, and since running was out of the question, he went down to use Dudley's weights and equipment. Harry was still showered and dressed when Petunia managed to get down stairs at 7:20.

"I suppose you want breakfast?"

"Please," Harry managed to respond calmly. "I could set the table after breakfast, if you'd like."

Petunia eyed him. "Very well. Actually, fix me a poached egg, one slice of toast, and tea. Fix yourself anything you want. I'll get the good china and silver out. Set the table for nine."

Harry made himself a small breakfast, and he laid the table. He had never seen the china, other than a few of the larger pieces. Neither did he recognize the silver or the crystal. Memories of being banished to Mrs. Figg's or the cellar, and given at best some tinned soup or just plain bread-and-butter while the Dursleys entertained, flooded into his mind. Harry was tempted to smash everything.

He didn't, of course. Harry carefully, and correctly, laid out the table as Dobby had showed him the previous vacation. When he was finished, Harry went upstairs to change into his suit. He didn't do so straight away, however. He spent a full half-hour in meditation and in redoing his Occlumency exercises. He reminded himself to cast some silencing spells at the Grangers that night. There would likely be some bad dreams when he finally fell asleep.

To Harry's slight surprise, the Smiths were an elegant, upper-class family. Moody had merely passed on the information that the Smiths were non-magical and that Muggle law-enforcement had nothing against them.

In shape, Mary looked rather different from her family, who were tall and lanky. She had the same features and coloring, however. The parents were expensively, if quietly, dressed. The father took one look at Harry's hand-made suit, and fell into a discussion of tailors. Harry managed to deflect Mr. Smith's oblique inquiries on the location of Harry's tailor (Gladrags), but Smith was happy to discuss the esoteric business of choosing cloth and buttons.

Mr. Smith seemed at ease, but his wife was looking around the Dursley's sterile 'Mrs. Grundy' household. While Mr. Smith had brought the money into the marriage, Mrs. Smith had brought the longer heritage. Harry had overheard a few conversations between (and lectures from) Hermione and Justin over the years on Muggle hierarchies, and Harry was able to make her feel at ease as well. Mary's three siblings (two brothers and a sister) were all younger (14, 10, and 7) were fairly well-behaved.

To Harry's amazement, Dudley was also well-behaved. It was clear that the Smiths did not think much of Dudley's boxing, the one thing Dudley did well, or probably much for Dudley or the Dursleys. Dudley, between his tough boxing training and having endured the dementor attack in July 1995 and the werewolf attack in October, 1996, had at least partially overcome his spoiled background. Only time would tell if he would backslide.

Harry, having taken the brunt of the conversational burden with Mary's parents for over three and a half hours, was glad to leave Petunia and Dudley holding the bag that was rightfully theirs to begin with. He said goodbye to the Smiths with the two forms of firm handshake Hermione had coached him on the previous December, and was a bit shocked to be slightly crushed by Mary's farewell hug (unsurprising, since she was an inch taller and ten pounds heavier than he was).



At 3:45, Harry knocked on Mrs. Figg's door. The elderly Squib was touched that Harry didn't immediately floo to Hermione's, but paused to pet the cats and to toss them a few catnip toys. Finally, a few seconds after 4:00, Harry took a deep breath, thanked Mrs. Figg for lending out her fireplace.

It had been a long time since Harry had floored, and he'd never been any good at it. Therefore, Harry was not overly-surprised when he ended up doing a forward somersault onto the Granger's hearth rug, his backside elevated, since he'd landed with it on top of his valise.

Harry muttered an ancient Celtic curse Remus had taught him, and opened his eyes, a frown on his lips.

Above him was a smiling Hermione. Her hair, which she now usually wore in a thick pony tail or braid, was spread across, and past, her shoulders. She was wearing an old Chuddley Canon t-shirt which Ginny had taken from Ron and subsequently given to Hermione. She had ripped off the sleeves and cut off the bottom, revealing her slim but muscular arms, and hard abs. Other than that, she was just wearing a tight pair of jeans that had also been cut off well above the knee. A wave of heat washed over Harry, as the fire went back to a normal one.

Harry's eyes swept from the crown of Hermione's wild hair to her bare toes, and smiled. "I love you, Angel," he said.

"And I you, Harry-bear." She grinned. "Don't worry. My parents won't be back before Five. I'll change before then."

Harry finally sat up. "Too bad. Nice outfit."

"Do you think so?"

"You look a little more beautiful each time I see you," Harry swore. He leaned over and slowly ran the tip of his tongue up the top of Hermione's right foot, then up her shin and thigh, to the bottom of her shorts.

"That's enough for now," Hermione declared. "Let me show you the house."

Harry scrambled to his feet. "Is it very different from your last house?"

"Very," Hermione admitted. "That was a large, two storey semi-detached town house, without a cellar or much of a garden. This was a bungalow, but the previous owner raised the roof over most of it, and had fixed-over the cellar."

The stone fireplace was small -- Harry couldn't imagine flooing out from it, and wasn't surprised he had tumbled out of it. The room was fairly narrow, but of a good length. There was a large nine-panel window across from the fireplace, running from floor to ceiling, and taking up half the wall. The furnishings were neutral-colored and elegant.

Hermione took Harry's hand in one hand, his valise in the other, and led him into the kitchen. There was the back door, a door to the cellar, and stairs going upstairs. "Mum and Dad have their room and bath upstairs, over the dining room and two downstairs bedrooms," Hermione explained, dropping his valise.

Next was the dining room, which led back to an 'L' hallway, straight ahead was the entrance hall leading back to the front room and then to the front door. To their left there was a short hall, ending with a bathroom, and with a bedroom on either side.

The left bedroom, next to the dining room, was Hermione's, some 12 x 12 feet. The other had been made into an office. Harry just got a glimpse of that before Hermione dragged him into her bedroom and twirled Harry so that he fell onto her bed. Hermione leapt astraddle upon Harry and they kissed deeply. Their magics flowed together and they merged, linking them as no Muggle could ever be linked to another person.

Ten minutes later, they disconnected, and lay in each other's arms, content. After five minutes more, Hermione said, "I guess I should get dressed."

"Alright."

Hermione stood and stripped off her clothes. Harry enjoyed the sight, and Hermione enjoyed teasing him as she undressed. She made certain to display herself to Harry in ways that would have brought a blush to both of them the previous August. Now, they both found the game arousing.

After Hermione was nude, she started to slowly dress again. Harry asked in a disappointed voice, "Going somewhere, are we?" Hermione was dressing up.

"No. We just dress for dinner on Sundays. Mum and Dad didn't feel like cooking, so they ordered out. I hope you're hungry!"

"Are you joking? After 'ye ode English roast' just a few hours ago?"

"Suck it in, Potter. Dad has been thinking about the perfect wine all week."

"What is the proper wine for human sacrifice?" Harry whinged a little.

"Come on, my love. Let me show you the cellar."

"I take it we'll be sleeping down there, since I'm sure your parents wouldn't want us in this little bed."

"Very funny," Hermione stated, looking into the closet for the right pair of shoes.

Harry took a moment to glance around. The far wall was lined with bookshelves, only partially filled. Harry reminded himself that Hermione had lost many books the previous July, and hadn't replaced them all, and some that she had replaced were at their rooms at Grimmauld Place. There were no photos, no paintings, no posters. It made Harry wonder at how Hermione might have surrounded herself before the previous July.

"Come on. The cellar is nice."

To Harry's surprise, the cellar WAS nice. As best he knew, it wasn't very common to have a basement totally fixed up like this. The area under the kitchen was the laundry and furnace room. The area under most of the living room was partially used for storage and also had a treadmill. The rest of the cellar was fixed over as a library and television room. One of the two sofas converted into a bed.

"Nice," Harry said, looking around.

"It is," Hermione agreed. "I hope Voldemort doesn't ruin this place, too."

"I'll do the best I can, Angel," Harry promised.

"I know," Hermione agreed, as they heard her parents came back from picking up dinner at an Italian bistro after Evensong.

Emma Granger sat in front of her vanity, brushing her hair with ferocity as she prepared for bed. "What's wrong?" her husband asked.

"You should know what's wrong," Emily stated snippily.

"Well obviously, I don't."

"Hermione, Harry . . . downstairs."

"Yes, they are."

"You saw how they were looking at each other!"

"Yes, I did. They obviously love each other very much."

Emma set the brush down, turned, and gave her husband the eye. "You're the father. You're supposed to be more upset than I."

"I don't know if that's possible. I do know it would not be warranted."

"Your daughter might be, could be . . . is probably being intimate with a boy, especially this one, who's in the cross-hairs of some lunatic, whose followers already burnt us out of one home -- doesn't this bother you?"

"The second part does," Dan Granger allowed. "As for the first part, we both know they are NOT having sex. If they ARE being 'intimate' in other ways, I do NOT want to know. I trust Hermione and her judgement, and Harry seems to be the most honorable person I've met in a long, long time."

"She going to wind up married and pregnant before she's twenty!"

"She's our only surviving child," Dan pointed out gently, bringing up an old wound. "Harry's wealthy and we're well off. Hermione doesn't have to work. She'll devote herself to human and . . . sentients' rights. If she wants to have no children, she will have none. If she wants a dozen and can bear them healthily, she will. I don't see the problem."

"I'm surprised you didn't tell Harry to sleep in Hermione's bed," Emma complained.

"Of course not; it's far too small. I told Hermione that, as long as she and Harry weren't having vaginal sex, she could sleep in the cellar with him."

Emma's jaw dropped. "You didn't!"

"I did. It's what I would have wanted when I was their age, and I trust them not to go too far."

"And just what do you expect they'll be doing!"

Dan opened the front of his pajamas. "If Harry's very lucky, what we're going to do. Come on," he urged, watching his wife of nearly twenty years lick her lips. "You know you want to."

She frowned, and then sighed. "I hate it when you're right," she said as she moved to kneel down on the floor. "You're still a nasty, randy old perv."

"I'm three months younger than you. Now hush."

Hermione had been shocked at her father's suggestion, but was quite ready to take him upon the idea. Nothing was said the next morning, or ever, on the subject.

That next morning, however, the Grangers dragged Harry and Hermione to their office for complete exams. Fortunately for both teens, no problems were found.

As the Grangers' practice was located a thirty minute drive from their old house, and thirty minutes in nearly the opposite direction from their new one, it had been thought safe for Harry and Hermione to wander between the two. Rather than actually wandering that first morning, however, they headed straight towards Hermione's maternal uncle's fertility clinic for another visit. Hermione still had every intention of having Harry's child, hopefully by natural means, by artificial insemination if need be.

That out of the way, Harry and Hermione spent Monday afternoon, and all of Tuesday and Wednesday, in the commercial areas of out-lying London. They bought nothing except lunch, but enjoyed the window shopping.

Each of the four evenings, the Grangers went out, dragging Harry and Hermione with them. The Grangers enjoyed a short-run avant-garde play Monday night (written by a young woman, satirizing her boorish mother's fashion set and her mother's drugged-out over-sexed best friend), an amateur production of The Tempest, a musical in the West End, and a student production of a play by Plautus (in the original Latin).

Harry now understood Hermione a bit better. She certainly had a very different childhood environment than he could have ever imagined, growing up with the unloving, pedestrian Dursleys. Before he had started dating Hermione, he had thought there had to be more to her than her studies and passion for equality. Dating her helped him get to know her. Now he was finding out where she had come from, and he respected her and her family all the more.

Friday, March 28, 1997

Thursday and Friday morning had passed quietly at the Granger household. Then, as morning wore on, Harry and Hermione prepared to leave for two nights at Grimmauld Place. Dobby had already come and taken their luggage, and they were waiting at a tea shop late Friday morning for a car to show up for them -- that had seemed the safest way to travel.

Hermione was soon almost drowsing in the back seat, curled up comfortably against Harry. She came fully awake when she felt him stiffen and make a small sound of pain.

"What is it?" Hermione whispered.

"Voldemort is waiting for us somewhere in Grimmauld Place."

## **Chapter VI**

Friday, March 28, 1997

Dobby's long ears twitched. This was annoying to the elf, as he could not understand why it was happening so often that morning. He went back to studying the bouillabaisse he was making for the Master and Mistress' dinner, wondering if something in the strange soup was making him twitchy.

His ears twitched again. Dobby frowned, but gave a sigh of relief when Doli, head of the elf colony, appeared. Maybe there was a new elf, fresh from abuse and wishing to join the wonderful Master and his Mione. That might be making his ears twitch.

Then Dobby saw the look on Doli's face, and knew it was more serious. "What is Doli's problem?"

"Trixie and Dilly was looking at the Master's roof," Doli reminded Dobby. Dobby nodded. He was worried about one part of the roof, and also had the elves reinforcing the protections every week. "Trixie and Dilly saw bad wizards and witch, on the roof of house to right and also more across the alley in back, casting spells to keep Muggles away. Doli checked, and Doli saw they were not just bad wizards and witch, not just followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but . . . He is there."

"He?" Dobby asked, dropping the ladle.

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Master and Mistress are coming . . . no Order wizards in house. . . ." Dobby said thinking out loud.

"House elves must never hurt any witch or wizard; house elves must never use magic against any wizard or witch," Doli reminded Dobby.

Dobby thought about that, then said, "No, no enslaved house elf may ever cause harm to witch or wizard, even at Master's command. House elves must never use magic against any wizard or witch? Wizards' rules! Dobby will not harm evil wizards, but Dobby is not enslaved. Dobby serves Harry Potter, and Master Harry Potter has asked Dobby to guard house and Mistress Hermione."

Doli thought about that. "What then will Dobby do?"

"Dobby will defend house of Harry Potter and love of Harry Potter. Dobby will not harm evil wizards; Dobby will use magic against evil wizards."

"What will Dobby do?" Winky demanded, appearing just in time to hear something she didn't think she really wanted to hear again.

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and evil wizards. . . ."

"And witch," Doli added.

"And witch is outside, and will attack Harry Potter and Mistress Hermione. Dobby is free to decide what Dobby will do. Dobby will help Harry Potter. Dobby will defend Mistress Hermione."

"Then Winky will defend Master Harry and Mistress Hermione." Winky burst out crying while Dobby again proclaimed, "Dobby will defend Master and Mistress! Dobby is free elf, not enslaved house elf!"

Doli called in the other 20 elves from the colony who were there that day. Most were also crying and wailing in terror. "Hush!" Doli commanded, and, while most still cried, they did so quietly. "Evil He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and evil followers wait to attack Master and Mistress! Master and Mistress care for house elves, abandoned house elves! Master and Mistress may be ones prophesied to end slavery of all house elves!"

"House elves must never hurt any witch or wizard; house elves must never use magic against any wizard or witch," Trixie said sadly.

"Enslaved house elves must never attack any witch or wizard," Doli stated. "Doli is free. All house elves here is free. Doli freely came to Harry Potter and accepted work. Work includes defending house and Mistress. Doli will not harm witch or wizard, but Doli will defend Mistress!"

"Winky will defend Mistress and Master," she sniffled, and then cried out, "Winky wishes she had some butterbeer!"

One elf came forward and signaled for silence, for he could not speak. His last owner had cut his throat in a drunken rage and then dismissed him when he could no longer speak. Another master had burned out an eye decades before. He limped from the years of abuse and beatings. He carried scars that had made Remus Lupin wince in sympathy the one time the scarred werewolf had seen the poor elf. No one even knew his name or where he had come from.

The elf came forward and joined Doli's hand to Winky's, then Winky's to Dobby's. He then took Dobby's other hand in his left, and held out his right to the other elves. His meaning was clear.

The other elves rushed forward. For the first time in recorded history, a group of elves had decided to fight wizards.

The Elf Rebellion had begun.

"What do we do, Mister Potter?" the driver, a young wizard neither Harry nor Hermione knew anything about other than that he was a Hufflepuff two years older than themselves, asked nervously.

"We're getting close. There's a really good chance he's already on our tail."

At that point, Winky and two other elves popped into the car. "Mistress!" Winky squealed. "Evil wizards!"

"We know, Winky," Hermione said.

"Winky, why did three of you come?" Harry asked quietly.

"Elves will defend Master and Mistress!" the elves chorused.

"What did you say?" Hermione demanded.

"Elves will defend Master and Mistress!" the elves chorused again. Hermione smiled. 'Elves,' not 'house elves.'

"I thought the rules said . . . how did it go?" Harry asked.

"House elves must never hurt any witch or wizard; house elves must never use magic against any wizard or witch," Winky repeated. "Dobby said Dobby is not enslaved house elf. Dobby is free elf. Dobby will not harm evil wizards, but Dobby will defend Master and Mistress. All elves will defend Master and Mistress; no elf will harm wizard or witch. Six elves will capture evil witch and two wizards across alley. Other elves will protect front of house, when Master and Mistress arrive."

"How many are there in front?"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and five evil wizards in front, on roof top of house to front right of Master's house."

"And how many elves are there for the front?"

"Fourteen," Winky said.

"Sanni, go back to Grimmauld Place and let them know that no one should approach Voldemort, then go to Hogwarts and warn the Headmaster. Capture the others if you can." Harry instructed one of the other elves.

"Sanni goes." She disappeared.

"And what do you think you'll do?" Hermione asked in a horrified voice.

"I have an idea," Harry said. "I know all the books say it can't work, but I know that it will. I can feel it -- and I think you've felt it, too."

Hermione looked puzzled, until she looked into Harry's eyes. "The power that Voldemort knows not," she whispered. She knew what it was. She had known it all along. What she hadn't realized until that moment was if Harry could fully access it. Now she knew. Hermione believed.

Hermione offered herself to Harry, and they merged their magics. As the car pulled into Grimmauld Place, she could feel Harry let go of her, but their magics were still merged, although that was supposed to be impossible. The merging of magical auras should only occur



in contact. Hermione felt Harry draw some of her power with him as he got ready to leave the car.

As Harry released her, Hermione had flashes of others, and she managed to say, "Wait a moment. Think of Luna and Colin, think of Ginny and Dean." As Harry did so, Hermione felt their magic being drawn slightly to Harry as well.

"Don't let anything happen to the car or anyone inside, including yourselves," Harry told the elves. With that, Harry got out of the car and surveyed the deserted square. He shut the door and stood up. #12 was one of six houses in front of him. There were eight houses on the other sides of the two sides of the square (the houses behind him faced a main thoroughfare).

"Come out, Riddle! I know you're here!"

At the moment Harry stepped out of the car, Ginny Weasley screamed, while Colin Potter fainted. Except for one student, the rest of the people at lunch turned to see what what happened. Luna rushed up to the head table just as Sanni appeared. "Harry is facing Voldemort," Luna said. She then sat on the floor, and concentrated on somehow sending power to Harry.

In the west of England, Dean spilled his glass of pumpkin juice.

"Are you alright?" Padma asked.

"Harry. . . ." Dean said. "Harry is under attack. You know where, Ron."

Ron stood, not certain what he could do.

"Come, boy," Neville's grandmother commanded. "Dumbledore told me the location. I shall make a portkey, and then go to the Ministry." She looked around and picked up a long poker from the fireplace and began the charms.

"Who's coming with me?" Ron demanded.

"Dean's in no condition to go," Padma pointed out.

"You stay with him," Ron said. "Who else wants to stay and who's coming with me?"

"I'm coming," Neville stated.

"So am I," Lavender declared.

"Let's do it," Parvati agreed.

"I'm in," Seamus said.

"Being Slytherin, being Pure Blood, does not mean being evil. I'm with you," Anna told them.

"Remember Cedric Diggory," Susan declared, standing..

"REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!" every student shouted, except for Dean, who wasn't very responsive, trying as he was to send power to Harry through Colin.

"Brave of you to face me, Boy!"

"Cowardly of you to need five followers to face a sixteen year old boy, Riddle."

Riddle glanced behind him, a flicker of surprise going across his inhuman face.

"Expecting even more help? Maybe they figured if you were too weak to face me by yourself, they didn't want to associate with you any more."

Harry felt Voldemort try to force himself into his mind, but he slapped him back easily -- defense in this realm of magic was much simpler than offense and Hermione was already touching and reenforcing his magic; Luna and Colin were there, too. He could feel Ginny and Dean somewhere in the background.

At that moment, seven students, six Hogwarts faculty, six aurors who had been stationed at Hogwarts, plus Alastor Moody and Remus Lupin, all arrived via portkeys in the entrance hall of Grimmauld Place, putting them all into a heap.

"Kill anyone who shows their face!" Voldemort ordered, turning slightly away from Harry. Coming back to Harry, he sneered. "Well, Boy?"

"PATRONUM!"

Whatever Voldemort thought Harry would do, that wasn't it. The Patronus Dart tore through the Dark shield Voldemort had erected and only missed Voldemort by a few inches because he took a very undignified drive to the ground. The Dart kept going and ripped into a parked mini, smashing the door.

Harry wasn't about to give Riddle a chance to fight back. **"PATRONUM! PATRONUM!"** Harry had aimed all his positive feelings for Hermione and his friends, and the power of their feelings for him and for each other, at Voldemort, who was rolling around on the ground. Voldemort managed to avoid the second Dart, which ricocheted off the road and into a Death Eater, now frozen in place by an elf. The third smashed into Voldemort's right shoulder, causing a howl of pain as the entire shoulder socket was crushed.

Voldemort disappeared -- the whole 'fight' had taken all of twelve seconds. The Death Eaters were trapped, and so were easily swept up by the aurors who had now boiled out of Grimmauld Place, followed by the students and staff.

Three of the aurors collected the five Death Eaters in the street, who had been released as soon as the group had appeared. Three other Death Eaters also popped up, bound and gagged. Harry was glad to see that Bellatrix and Wormtail were now captured.

An auror Harry didn't know came over to Harry. "Now, what's all this then?"

Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997

Minister Bones eyed Harry. "Mister Potter, more happened Friday than you are telling me, especially concerning the captured Death Eaters." Harry and his friends had undergone two days of questions. None had mentioned Harry's apparent ability to draw power from others, and neither had Harry, Hermione, or the Order driver mentioned the elves.

Harry shrugged. He wasn't about to let the elves get into trouble for capturing the Death Eaters. Hermione and Diggle were busily researching the legal ramifications, and Harry had learned to 'play dumb' over his ten years at the Dursleys.

"Nothing to add, Potter?"

"I told you what I did to Riddle," Harry stated. "You have eight Death Eaters to interrogate. Does Riddle have any more Death Eaters or have they deserted or been killed? More werewolves? Vampires? Dementors? Other allies? Since I'm the one apparently stuck dealing with him, I'd rather like to know."

"Now look here young man!" the Minister started. She was shocked when Harry stood up, leaned over the table separating them and stared her in the eye. 'The Harry Potter of August 1995 looked so frail,' she realized as she met his gaze, 'and even the one I met last autumn was just a boy. This Harry Potter just defeated a fully-restored Voldemort in open battle and I don't think he was using his full power when he did it.'

"You are the Minister of Magic," Harry reminded her, "and I know you have issues and concerns that I'll never even guess exist. My concerns are destroying the most powerful Dark Wizard in centuries and unfortunately secondarily hoping I survive and have a life. I want you to help me, at least with the first. I'm going to have to kill a man, or at least someone who was born a man, and the longer that takes, the more people, magical and Muggle, will be killed. You decide; help me or hinder me."

"What exactly do you want, Potter, once you win?" Bones demanded. She knew what he wanted at the moment.

"I want the Death Eaters punished. They literally got away with murder last time. While werewolves, and vampires for that matter, need to be registered and even regulated to some degree, there needs to be anti-werewolf discrimination laws, not werewolf persecution. House elf slavery has to be ended, and elf abuse has to be made illegal."

"You're serious about these ROMP and ELF groups your girlfriend has created, you mean."

"We are. Elves are going to want to keep working for us; they need to work for us. We have to make certain they aren't taken advantage of."

"And what do you want for yourself?"

Harry sat and grinned. "I certainly DON'T want to be Minister of Magic. I assure you, that would just about be my last resort to get these issues worked on."

"Are you still intending to join our auror program?"

"No," Harry stated. "Professors Law and Powell have arranged for me to go through the auror and hit-wizard training in North America."

"I see." 'This will certainly cause some wrinkles,' she thought.

"Any thing else, Minister?"

The Minister was interrupted by a knock on the door. Harry and Minister Bones looked over and were surprised to Percy Weasley come in.

"Weasley! I thought you were sent to the Centaur Office two weeks ago, after that cock-up you caused at Harrods."

Harry hadn't heard anything about that, but knew he'd best keep quiet. He also knew the Centaur Office was where Ministry officials were sent who were seen as incompetent or in need of punishment.

"Yes, Minister," Percy said, coloring from embarrassment.

"Then what the devil are you doing here!"

"Amazing enough, I'm doing my job. I was summoned by the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest. Two representatives wish to speak to you, Harry Potter, and the Headmaster, as well as the centaur residing here at Hogwarts."

"Firenze," Harry offered. He was ignored.

"When do they wish this meeting?"

"As soon as possible, although they wish to speak with Ha . . . Mister Potter here, first."

Bones considered. "Very well. You bring the centaurs to Potter. I'll get the Headmaster, and he can call this Firenze."

Harry stood when Bane and Ronan entered the room. "We will speak to Potter alone," Ronan declared. Percy grimaced, but left.

"You wanted to speak with me?" Harry asked brusquely.

"Can you insure our privacy?"

"If you wish," Harry answered, pulling out his wand. Ronan nodded; Bane still was ignoring Harry. Harry cast the silence and privacy spells.

"Is it true that elves fought wizards?" Bane then demanded.

Harry considered. "Fight? No. They did use magic against wizards to capture them and to protect my girlfriend."

"And what is your Ministry doing about it?" Ronan asked.

"They probably suspect the possibility, but don't believe it's really possible. So, we haven't told them yet."

"What do you think they will do?" Bane asked, still harsh.

"They will want to punish the elves, no matter what the legalities are. We're researching that now."

"And if your law demands they be punished?"

"Then we don't tell them yet. If they find out, then we believe that law shouldn't apply to free elves, because as far as we know no free elves ever agreed to the restrictions. We will **not** turn the elves over for any type of punishment. Our position will be that free elves will agree not to cause harm, but that they certainly have the right to defend themselves. Their magic is particularly adaptable to defensive magic."

"Why cause no harm?"

"Because right now, many elves are easily influenced. It will also make our position slightly less disturbing to the wizarding world in general." Harry shook his head. "You wouldn't believe how abused some of the elves are."

"We would, Harry Potter. Any wizard, even Dumbledore, would be surprised at what we hear," Ronan stated. "The stars showed us a likely path. Only you could prevent the path from being followed. We did not think that less-likely path was even possible. We seem to have been wrong."

Bane snorted. Ronan turned and looked at him. "Comment, Bane?"

Bane sighed. "No. No, the path is still less likely, but no longer improbable." He turned to Harry. "I do not like humans. I do not like wizards. I do not like you."

"That's fine," Harry replied. "I don't like you, either. But I don't like you because you're you, not because you're a centaur."

Bane looked angrily down at Harry, and then did something Harry had never seen a centaur really do. He relaxed and grinned at Harry. "No, I do not, cannot, like you, Harry Potter, but

you are now the third wizard I can say I respect." He looked at Ronan. "Shall we respect Potter's decision on the elves?"

"We shall." Ronan looked at Harry. "We respect your work with the elves. Word has spread to all the world's free elves that elves decided to act against the Evil One, and Harry Potter is helping them. I suspect that the elves will not stop this movement, now it has started."

"Oh . . . this is going to be a lot more complicated than I thought."

"The young one has humility as well as power," Ronan commented.

"We hear many things, and see many things," Bane stated. "We will inform you or Dumbledore or Hagrid."

Ronan added. "We shall so inform your Minister."

"If she sends that idiot away," Bane insisted.

"Poor Percy," Harry said. "He tries so hard, and always misses the mark."

"The pompous wizard is known to you?" Bane demanded.

"He is the brother of two of my best friends," Harry admitted.

"Then you will think of some way to help him that keeps him out of our forest," Bane stated.

"If he ever comes to you again, it won't be at my suggestion," Harry promised.

"You may release the spells," Ronan stated.

Instantly, the door opened and Firenze stepped in, followed by Dumbledore, Bones, and Percy.

"This one is not acceptable," Bane stated, pointing at Percy. "Perhaps the Merpeople would be able to tolerate him. As objectionable as he is, however, you have sent many worse."

Percy winced, even though he knew nearly all of the few ministry representatives who actually met with the centaurs were rejected by them.

"Wait with the others, Weasley," Bones ordered.

Bane turned to Firenze. "The least likely path has become possible. You were right on that at least. Your banishment has been rescinded."

Firenze bowed deeply.

Ronan turned to Dumbledore and Bones. "We hear and observe many things. We shall send word to Dumbledore, Hagrid, or Potter, as they are three wizards who will speak honestly to us. Take lessons from them, especially Potter. The Dark One you seek has been in the Forest, going into a cave that leads under the lake. We do not know for certain when he comes and goes. Two very new fledgling vampires arrived in the Forest two nights ago, but mistook

Aragog's cave for the one they sought. Aragog's children did not care much for the taste, but were hungry."

Bane bowed to Harry, Dumbledore, and Firenze and left the room. Ronan actually clasped hands with them, and left with Firenze following.

Minister Bones stood there, frowning.

Before Dumbledore could say anything, Hermione appeared at the door. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"A set of proposals for the Minister," she said simply.

"On?" Bones demanded.

"Werewolf and vampire rights, the rights of sentients, and elf freedom and rights," she answered. "For the Ministry, and the International. Also proposals for the rights of the Muggle-born and raised, and even a little something for the Pure-Bloods."

Bones came over and picked up the stack of copies. "Very well, we shall consider them."

"I really would prefer for you to have the credit," Harry said softly.

"I understand," she answered.

"When does the news on Friday's duel break?" Hermione asked.

"It did this morning, on the wireless. The story will appear in the Prophet tomorrow. I was hoping to have a fuller idea of what happened, but I will go with what I know, for now." Bones swept out of the room.

"Come along," Dumbledore stated. "Once they're gone, you're going to tell me everything."

## **Chapter VII**

Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, having listened to Harry's complete story, along with precis of the experience from Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Colin, and Dean. Ron, Susan, Seamus, Anna, Wills, Neville, Lavender, Parvati, and Padma listened in.

After several minutes of silent cogitation, Dumbledore stated, "What you did has never been done, to my knowledge. It is likely very dangerous."

"I disagree, Headmaster," Dean stated, to Dumbledore's surprise. It was quickly clear that the others who had been directly affected agreed with Dean. "I was seriously weakened when Harry first tapped into my power via Colin. I could feel his surprise, and after that, he controlled what he was doing, and I feel that after the initial shock I was able to control how much power Harry could draw -- it felt like I was casting a continuous First year Charm -- it took concentration, but I wasn't drained in any way. I believe we must test and develop our control."

"I partially agree," Hermione stepped in. "I believe we can rather quickly control the connections so that we're not damaged. I'm not certain we can ever use the connections and be able to defend ourselves at the same time. As Dean pointed out, we were able to think and control what we did, but once we fed Harry the power, it took all our concentration. We'll have to ask the elves to help us."

"Ah, yes, the elves. I am concerned that they used magic against wizards, as opposed to using it to protect you or themselves," Dumbledore admitted.

"They are willing to agree to do no harm," Hermione stated, "but only on the condition that wizards do no harm to them or to those still enslaved."

Dumbledore sighed.

"It has to be done," Harry said. "It must be a crime to abuse an elf, and elves must have the right to retaliate, enslaved or not. And it has to be done by the International, not the patchwork of national and local authorities here in Europe."

"I shall be contacting everyone I can to gather support," Dumbledore agreed.

"Why here in Europe?" Susan asked.

"Most other places have some very rudimentary regulations against elf abuse," Hermione said. She'd been very thorough once she realized that what held for Britain could be largely irrelevant to the rest of the wizarding world.

"And we mustn't forget that the centaurs left neutrality in part, perhaps in large part, because Hermione and I back the elves," Harry added.

"Ah, yes." Dumbledore stood. "Harry, may I trouble you to join us? A group of aurors and hit-wizards will be joining us to investigate the Chamber of Secrets. We must quickly investigate that report."



Dumbledore surveyed the rest of the group. "Please stay here. If you need it, there is a lavatory three doors down on the left side of the platform. Otherwise, please stay here. Food will be delivered soon. If we encounter Voldemort, Harry may have to confront him. No matter if he does or does not, you must decide if you wish to continue the experiment."

Harry stood, and Hermione stood as well. They hugged and briefly merged their magic. Luna and Colin did the same with Harry, then Dumbledore left, with Harry trailing behind.

Luna turned to Ginny, and they embraced and merged. Hermione walked over and joined them. After a moment, Colin joined the three girls, followed by Dean. Padma stood and gestured the remaining students to move aside. She rearranged the Headmaster's office and managed to get the five merged students in more comfortable positions on cushions.

When everything met her satisfaction, she said, "Siblings should not join directly with siblings. At least two people should say out this time." She turned to her twin. "Have you merged with Lavender or Neville?"

"Both," Parvati admitted.

"Then I shall stay out, this time. Who else?"

"I will," William said.

"Ron?" Padma asked.

"Are you joining?" Ron asked Susan.

"Unless you ask me not to."

"I'm not asking that," Ron told her. He turned to Padma. "I'm in this time."

"Alright," Padma agreed. "Now let me position you all, and if I pull you out, end it."

"Let's go," Lavender said.

"They are merging, are they not?" Dumbledore asked.

"Almost all of them," Harry answered. "I wonder why Padma and Wills haven't joined?"

"Padma Patil is a most cautious young woman," Dumbledore answered. "I would imagine she believes it best if at least two stay out of the group merging to keep an eye on them. She will pull any out that are under stress."

"That's good."

"Let us hope this is unnecessary, but just practice."

They walked up to the door of Moaning Myrtle's toilets, where seven aurors, including Tonks, were waiting.

"I have arranged for a dozen aurors and hit-wizards to be entering the cave in the forbidden forest in a short time. We should go; we should have a cave-in to clear," Dumbledore told the group.

Myrtle took one look at the group and dove into her toilet. Harry opened the hidden entrance and looked at Dumbledore.

"May I suggest you ask for stairs, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, and said, "Stairs," in Parseltongue. They appeared. "Wish we'd thought of that four years ago," Harry muttered. He went down next to last.

The aurors satisfied themselves that there were no back-passages from the bottom, although they saw several sets of pipes on the way down. It took nearly an hour to clean up the cave-in and make certain the roof was well-supported.

As they approached the door to the Chamber, one of the aurors sniffed and said, "What IS that smell?"

"Probably the remains of the basilisk," Harry answered. "Would there have been enough rats and other scavengers to pick it clean by now?"

"There should have been, if they could have found any way in," Dumbledore mused. "If not, or if the basilisk's flesh was poisonous to the scavengers, then the air will be very rank. I suggest bubble-head spells for all of us."

Once they were in the Chamber, they could see that while it was far from air tight, few scavengers had made it to feed on the remains of the huge snake. Those that had, had died from the internal poisons.

"Harry, you and Tonks go behind the image and see if there is indeed another exit to the Chamber. We shall attempt to sweeten the Chamber itself, at least a bit."

At first they didn't think there was any other exit. Tonks however kept coming back to a statue of a wizard against the back wall. It was really the only decoration behind the head of Slytherin.

Finally Tonks stepped in front of it and declared, "This must be guarding something." She pointed to the feet of the robed statue, where an adder was curled. "Ask the snake."

"Open," Harry commanded.

The eyes of the statue opened. "You do not command me. Whom do you serve?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Who are you and whom do you serve? Which of the Hogwarts Four, if any? Or do you serve only yourself. Answer true."

Tonks stared at the statue, wondering explaining being an auror to a statue might entail. Harry puzzled a moment, and felt the right answer coming to him. "I serve the cause of Light Magic. I follow Merlin, Godric Gryffindor, and Albus Dumbledore. I am Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Scourge of Voldemort."

"Blimey, Harry, you've been reading too many Muggle fantasy novels," Tonks muttered.

"You speak as one should, but your minion is disrespectful," the statue said, rebuking Tonks.

"Minion!"

"Would you follow Harry Potter into battle? Would you risk your life to save his? Would you obey him?"

Tonks flushed in anger, but answered, "Yes, but. . . ."

"Minion," the statue affirmed. It turned to Harry. "My maker was not evil, although he had a very different set of values than you on what was good. Still, I am authorized to let the good pass through. However, do not try to take anything out that you do not take in."

"Did you ever allow Riddle in, or through? Or to take things?"

"I did when he was first here. I did not when his avatar returned, and my counterpart at the other end has not let him through more recently. Now, I shall allow you and one other through. Decide who goes with you."

"Tonks, go tell the Headmaster," Harry said.

Tonks looked at him and snorted. "Minion!" she muttered, and went to get the Headmaster.

"I had best go through with Harry," Dumbledore decided when he had come back with Tonks. "Tell the others you should all stay here for ninety minutes, and then leave if we haven't returned."

Tonks nodded, while Dumbledore turned to the guardian. "You will let us through?"

"I shall let you in. You may not leave with anything that you find inside."

"Very well."

"Headmaster, perhaps we shouldn't . . . tarry."

"We were warned not to take anything, Harry, not not to look." Dumbledore could only imagine what might be the scrolls and codices that filled the shelves lining the passage. He was trying to read the titles.

"Perhaps we shouldn't take too much knowledge, either."

Dumbledore sighed and straightened up. "Perhaps you are correct. Come along, then."

The passage was only some fifty meters long. As they approached the other exit, a face formed in the stones of the wall. "I see you were tempted, but did not give in to the temptation. Very well, you may pass." The slid open.

"Be on your guard," Dumbledore warned softly. "It is just after sunset. If there are any vampires, they will awake soon."

"Albus. . . ?" a weak voice called.

Dumbledore turned around, saying, "Stay here and keep watch, Harry."

"Harry. . . ." the voice called, more weakly.

When Dumbledore walked fully into the chamber, torches around the perimeter lit. It was the size of the Chamber of Secrets, but undecorated, and mostly empty. There was a long table covered with various goods against a side wall, a chair, and also six large marble-like blocks - and trapped inside were what even Harry could tell at a distance were vampires.

"It's Cassandra," Harry stated.

She seemed to be the only one awake. Dumbledore and Harry approached her, Harry making a slight detour to the table to see what was on it. Harry then came up to Cassandra and Dumbledore. The Headmaster was examining the block. Only Cassandra's left arm and head and neck were free of the block.

"Here," Harry said, helping Cassandra drink some of the spring water he had found on the table.

"Thank you," she told Harry, still weakly but a little clearer. "Voldemort has been feeding on us, myself and his own five remaining vampires. They are all very weak -- fledglings or fledglings made by fledglings!"

"He's a vampire?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"In small amounts, vampire blood helps heal serious magical injuries, although it can have quite a disturbing affect on a person's internal organs," Dumbledore explained. "I doubt that would bother Voldemort at this point in his existence."

Dumbledore turned and looked at the other vampires. "They are all his, are they not?"

"They are. Wait!" Cassandra pleaded. "Do not kill them just yet!"

"Why?"

"Please, let me feed on them! I am very weak."

Dumbledore seemed to hesitate.

"If you're going to destroy them anyway, why not?" Harry asked. "If you're going to bring them to the Ministry to be destroyed, again why not, even if she can't take as much as she'd like?"

"It might take some doing to break these blocks," Dumbledore pointed out, "and I need to discover what the other auror team is doing."

Harry's wand slashed downward, and the block crumbled. Dumbledore looked on in shock. He had figured it would take at least himself and Harry working together some minutes to achieve that result. He looked at Cassandra, who looked weak and hungry, but still in control. "Very well. Harry help her, but please do NOT destroy them. They need to be questioned." He turned and made for the other door.

Cassandra sat weakly on the floor, trying to control herself. Suddenly, a welcome odor made her moan. She opened her eyes and saw Harry holding out perhaps an ounce of his blood in a small glass in one hand, and the goblet of water in the other. She took both, and satisfied her greatest craving. "If you keep feeding me, Harry, Hermione will get jealous."

"As long as it's just a little blood now and again, I don't think she will mind."

Cassandra smiled and let Harry help her to her feet. "I understand, Harry. Now, you may not wish to witness this."

"Would you prefer I didn't watch?"

"No, I don't mind, but many people find it a bit . . . disturbing."

"I thought we were supposed to find it erotic?"

"That is a minority reaction to seeing it, although a significant one. When done with affection, it is always erotic to a direct victim."

"When will they wake up?"

"If I hurry, they shall not awake until tomorrow evening."

It turned out Voldemort had been using the outer chambers for some months, although apparently only Wormtail had had frequent access. He had acted the go-between to supply Michael Corner with objects like the portkey targets. Corner had then turned them over to Cho or Pansy for further distribution.

The five trapped vampires remained unconscious after Cassandra had drained them of as much blood as possible. After some negotiations with the statue in this outer chamber, the vampires were transported, still trapped, back to Hogwarts via the Chamber of Secrets under Harry's guard while Dumbledore and some of the aurors completely destroyed the tunnel leading to the Forbidden Forest, going out through the tunnel itself. They left the outer chamber intact as part of the deal with the statue.

The remaining aurors in the original Chamber transported the five trapped vampires and Cassandra straight out of Hogwarts to the Ministry via portkey once they reached Myrtle's bathroom. Harry returned to the Headmaster's office with to await his return and to break up the merge.

To Harry's slight surprise, he found Henrietta waiting for him at the outer entrance to the Headmaster's office. Then he remembered that she and Ron had no-doubt merged their magics more than once in the seven months they had been involved.

Henrietta returned Harry's greeting and then said, "I suppose you know why I'm here."

"I know why you might have been drawn here, anyway," Harry answered.

"My father is fighting this war. I barely escaped with Luna before the cottage was destroyed last July. Just because Ron and I aren't dating anymore doesn't mean I don't want to help."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

As far as the best intelligence could now tell, Voldemort was alone except for his snake, the few remaining Death Eaters and dementors having deserted him. Where Voldemort and Nagini were, however, was unknown to everyone but Voldemort.

The wizarding communities of western Europe heaved a collective sigh of relief and hoped everything would go back to normal. The rest of the wizarding world hadn't really been paying much attention to the problem to begin with.

The International began having hearings on the rights of werewolves, house elves, and sentients in general, reopening arguments that had been troubling the magical world for centuries.

The British community were a bit startled to learn that they had the most restrictive anti-werewolf regulations in the world. It also came as a bit of a surprise to learn that elves had been partially freed in North America, Australia, and New Zealand for over a century (ie house elves were owned, but their children were able to choose their owners), and that the ministries in Australia, North and South America and much of Africa and Asia had at least banned house elf abuse (although these rules were often poorly enforced).

Around the world, free elves presented their employers contracts based on the ones Hermione and Mr. Diggle had created -- and refusing to work without a contract. That the old restrictions on house elves did not apply to free elves came as a surprise to nearly the entire wizarding world. Desire to get the elves to agree never to harm wizards pushed the desire for a settlement forward. It was clear that it would take some time to work out the details, but that they would be worked out.

At Hogwarts, the students interested in Quidditch (other than the Seventh and Fifth years) swarmed back to the pitch for impromptu scrimmages, to prepare for the return of Quidditch the following year. Seventh and Fifth years were entering the final stretch of study for their N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s.

Like all the students other than Harry, Hermione gave up most of her extra defense work. She split what little extra time she had tutoring the Fifth years, researching merging, overseeing ELF and ROMP, and watching over Harry. Ron spent his free time snogging Susan and thinking about Quidditch.

Harry kept up his training schedule, trying to build his physical and magical endurance. Harry now had a professional physical trainer, a Squib from America who worked with professional Muggle athletes. He had to help Harry gain that endurance while making certain Harry kept his reflexes sharp. As the weeks of spring flew past, Harry sometimes wondered if he was the only student who realized that the war might be far from over.

Dumbledore certainly realized that the war wasn't over. He and Harry met several times in April to work out Harry's summer. Harry did wonder how many of the students would be willing to come with him to an unknown location for what would likely be very tough training.

Hermione would go, and Ginny and Luna would likely demand to go as well. Ron would want to, but would feel torn if Susan decided not to or if she was not allowed to. Colin would likely have to go even if he didn't want to (fortunately, he did wish to, but hoped Wills would go as well). Dumbledore did not push anyone to make a quick decision.

School would be out on June 28, and Harry would be spending a week at the Dursleys. The group would be returning sometime around August 17. Hermione told her parents that she would be with them for the week after school and hopefully between August 17 and 24. As May approached its close, that was where the entire trip stood.

## Chapter VIII

Friday, May 2, 1997

A gasp went over the Great Hall as post owls dropped off The Morning Prophet:

### ***DARK LORD'S ATTACK KILLS 6!! CHALLENGES HARRY POTTER!***

*He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named* apparantly launched a solo attack on the Williamson farm near Merby, East Anglia, early last evening. The Dark Lord killed George Williamson (29), an auror, his parents Frederick (80) and Martha Weasley Williamson (56), his fiancée Georgina Brown (27), and two of his three siblings, Marie (16, a 5th year Hufflepuff) and Joseph (12, a 1st year Slytherin), who were home on special leave to meet their brother's fiancée. The sole surviving witness, who was mutilated, was 10 year old Victoria, who starts Hogwarts in the autumn.

*The Dark Lord projected the Dark Mark, and left the following note:*

***Pure Bloods have proven themselves to be no better than Half-bloods, Mixed-bloods, or even the Muggle-born. None-the-less, I remain convinced there are wizards and witches who deserve to join me in ruling over the magical world, after we subjugate the Muggles! I shall begin my rule by destroying the symbol of the resistance, Harry Potter.***

***Harry Potter! You shall meet me once you become a man! I shall give you three weeks after you become a man to find and challenge me. If you do not, I shall destroy the weak and unnecessary, as I have tonight, until you do.***

***As for the rest of the wizarding world, until the 21st of August, I shall only strike in defence. After that, beware!***

"He has GOT to be kidding," Hermione stated.

"Gone around the bend, that one finally has," Ron agreed.

"What?" Neville asked.

"He sounds like the villains in your comic books," Ginny said to Ron. She turned to Neville. "You never read comic books?"

Neville shook his head.

"We already knew he was a crazy, sadistic lunatic," Harry said softly. "Why should you be surprised when he just proves it again?"

"Because it always comes as a shock that he's really this insane," Hermione answered. "It's outside our every day frame of reference."

"I'm sure that's why he was so successful in frightening everyone back in the Seventies," Colin mused. When he saw he had everyone's attention, he went on. "Look, Voldemort is a



nutter, but he's a very skilled and powerful nutter. Even if he wasn't totally nuts twenty-five years ago, he was off. People didn't realize that. His insanity made him seem more mysterious and dangerous than he was. Wizards weren't used to the idea of the insane mastermind."

"So they mistook his insanity for even greater power? Maybe," Lavender said thoughtfully.

"Everyone is going to be after you for a statement, Harry," Parvati pointed out.

Harry pulled out quill and parchment and scribbled a few lines. He showed them to Hermione, who nodded. Harry made a gesture, and Hermione read the short note. "In regards to the ravings of Tom Marvolo Riddle, who calls himself Lord Voldemort, it seems strange that he still feels himself able to control with world despite over twenty-five years of failure coupled with terror, and stranger that he believes that a 16 year old is the only obstacle between himself and world domination.

I urge you all to report any information that might help the Ministry find this renegade wizard."

"You'll have Dumbledore look at it before you send it?" Hermione asked.

"Of course."

Harry stood up, but stopped when Lavender put her hand on his arm. She exchanged a glance with Neville and Parvati. "Harry, we're still with you. We'll be with you this summer."

Harry smiled. "Let's get through this term, and then this summer, we'll get ready. Together."

After May turned to June, the examiners again descended on the school, and the Fifth and Seventh years went through the annual torment. As soon as the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were over, the exams for the rest of the students began. Compared to the O.W.L.s, the end of the year exams for the Sixth years were actually tolerable.

On the next to last Tuesday of the month, Dumbledore gathered the students who might be joining Harry in a small classroom. With two exceptions, the group was arranged in pairs: Harry and Hermione; Ron and Susan; Dean and Padma; Seamus and Anna Lloyd; William Lloyd and Henrietta (a rather new and unexpected couple); Luna and Ginny; and Millicent Bulstrode and Daphne Greengrass. One exception was a trio: Neville, Parvati, and Lavender, the other was Colin. Colin was still friendly, even involved to some degree with Dean and Wills, which Padma and Henrietta were putting up with at the moment (more so Henrietta than Padma, as Wills and Colin were still rather more physically affectionate than Dean and Colin).

Albus Dumbledore surveyed the tired-looking group. Compared to the previous academic year, this past year had not been so terrible, but it had been more tiring. Hopefully the same would be said of the coming vacation. The students sat, united to some degree, across House-lines. The three Slytherin girls still looked as if they felt a bit out of place, but they were there. "You all understand why you're here?"

"I'm here because I want Riddle destroyed," Millicent started. "Potter here can do that, especially if we can help feed him power through a group merge. That will be intrusive, but it's a lot safer for us than facing Riddle alone would be! We'll be leaving for some unknown place a week into the vacation, so that we can learn how to really pump some power through the merges when the time comes."

"Exactly. Some of you will be going with Mister Longbottom for that week, some with the Weasleys, and a few will go with Colin Potter. Is there anyone who is not committed to this course of action? For if you are not, you will be identified during the merges. It would be best for all concerned, especially yourself, if you acknowledge it now."

No one said anything.

"Very well. I leave you to make your excuses to your other friends as to why you shall be unavailable for the summer. I SHALL learn of any leakage of this information."

"So, Harry, how are we going to be dividing up?" Colin asked as they left the meeting a few minutes later.

"I have to go back to my Aunt's. Why don't you and Hermione work things out?"

Colin sighed. "Because she's likely already mapped everything out, and you're the only person she'd ever back down for."

"Nonsense!" Hermione declared in Colin's ear, making him jump. "Here! Don't leave it lying around!"

**Longbottom . . . Weasley . . . . . Potter\***  
Neville . . . . . Ron . . . . . Colin  
Parvati . . . . . Ginny . . . . . Dean  
Lavender . . . . . Susan . . . . . Seamus  
Millicent . . . . . Luna . . . . . William  
Daphne . . . . . Henrietta  
Padma . . . . . Anna

*\*Professor Lupin and Auror Tonks will be supervising here.*

"Oh. . . ." Colin said. "And where will you be?"

"I'll be visiting my parents for a few days, then I'll be staying near Harry for a day or two. Then we go back to you and Harry's place, along with everyone else. Where we go from there. . . ?" She shrugged.

Saturday, June 28, 1997

Harry, Hermione, Ron, Susan, Luna, and Ginny shared a compartment on the Hogwarts express. The prefects took turns making the rounds, but the train was very well-behaved that June.

Ginny and Luna were still recovering from their O.W.L.s to some extent. The four Sixth years were quite content with their scores. As the train entered the Midlands, Luna accidentally asked Hermione about it when the two were alone in the compartment. "You look very content today, all things considered."

"Things like this summer, Voldemort, the elves; things like that?" Protests over the elves demands were spreading, as were the elves leaving work in protest and house elves being accused of slowing down their work.

"Things like that," Luna agreed.

"Actually, I was thinking about our grades," Hermione admitted. "Probably rather shallow of me, actually."

Luna smiled. "I know you all did well, but how exactly did you do?"

"You don't mind? Even Harry's eyes glaze over when I rehash our scores."

"well, you haven't told me the scores, so it's new to me. And I AM a Ravenclaw. We talk about our grades, too."

Hermione smiled widely, switched seats to next to Luna, whipped out parchment and quill, and wrote out the results while she and Luna talked about the scores and Sixth year classes in general.

**Hermione:**

**Creatures 120, Charms 102, Transfiguration 102, Defence 99, Runes 99, Arithmancy 99, Medical 99 -- average 103;**

**Harry:**

**Defence 105, Creatures 101, Charms 100, Muggle Studies 99, Transfiguration 96, Medical 90 -- average 98.5;**

**Ron:**

**Defence 96, Creatures 96, Ministry 93, Charms 93, Herbology 87, Divination 84 -- 91.5;**

**Neville:**

**Herbology 102, Creatures 102, Defence 96, Ministry 92, Charms 91, Medical 90, Transfiguration 87 -- 94.3;**

**Dean:**

**Charms 98, Defence 94, Herbology 90, History 90, Household Potions, 93, Practical Transformations 93 -- 93;**

**Seamus:**

**Defence 93, Astronomy 90, History 84, Practical Charms 96, Household Potions 90, Practical Transformations 90 -- 90.5;**

**Lavender:**

**Divination 96, Defence 94, Charms 90, Transfiguration 89, Astronomy 87, Household Potions 96 -- 92;**

**Parvati:**

**Divination 96, Defence 91, Charms 90, Transfiguration 88, Astronomy 87, Household Potions 96 -- 91.33;**

**Padma:**

**Arithmancy 102, Runes 99, Astronomy 98, Potions 96, Herbology 96, History 96, Muggle Studies 91 -- 96.9;**

**Susan:**

**Ministry 97, Charms 96, Medical 90, Defence 89, Transfiguration 87, Herbology 87 -- 91;**

**Millicent:**

**Creatures 93, Charms 93, Defence 91, Potions 89, Transfiguration 84, Herbology 84 -- 89;**

**Daphne:**

**Charms 93, Potions 89, Runes 89, Astronomy 87, History 87, Herbology 86 -- 88.5.**

By the time Hermione stopped analyzing the ramifications of every grade of Sixth year in the group, the train was approaching London. Hermione looked up to see Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Susan had returned and were grinning at her. "What?" she demanded. Then she realized what she had done, and how long she had done it. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"That's quite all right," Luna told her. "You needed to tell someone."

"And now you've done that, and we never need hear about it ever again," Ron stated firmly.

Hermione gave Ron a dirty look. She told herself yet again she was very glad she and Ron had broken up almost exactly the year before, and she almost wished they had never dated in the first place.

The platform looked more normal to Harry than it had in years. He hung back, standing next to the train and watched families reunite and his friends and followers march off proudly. While none had said to anyone outside the little group what they were doing, the other students had pretty much put things together.

In seven or eight weeks, Harry realized yet again, it might all be over. He might be dead; Voldemort might be dead; they both might be dead. There didn't seem any other option.

Harry hadn't realized how stiffly he was standing until he felt Hermione's arm go around his waist and her head lean on his shoulder. He could feel her magic, and the feeling of love and safety Hermione projected whenever she was near him calmed and relaxed him. "It will be alright, Harry. You'll win."

"I thought you gave up on Divination?" Harry teased.

"I have; it's not for me. Still, however imprecise, it does exist. And if I'm no good in it, Luna, Parvati, and Lavender are, and they're all confident you will win."

"But will I survive?"

"Plan on it," Hermione said. "Now come on. Let's get off this smelly platform."

"Easy for you to say. You're going home; I'm going to the Dursleys!"

The ride to Little Whinging was very quiet, as it was only Vernon and Harry. Vernon had nothing to say to Harry, and Harry had nothing to add.

Finally, as they approached the exit to Little Whinging, Vernon asked, "Where's that owl of yours?"

"Staying with Hermione."

Vernon grunted. As they approached Privet Drive, however, he managed speech again. "And you're leaving next Sunday?"

"So I've been told."

"And never coming back?"

Harry smiled internally, but kept looking straight ahead. "Not to stay, anyway."

"What does THAT mean?"

"Well, you're still my only relatives. I would imagine we'll see each other from time to time." Vernon turned into the drive. "And if Dudley's children turn out magical, I expect they'll need to see a lot of me."

Vernon missed the brake pedal and crashed into the garage door.

It was an interesting five days for Harry. He was still a tad below average in height, but he was now 5 foot 9 -- long-legged but moderately well-muscled for his frame at 11 stone 11 (165 pounds). Dudley, a widely-built 6 foot, was now 15 stone even (210 pounds) -- 5 stone lighter than he had been the previous summer, one heavier than he had been a Christmas. However, early Monday morning, when Dudley saw the speed at which Harry attacked the punching bag and heavy bag, he knew not to even try to tease Harry.

As soon as the thought had crossed Dudley's mind, he realized that the very idea of attacking Harry was silly. Objectively, Dudley was still a rather dense young man with bullying tendencies. Compared to where he had been before his encounter with the dementors, Dudley was now almost civilized.

Dudley watched Harry some more, and then made a decision. "Harry, you have fast reflexes, but let me show you what you're doing wrong." Harry eyed Dudley suspiciously. "If I trick you, feel free to curse me after your birthday."

Harry smiled. "Fair enough."

Dumbledore hadn't thought it necessary for Harry to stay confined to the house for this week, although he did describe the area Harry should limit himself to. Harry had Dudley out doing some road work with him every morning, although Dudley only did a third of what Harry did. Harry would then join Dudley in the middle of his own workout in the cellar.

It was Thursday when Dudley asked as the two were cooling down, "So what's bothering you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something is bothering you. You go along fine enough, and then it's like a switch turns off."

"Why do you want to know?"

Dudley shrugged. "Just curious. Better than the nightmares were for the last two years, from my point of view, but it doesn't . . . it just doesn't look good for you."

Harry gave his cousin a twisted smile. "Well, believe it or not, some time in mid-August, I have to face a very powerful, evil wizard and fight him to the death."

Dudley's jaw dropped. "You're shitting me, right?"

Harry shook his head. "Believe me, I wish I was."

Dudley shook his head. "And you wondered why Dad thinks you and your kind are freaky." He looked at Harry. "Was what that guy told us about the attack true?"

"What did he tell you?"

"That if I wasn't under this blood spell stuff, I would have either been killed or turned into a werewolf?"

"That's true, at least."

Dudley thought. "Is it bad being a werewolf? Or, well. . . ."

"Cool? No, it's not cool. Remember how sick you were just from the scratches?"

Dudley grimaced. He remembered.

"Well, imagine feeling that way for two days before the full moon every month, and for three days afterwards. That would be a **good** transformation. Werewolves are very violent in their

wolf forms, and if they can't attack someone, they either attack themselves or have to half-poison themselves to prevent it. One werewolf I know, who's been one for over thirty years now . . . you can't imagine how scarred he is. If you kill someone when you're transformed, you're destroyed. If you seriously injure another wizard, you're destroyed. If you're a Muggle, non-magical, and are bitten by a werewolf, you're destroyed."

"What!"

"A Muggle werewolf goes insane over a year or two. Most Muggles who are injured as much as you were are killed, too, just so there don't have to be any explanations."

"Then why wasn't I? Or the girls?"

"The girls that survived were raped by people, not werewolves. You weren't because you already knew about the magical world."

"That guy said something like that, but I thought I must have imagined it. So, are all the ones that were bitten. . . ."

"The ones who attacked you, and the ones bitten, are all dead."

Dudley shook his head, "I guess there's nothing I can do to help, so I'll just wish you good luck."

"Actually, there might be."

Harry was showered, dressed up, and at Mrs. Figg's at 11:15 Friday morning.

"Harry, she's not going to be here for twenty minutes."

"I know, but she tends to be early."

"Harry, she's traveling by timed portkey."

Harry shrugged and dangled some string for the cats to play with.

"May I at least thank you for sending the elves every morning?" One elf came for an hour every morning. Hermione and Harry had decided the elves needed to learn to pace themselves, and the accumulated dust and odor had taken a few weeks to get clean one reasonable hour at a time.

"You're welcome. I'll be glad when everything is worked out for the elves. It's tough finding enough for them to do."

"Really?" She thought for a moment. "Perhaps that's why so many Old Families have such accumulations of junk. If they had to clean them, they might not be such magpies."

"Mrs. Figg? What was your maiden name?"

"Stewart . . . but you're right. James' maternal grandmother was my oldest sister." Harry had wondered why and how the Squib had found herself involved with the Order.

"Too bad it was from my father's side," Harry grumbled.

"What? Oh, of course. However, if I had come from Lily's family, I would not have known about magic, and so would not have been chosen for your guardian."

Harry heaved a huge sigh. "No, I supposed not." As much as he loved magic, Harry sometimes wished there was no magical world, and that he had grown up 'normally.'

Harry was glad when Hermione showed up on schedule. There was really little for them to do in Little Whinging. Hermione would stay at Mrs. Figg's Friday and Saturday night. Harry would work out in the early mornings, do a few chores around #4, and then shower and walk over to Mrs. Figg's around 9:00 am. They would stay together all day, mostly sitting out in Mrs. Figg's back garden, although they would walk around the village a bit. They would go to eat dinner at the Dursleys' each evening, and Harry would walk Hermione back to Mrs. Figg's, where Harry would stay until 10:00.

On Sunday morning, Harry followed the same routine. When he left at 9:00, however, he knew he was really saying 'goodbye'. If he failed, well, he preferred not to think about that. If he succeeded, Harry doubted if he would ever be back to Privet Drive for more than a dinner, mostly likely when Mary was there and Vernon wasn't.

Which was fine with Harry. While Vernon made himself scarce, Dudley and Petunia managed to wish Harry 'goodbye and good luck.' They didn't want to know the details, but they meant their good wishes.

Harry and Hermione took a cab to see her uncle, and then on to Grimmauld Place.



## **Chapter IX**

The eighteen students landed with a jolt. They were in a huge entrance hall, even larger than the one at Hogwarts. The stone work seemed even older, although that could perhaps mean that the building wasn't as enchanted. "Welcome," a high voice said from the top of the long, three storey stairs.

Harry's jaw dropped. "Cassandra?"

"Who are you?" Millicent demanded before most of the other students could. She turned to Harry. "Who is she?"

"I am your hostess. I am . . . Cassandra." The vampire seemed to almost float down the stairs. "I am also the vampire some of you have already contributed to. Where we are is of no importance. You are here to do one thing -- you are here to learn how to send power to Harry Potter, so that he may destroy a great evil. You shall merge your magics several times a day. Sometimes it will just be with your partner. Sometimes it will be with others from the group. Some times it will be the entire group. You will have some time to do other things: to prepare for your next year of schooling; to be with your friends in the group; to make new friends; even to increase your intimacy with some member or members of the group. In your other time, feel free to read, study, play, frolic, or even make love if you so desire. Just remember, for this to have the greatest possible success, you must learn to trust each other and yourselves."

Cassandra raised her hands, and for the first time, Harry saw her with a wand. "I shall send you to your rooms now. Do try not to stray into anyone else's without permission." Her wand slashed down in a rainbow of sparks, and Harry found himself in a large bedroom.

Looking around, he saw three doors. One was obviously to a bathroom, set into the large room, and one, equally obviously, led to some corridor or other. He went over and just as he was about to knock on the remaining door, a knock sounded on it.

"Yes?" Harry said. "Hermione?"

With a worried, "Yes!" Hermione flung the door open, right into Harry's nose.

**"OW!"**

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione cried. "Harry, stop howling and carrying on and let me fix that! Harry! Harry, move your hands! Harry, you'll get blood on the carpet! What would Cassandra say to that?"

"Yummy," the vampire said, shocking both teens with her sudden appearance. She firmly grabbed Harry's wrists and exposed his slightly bloody face. "Fix his nose, Hermione."

"Ow!"

"Hush!"

Cassandra smiled and cleaned the blood off Harry's face with a finger. "You really are a most delicious boy," she said, licking her finger off.

"That's MY delicious boy you're talking about," Hermione pointed out.

"So he is. Rest, and try not to set off any more ward alarms." Cassandra disappeared silently.

"Do you have any idea where we are?" Harry asked.

"None," Hermione admitted. "If we just moved thorough space, we're obviously somewhere east, probably in central Asia, but beyond that?" She shrugged. "Maybe in the morning."

Harry looked around. "So, in your room or mine?"

Hermione smiled. "Well, since I'm here already. . . ."

The group never did find out where they were. Although it was only afternoon when they arrived by their internal clocks, they all soon fell asleep. When they woke up, it was morning. The castle was large, and they were kept inside at night and most of the day as well, so they were never able to even figure out the exact latitude.

Cassandra was of course only available during the evenings. Remus and Tonks were available during the day, and Dumbledore showed up twice in July to check on their progress.

Harry entered into direct (ie accomplished through touch) merges which each of the others, usually in small groups. Some, he merged with individually and often (Hermione, Luna, Lavender, Susan, Daphne, and, to her joy, Ginny, although he only merged with Susan, Lavender, and Daphne privately one time each in the five weeks they were training together, all towards the end of July).

Only Harry had to practice dueling, which he did at least three hours a day: one hour each against Tonks, Remus, and Cassandra. His fellow students still practiced at least an hour a day, and usually at least one would team up with one of the instructors, to make it challenging for Harry.

Back in the 'real world,' magical law enforcement from all around the world scoured their jurisdictions for any sign of Voldemort. Areas were searched as they had never been in history. Suspect wizards and organizations were investigated more thoroughly than anyone had thought possible, especially in such a short period of time. Arrests were made, dozens of criminal and Dark organizations were at least severely crippled if not destroyed. World-wide, seventy-eight major and hundreds of minor fugitives from various types of justice were apprehended. Literally tons of banned material and potions were confiscated and many hundreds of highly illegal magical objects were collected (nearly all these materials, potions, and objects were destroyed). It was the largest crack-down in the history of the magical world.

There was no sign of Voldemort anywhere. There was not even a hint that any of those arrested or questioned had been in contact with the Dark Lord since his ultimatum.

Harry didn't seem to notice any of these events very much. He concentrated on his training and mostly ignored everything else going on around him. He made an exception for Hermione, but he drifted away from any intimacy with any of the others, other than during the merges.

The others were not so constrained. Ron and Susan, Dean and Padma, and William and Henrietta all became physically as well as romantically involved over July. Henrietta accepted Wills partial involvement with Colin, although both she and Colin ignored Wills' hints for the three of them getting together. Padma was also tolerating Dean and Colin's continued relationship, if only because it seemed to be winding down.

At Cassandra's suggestion, most of the group became more tactile with Harry, and by mid-July Harry was getting two massages a day from everyone except Ron, Wills, and Neville. Even though they did not merge their magics with Harry during those massages, Harry did grow ever more sensitive to the others' magic.

Remus, Hermione, and Padma took detailed notes from each participant every day. They were moving into an unexplored realm of magic, and the records might prove important some day.

The only other studying some of the teens, including Harry, had to do was for apparation. All the now ex-Sixth years were being trained, even Hermione, who was the youngest and who would not turn seventeen until September.

Monday, July 28, 1997

It was late at night, probably nearly midnight. Harry had fought a thirty minute duel against Cassandra and Dumbledore, and was very tired. Hermione and Luna were giving him a hot oil massage, partly as a reward for how hard he had worked that day. None of the others could keep up with him; even Lupin, with his werewolf stamina, was now hard-pressed at times.

"Harry. . . ." Hermione said thoughtfully.

"H'mmm?"

"Do YOU know where Riddle is?" Dumbledore had brought news that there was still no trace of the Dark Lord.

"No, not right now. I think I do know where he will be around the Twentieth or so."

"And where is that?"

"Not telling yet. If I tell anyone ahead of time, you'd feel you'd have to tell someone. And if anyone else is there, Riddle will run off and kill some innocent person. OW!"

"Do you really trust me that little, Harry?" Hermione asked angrily.

"First, admit that would be your first inclination. You want to protect me as much as I want to protect you."

"We all love you, Harry," Luna said quietly. "Convince us you know what you're doing, that this isn't some noble and foolish idea."

"Alright. I asked Cassandra to procure me something, or rather a pair of somethings. Look in the small box in my right robe pocket."

"These medallions?"

"Exactly. For at least three evenings, I will apparate to a location after merging with you, wearing the gold one. If I use any spell, it will show up on the silver medallion in writing. Whomever is monitoring the group merge can ask for my location, and it will show my location. However, that aspect will only work three times, so whomever is monitoring had best not try tracking me down unless it's necessary."

"And if you're hit before you get a chance to do anything?" Hermione demanded.

"It will also display that."

"And how do you know the coordinates?" Luna asked.

Harry smiled. "I'm Muggle-raised. I know many things wizards don't."

Hermione frowned. Harry wasn't about to reveal he had bought Dudley a new toy, a Global Positioning Satellite display, on the condition he do a little recon work (during daylight only).

Harry's birthday passed quietly. Except for a morning workout and merging with the entire group, Harry took the day off. Harry had asked for that no one bother with presents, although Cassandra's elf had made a birthday cake.

Harry and Hermione retired early, even before sunset. As Hermione bathed, Harry came in, offering to wash her back.

"Harry," she said a few minutes later, "what's on your mind?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I know. I'm fairly confident that, barring some stupid mistake on my part, I should win in three weeks, or at least that **he** won't win."

"Ah." Even if Harry killed Voldemort, he could be killed or crippled. "And what does that mean, in this context, my love?"

"We're qualified, and I'm legally an adult."

"True." N.E.W.T.s were needed for many careers, but it was the minimum O.W.L.s and age that qualified you for most rights and privileges in the wizarding world.

"And technically, while you are not adult, well. . . ."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Hermione . . . will you marry me. Tonight."

"**WHAT!**" She sloshed a large amount of water around the tub as she tried to turn around.

"Will you marry me. Tonight."

"Are you **CRAZY**?"

"No. I love you. If you prefer not to, I'll understand."

"We can't!"

"Of course we CAN. You can argue that we shouldn't, but we can."

"All other considerations aside, I'm underage."

"Remus and Tonks stand in loco parentis and may give permission, and Cassandra can do the bonding ceremony. And even if Tonks is a bit clumsy when she isn't paying attention, she is fairly skilled in potions, if you'd let her start the Wedding Night Potion."

"So, you're marrying me to have sex with me?"

"No, that's just a major added benefit."

"And what do we tell my parents?"

"If I live, we tell them that we're having a Muggle church wedding on the next First of August."

"Remus and Tonks will never go along with it."

"They will."

"Who else will know?"

"If everything works out, only the people you want to know, plus we would need one adult wizard and one adult witch to stand up with us."

Hermione sat frozen for a moment, and then decided. "Go get Ron, Susan, Ginny, and Luna."

"Why Susan?" Harry asked, just out of curiosity. Ron, also seventeen, was an adult. Harry realized he didn't know when Susan's birthday was.

"So Ron won't have to lie, because she's seventeen, and because having the British Minister's niece as a witness might be necessary."

"We'll do the ceremony in your bedroom."

"Alright, but keep Ron and Remus in yours until we send for you."

"If you want to keep to tradition, we can have the wedding after midnight."

Hermione frowned. "Which tradition would that be?"

"The groom not seeing the bride the day of the wedding until the ceremony," Harry said with a straight face.

"Alright. That gives me almost three hours to get ready. Shoo!"

"I don't believe you're doing this," Ron said.

"Ron, you've said that at least a dozen times. . . ."

"Fifteen, actually," Remus said, helpfully.

"Whatever. The point is, if you say it again, I'm going to curse your tongue out."

Ron glared and went to sit in the corner. After five minutes, however, he said, "I still don't understand why."

Harry looked Ron straight in the eyes, and Ron quailed at the look in them.

"Do you really want to know?"

Ron swallowed hard. "Yes."

"Did you know you're a minor prophet?"

Ron frowned. "What does that mean?"

"You actually predict the future, in small ways."

Ron frowned. "So this is about what I said the other day? Harry!"

"You said I would never live to. . . ."

"That's NOT what I meant to say! Or how I said it!"

"I know, but that's what came out. And I've noticed those unguarded slips of yours often predict the future. So, I know I won't see the sunrise Christmas morning with Hermione. That is what you **said** four days ago. I know what you **meant** to say, that Hermione's parents would

probably either have us sleeping apart, or we'd be too . . . involved to watch it. Well, they didn't have us sleeping apart at Easter. No, I won't see Christmas morning with Hermione. Maybe we'll be separated some other way, but right now the odds are, I'll be dead or seriously injured."

Ron and Remus both looked puzzled. "For long-term patients, visiting hours Christmas Day at Saint Mungo's start at noon," Harry reminded them. "We saw the signs when we visited your Dad. And Ron? I have the same power. I've Seen a few things before. I See what's going to happen, and where. I see every step. I see Voldemort's death. I just don't See if I survive. I promise, I'll do everything I can to survive, while making certain Voldemort doesn't."

"Alright," Ginny said, walking into the room, "let's do this!"

Hermione and Harry would remember that night as one of the happiest in their lives.

Wednesday, August 20, 1997  
8:30 pm

Harry slowly separated himself from Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Susan. The group merges were stable. Professor Sprout smiled at him and gestured with the medallion. She would be keeping watch. Tonks waved; she would be fetching the aurors if needed. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Lupin, Powell, and Law were there to join in, while Flitwick would be aiding the elves and Sprout in defending #4 Privet Drive in case of attack. Vernon Dursley had been very glad to take his family on an extended vacation to America for the month of August.

The last to bid Harry farewell was Dobby. "Dobby has arranged everything. Dobby and Winky will protect Mistress Hermione."

"I love you all," Harry said. "Hopefully I'll see you all at Two a.m." He disappeared.

"I wish we knew where he was going," McGonagall complained. She looked at Dobby.

"Dobby does not know."

"You could find out, though," Tonks almost snarled.

"Dobby will not betray Master Harry's secrets."

"No," Dumbledore said, "you wouldn't. And Harry is right. The fight must start with only Harry there."

Harry appeared standing over the grave of Tom Riddle in Little Hangleton. He immediately knew he had been right. Voldemort was near. Harry waited a few minutes, and then walked up towards the house as the sun set.

As he entered the grounds of the Riddle House, he turned and hissed. "Show yourself, snake."

Nagini reared its head, some ten feet away. "Where is your master?" Harry demanded.

Nagini coiled, and then moved as fast as it could to strike at Harry. Harry dodged and beheaded the huge snake with a quick slash of his wand, and turned the movement into a roll. A stunner passed by Harry's head.

Back at Privet Drive, the group sending power to Harry reacted even faster than the medallion. Sprout called out the hexes, and then demanded the coordinates. In a flash, the pursuit group disappeared.

When they appeared near the Riddle House, they found the duelists surrounded by the magical cage, sounding of phoenix song.

"Nobody do anything to them!" Dumbledore called out. "Surround them! If the song cage breaks, throw the death curse right at him. If we do it together, it might work! We'll have to worry about Harry later!"

"Do you hear that, Riddle? You've lost. Whatever lies beyond life, you're about to face it."

"Do you really think you have the power to destroy me?"

"Maybe, maybe not, but I've got more than my power." Harry took a step towards Voldemort. Then another. It was now clear even to Voldemort that Harry could throw the link into Voldemort's wand at will, which would render it useless for a time at best. It could even blow up, injuring or even killing Voldemort. At the same time, if Voldemort broke the connection, he would be open to attack from the growing group surrounding them as well as Harry.

"You stole a lot from me, Riddle," Harry said, taking step after step. "My parents, my childhood, my godfather . . . my blood. Well, I can't get anything back except my blood." He took another step. And another.

Voldemort stepped back, which made his wand-arm shake.

"I really hope there is an afterlife, with judgement," Harry snarled. "As horrible as non-existence is to think about, it's far too good for you. You deserve to at least suffer the pain you inflicted, or had inflicted, on all your victims."

Harry's wand was nearly touching Voldemort's. Harry flung his wand away and tackled Voldemort like a rugby player, uttering a spell Cassandra had taught him.

Voldemort literally exploded as Harry ripped his blood from Voldemort's body, destroying the spell that had created that body.

At #4 Privet Drive, the entire group screamed in agony. They had felt the effects of the explosion. They could feel Harry's life ebbing away.



And a little more than two hours later, just before midnight, although they had stayed merged, trying to pump Harry enough power to keep him going, they all felt Harry Potter die.

The-Boy-Who-Lived lived no more.

Friday, August 22, 1997

Ron stared at the wounded ground. Six feet under the mound of earth laid the body of his best friend. He had sat vigil the entire night before. He had watched the coffin lowered into the small cemetery at Godric's Hollow a few hours before, between Harry's parents on his right and a memorial to Sirius on his left. Ron had left at 5:30 with everyone else, but now, two hours later, he had returned, looking for the person who was now the second most important person in his life.

Ron took a deep breath and looked up. "Hermione?"

She looked up as well.

"Hermione, we should leave."

"He was right, you know."

"About what?"

"He said that as long as he stopped Voldemort, life would go on pretty much as usual. We'll go back to school next week. I'll do brilliantly on the N.E.W.T.s, you'll play Quidditch. People will be born and die as they have been. Some Pure-Bloods will still vilify the Muggle-born, some teacher will dislike students for the wrong reasons, some students will rise up to be the next Marauders or Gred and Forge."

"But Harry is gone too early."

"Harry is gone too early," Hermione agreed. "It makes one wonder if there is a plan, or any divine presence, or it's all just . . . mechanical."

"There may not be enough evidence to prove anything, but there's more than enough to give us hope and faith," Ron answered. "If we all knew without doubt that there's something better on the other side, it would be too easy to give up."

"I suppose so, but sometimes, it's not easy."

"What did your parents say about your marriage?"

She almost smiled. "What could they say with Harry dead?" She held out her hand. "Let's go back to Grimmauld Place -- to the House of Potter."

"Of course, Mrs. Potter."

## **Chapter X**

Monday, September 2, 1997

"What's wrong, Ron?" Susan asked, joining her arm and hand with her boyfriend's.

"Look at them," Ron said, almost growling. Susan did so. They were standing at the entrance looking into the Great Hall, where a small crowd was studying. Susan saw Ron was looking towards the Gryffindor table, where Hermione, Ginny, and Luna were entertaining and supervising a group of First years.

"So?"

"I noticed it yesterday. It's as if they don't miss him, or if they do, it's barely there."

"I'm sure they do."

Ron shook his head. "Ginny and Luna were moping until they visited Hermione last week. It's as if they decided to put Harry in the past and move on. And yes, I know that's the healthy thing to do, it just seems too fast."

"We all grieve differently, Ron." She hesitated, then said, "You know, once Harry . . . died, I haven't felt any part of the merges. Have you?"

"No," Ron admitted. "We aren't supposed to. Hermione and Dumbledore both said Harry's ability to sustain those links, not just between us and himself but between all of us, was unique."

"Exactly. Even though it wasn't a long period, we were all used to that sustaining link. I would be shocked if Ginny and Luna haven't merged since then, and I would imagine Hermione merged with them as well. That could help heal their grief."

"You might be right," Ron agreed.

"It's a nice afternoon. Let's go someplace where we can be together. Let me heal you, Ron."

"Thank you," Ron said. They left together. From that moment on, Ron withdrew ever more slightly from his old friendships, even with Hermione. Ron and Susan became what they needed most, and faced the future together.

By the end of the school year, Ron spent very little time with his Housemates. Hermione, who had been Head Girl, had organized most of the Seventh years to study for their N.E.W.T.s, but that study time and their few classes together had been their only real contact. Ron was the Quidditch captain, and was busy leading Gryffindor squad to the Quidditch Cup and romancing Susan.

Between taking all six N.E.W.T.s (three O's), being on the winning Quidditch team two of the last three years, and being engaged to the Minister's niece (and heir), Ron moved right into a position in the Department of Magical Games and Sport. After a year, he was transferred to a

position as the British junior representative to the International Quidditch Confederation, where he made a name for himself over the next four years as an impartial official, and also as a solid referee for International games.

In June 2004, he came back as the principal secretary of the Department, although he accepted it on the condition he could still referee.

Ron and Susan had married on January 1, 1999, and started their family soon after.

Friday, August 20, 2004

7:05 pm

Ron Weasley stood on a busy street, watching Muggles ignore the entrance to an obscure square in an obscure corner of northeastern Greater London.

"Daddy, what are we looking at?"

Ron looked down and smiled at four year old Harry Sirius Weasley. "Nothing important, Harry."

"Is baby okay?"

"Amelia is fine, Harry." The infant squirmed a little in Ron's arms.

Harry tugged on his mother's arm. "Mummy, I have to pee pee. Can we **please** see Auntie Ginny or someone **soon**?"

Ron smiled a bit more broadly. "Come on then. We'll see if Fred or George are in yet. You can whiz there -- where it doesn't matter if you miss."

"Ron!"

"Daddy!"

Harry had started to buy out every resident of Grimmauld Place, and Hermione had completed the process. All 22 houses on the square now belonged to the Potter Trust. Ron didn't come here often, perhaps three brief visits a year.

Still, he knew all the occupied houses and the people who lived in them. Dean and Padma and their daughter; Seamus and Anna and their new-born son; four empty houses and then Fred and Angelina and their terrors of two year old triplets; newlyweds George and Daphne in the last house on the row. The far end, six houses, had Colin's house, Remus and Tonks' and their little girl, the empty #11, #12 (used primarily as the headquarters for ROMP), Hermione and her children's house at #13, and finally the house used by Ginny, Luna, and their children. The other side had Neville and Lavender's house ('Wasn't she supposed to have that third baby by now?' Ron thought), nearly-newlyweds Parvati and Anthony Goldstein, Wills Lloyd and Henrietta and their daughter, an empty house, Millicent and her daughter, Ernie and Hannah

Macmillan and their son, Justin and Morag Finch-Fletchley and their daughter, and Lee and Eloise Jordan with their two daughters.

Ron frowned as he saw four four year-old children on the front steps of Ginny's house. Even at this distance, he knew who they were: the four children born at the same time by artificial insemination, all just a few weeks older than his Harry. Severus Malfoy-Bulstrode, Marcus Malfoy-Weasley (oh, how Ron loathed that name!), Lily Potter-Lovegood, and Ronald Potter-Granger.

As they came closer, Ron could see the two house elves ('No,' Ron reminded himself, 'just elves') who were minding the children. Ron wondered where the two two year olds, Hermione Potter-Weasley and Sirius Potter-Granger, were.

Harry let go of Susan's hand soon thereafter, and ran to meet the other four year olds. The children greeted each other, and Ron smiled as one of the elves let his son run into the house to use the toilet.

A few seconds after young Harry went into the house, Ginny came flying out, followed by Luna, Millicent, Parvati, and Lavender at a more sedate pace, with Neville bringing up the rear. Lavender was moving a bit painfully, and was holding an infant.

"Lavender!" Susan squealed. "No one told us!"

"She was a week late, but when she came, she came quick!" Parvati explained. "She only arrived about forty-seven hours ago!"

"Yeah," Ginny complained, "Lav went into labor in the middle of dinner, and she was out twenty minutes later! The elves are still trying to wash out the carpet."

"What's her name?" Ron asked Neville.

"We were going to call her Nymphadora, but Tonks threatened us," Neville said with a smile, "so we're calling her just plain Dora."

"Congratulation, both of you. I take it Tonks will be the godmother?"

"Tonks and Anthony," Neville confirmed. He tickled Amelia under her chin. "Your little one looks healthy."

"So she is, much more than Harry was as baby," Ron answered with relief.

Millicent came up to them. "I'm to relieve you of Amelia, Weasley. Harry and Marcus will be spending the night with Severus and me. Amelia will be staying with Parvati and Anthony."

"How did they get chosen," Ron teased a little.

Suddenly a tremendous squeal echoed through the square, and the women, who had been joined by Tonks and Hermione, all started hugging Parvati.

"Oh," Ron said, "I see."

"Yes, Parvati just learned today. Baby's due in mid-March or so."

"Who all will be at dinner?" Ron asked. "Do either of you know?"

"Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Tonks, and Remus, so far as I know," Millicent answered. "Well, we'd best get going. Have a good evening."

Neville clasped Ron on the arm. "Yes, have a good evening. Thanks for staying the night. We can talk in the morning, if you want."

Ron shrugged. "Alright. See you both tomorrow."

Ron entered #12 Grimmauld Place for the first time in over two years. He winced a little when the portrait of Harry waved at him. Ron didn't know why the portrait bothered him so much, but the first time it had spoken to him, Ron had snapped at it. The portrait contented itself with sadly waving the few times Ron had passed since. Ron forced himself to nod back.

As Ron sat in the formal dining room, he remembered back to that happy Christmas Eve, now nearly eight years in the past. The room had been nearly bursting then, of course. Any less than seven people would have seemed a bit lost in the room.

Dobby came in with the food, to receive Hermione's thanks for cooking dinner. Ron managed a wan greeting in response to Dobby's "Greetings, Mister Wheezy" -- why the elf could say 'Ginny Weasley' and not his name made no sense to Ron. He knew better than to correct the elf in front of Hermione, however.

Hermione filled them all in ROMP's latest battles and the accomplishments of her two children by Harry's stored semen, which led to everyone else doing the same. That took a great deal of time, as they were all proud parents. Ron found himself relaxing for the first time at any house on Grimmauld Place for the first time since 1996.

After dinner, the adults enjoyed strawberries and spumante. "So," Hermione asked as Ron poured his second glass of sparkling wine, "are you glad you came over tonight?"

"You know, I really am," Ron admitted.

"Would you like to be considered for one of the houses?" Hermione asked.

While Ron's Quidditch work paid all expenses, he had only just reached a really decent paying position in the Ministry. If he and Susan had their wishes, they would end up with a family at least as large as his parents'. Having a large house where they would only have to pay for the upkeep would be a tremendous help. Ron still didn't like taking charity, but with two brothers and a sister with the same living arrangements, even Ron's pride wouldn't be too hurt. He looked over at Susan.

She had obviously already anticipated the question, and looked eager to move in immediately. Ron smiled, opened his mouth, and then realized what Hermione had said. She almost never said anything other than exactly what she meant to say. "What do you mean 'considered'?"

"This is a community, Ron, a family, really. If this was just a group of people living near each other, we would have asked you years ago."

"It means more than just babysitting without complaining," Ginny said, taking over. "Think of the Place as the Burrow on a grand scale."

"Are you afraid I'll be Percy?" Percy was still semi-estranged from his family, and still aligned with the reactionary factions within the Ministry.

"In part, although you would never act like him."

"How do you feel about us, Ronald? Think back to how you felt about us in the months before Harry passed on. Do you, or can you, still feel that way about us as a group?" Luna turned to Susan. "I do of course mean you as well."

"I would love to, and I like all of you, and love most of you," Susan answered.

"Ron?" Hermione asked.

"I feel that way," Ron said slowly, "and I understand why you'd ask. But. . . but I still miss Harry! It still hurts. It hurts that it seems that you, all of you, don't miss him as much as I do."

"Ron, Susan, you do know we love and trust you, right?" Remus asked. They nodded. "Will you promise, will you swear, that if we reveal a secret, the secret that holds us together, you will keep it even if you decide not to join us?"

Susan nodded, and Ron, looking puzzled, agreed.

"Then you should know," Hermione said slowly, "we don't miss Harry as much as you do."

"What?" Ron gasped.

"We don't," Tonks said, grinning.

"What do you mean? Harry's dead, right?"

"He is," Luna agreed. "And no, he's not a ghost, either."

"Then what do you mean? What do you know about Harry that I don't?"

"Well," Tonks said, "I know he's standing behind you."

Ron looked puzzled, then his eyes went wide and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Ron slowly turned around.

And there stood Harry Potter. Stiller than anyone Ron had ever really seen anyone.

He hadn't aged a bit.

"Harry!" Ron half stood, but stopped and stared. "Harry? Harry! you're . . . you're. . . ."

"A vampire? Yes, Ron. I am a vampire."

"Why?"

"Because yes, I was dying. I had destroyed Voldemort, in a way he never anticipated because he feared death more than failure, but it fatally injured me. Cassandra was already there -- I knew she could be trusted not to bring in the calvary too soon, and that Voldemort was unlikely to detect her in the first place."

He looked into a distance. "It was terrifying, dying. Maybe I was hallucinating, or maybe it happened, but I saw the so-called white light, and you'd never guess who I heard?"

"Sirius?"

"No, Snape."

"Snape!"

"Yes, Snape," Harry almost spat. "He really yelled at me and drove me back." Harry grinned. "I hope I didn't just imagine it. Anyway, while I was dying, and then being made and dead, Dumbledore had separated us from the rest of the rescue party, and then made certain I wasn't mutilated or embalmed when they laid me out." They all knew the horror stories of newly-made vampires who had been autopsied or embalmed. "He also had me dug up the night of the burial, so when I came out of my coma, which was Saturday night, I was able to come out without difficulty."

"So, vampires really are dead?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, that's been argued about for at least a thousand years. If my body isn't dead, it has certainly transformed. During daylight, I would pass for a corpse that's been around for a day or two. Am I totally dead? I guess not in some ways, but this body is in most ways more dead than alive."

"Harry," Susan said in a soft, trembly voice, "how . . . who. . . ."

"Who do I feed on?" Harry asked. Susan nodded.

"In the beginning, it was . . . difficult. I needed at least a liter of blood a night just to keep my sanity, and it was really more like two. Animal blood doesn't taste very good -- some worse than others. Just imagine choking down two liters of some nasty potion. Still, most of the blood I had for the first six months was animal blood. After two liters of pig or sheep's blood, Cassandra would take me out hunting Muggles some nights. I never killed any, of course, but I can't explain the difference of taste and power, taking the blood of a living person versus just drinking any blood, even donated from a person but not taken right from their body."

"How much blood do you need now?" Ron asked.

"I need a pint a night to stay sane. I drink a pint of animal blood when I revive -- that's why I don't look more dead right now than I do when I revive. I drink just half a cup of human blood later on most nights, but not every night, and then another pint of animal blood before I go back, unless I've had an active night."

"Active?"

"I work part-time for the Ministry, MLES."

"And when did you all learn about this?" Ron demanded.

"When did I learn about it?" Hermione asked rhetorically. "Two days after Harry revived. I didn't actually see Harry until Christmas break."

"We found out the same day as Hermione," Tonks said.

"And Hermione told us when we stayed here," Ginny added.

"And except for us, Dumbledore, Cassandra, the elves here, and a few people in the Ministry, no one else was informed until a year and a half afterwards," Remus said. "We wanted to tell you, but you had withdrawn. It's taken this time for you to come around."

"I was grieving!"

"And in most ways, I'm as dead as any ghost," Harry reminded Ron. "You had to work through this, and to make your life with Susan, before we could ask."

"And everyone here is one of your . . . donators?" Susan asked.

"All the adults, except Remus and Colin, of course," Harry said.

"Is that also a condition?" Ron asked.

"You wouldn't want charity, would you, Ron?"

Ron flushed.

"Trust me, Ron. I won't force you, but please consider joining us."

"And if we do, do we become vampires, too?"

"I'm only allowed to make one vampire every hundred years," Harry reminded Ron of what they had learned about vampire regulations in DADA years before. "Cassandra had to leave because of that." Harry frowned, then brightened. "Right now, I'm the only vampire allowed in Britain. Cassandra will be allowed back in 2008."

Ron looked at Susan, who nodded. Ron stood, and moved jerkily towards Harry. He tentatively reached out and touched Harry's cheek, then jerked back. Harry felt cold, clammy. In short, dead. But this **was** Harry.

Ron lunged and gathered Harry into an embrace and swung him around the room in joy. Finally setting Harry on his feet. "We're going to have to talk about keeping me in the dark for all this time. It wasn't **all** my fault."

"No, it wasn't," Harry agreed.



Ron bit his upper lip in thought, then said. "How do we do it?"

"The wrist is slower, and slightly painful; the neck faster, but very erotic," Luna called out.

"The inner thigh works best in many ways -- I orgasm every time! -- but Harry won't go there with the boys."

Ron flushed and the girls giggled. Ron looked Harry in the eye. All that mattered was that this was Harry.

Ron took off his robe and his under vest and leaned over. Harry gathered Ron into his arms, and Ron suddenly realized how strong a vampire really was. Harry's lips touched Ron's neck, and Ron realized with embarrassment that he was erect.

He let out a hiss of pain, and then felt Harry slowly suck out his blood from the small cut he had made in Ron's artery. Ron orgasmed in his ecstasy.

And then he felt his magic merge with Harry's, and was aware for the first time since that awful night of a connection with a larger group -- Ron was shocked when he realized he could identify each of the adults of Grimmauld Place. Then he felt Susan entering the group -- he opened his eyes and realized he was sitting on a chair. Harry was just releasing Susan, and she had the same flush as she did after making love.

"Welcome back to the House of Potter," Harry said.

"Is it always that. . . ."

"Wonderful?" Ginny asked, standing. "Oh, yes!" She opened her collar, and moaned with passion as Harry bit into her, drawing just an ounce or so of blood. A lick of Harry's tongue made her shiver with her orgasm, while it healed the wound. Another lick cleaned her neck.

"Ginny would let Harry do that every day, if he would let her," Luna said without jealousy -- for in truth, she would like Harry to bite her every day, too.

"And he's never lost control?"

"Never," Hermione said. "He's come close a few times while we're intimate, but he's never actually bitten me then." She smiled. "Harry gives all of you orgasms, but only I give Harry his."

"If I did bite while we were making love I might really lose control," Harry admitted.

"Anyway, I doubt if you want a lesson on the sex lives of vampires. You don't HAVE to offer your blood in turn, but the others do. I only take half a cup.

"Have you had enough?" Ron asked.

"Oh, yes," Harry answered. "I've fed well tonight."

"We'll be moving in, Harry," Susan said. "Which house?"

"The last one open in this row if you want it, of course," Harry said. "Number eleven is free if you want it. If you think that's too close, being right next door, you're welcome to any of the

others. The one next to Seamus' is set up with more Muggle amenities, the one between Wills' and Millicent's is totally ready, and closer to purely magical. Number eleven is sort of in between."

"We'll let you know, but we'll be here," Ron said, comforted by the feeling of togetherness he had been missing since Harry's apparent death. "We're with you." Ron was complete again. He could feel that the others, especially Harry and Hermione, felt the same.