

Harry and Hermione -- Their Sixth Year II

By

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Prolog

Friday, August 30, 1996

Most of the teaching and associated staff of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry met in the late morning. This was the tradition, meeting the last weekday before the students arrived.

"Welcome, faculty and staff!" Dumbledore proclaimed. "As you all know, the war we feared last summer has slowly started this summer. We shall be discussing detailed defense ideas and plans after our buffet luncheon. This morning, we shall start with our usual agenda, which means we start with staff changes."

There were glances sent towards the obviously-new members. "First, Divination will be officially split this year. Professor Trelawney will be teaching the Third through Fifth year students. Professor Firenze will be teaching the Sixth and Seventh years." Trelawney and Firenze were sitting on opposite ends of the room, refusing to even look at each other.

"Second, Remus Lupin will be joining the staff as a defense consultant. In addition to helping the Defense teacher with dark creatures for the first three years of students, he will be aiding select students in dueling and keep an extra, expert pair of eyes on the students and grounds. He shall be addressed as Professor."

Most of the staff glanced at Snape, who sneered slightly. "And where is our dear former, now returning, colleague?" Snape asked in his oiliest tones.

"He is on a special assignment for me," Dumbledore retorted. "Third, I wish to introduce Timothy Law, who has just retired as a hit-wizard for the International."

The staff looked at the elder of the two strangers.

"Well," Snape said, "that certainly answers for most of your qualifications." Even Snape, who had again requested that he be allowed to teach Defense, couldn't argue about being supplanted by an ex-hit wizard. "I'm surprised you would retire at a time like this."

The portly man looked at Snape for a moment, which somehow made even Snape a bit nervous. "Mandatory retirement from active duty is seventy-five. I am a reserve, currently assigned by the International to serve under Dumbledore at Hogwarts. You should all understand why."

"As for my academic qualifications, they are not quite what I or the Headmaster would like. I attended Hogwarts, Slytherin, Head Boy 1939." He glanced at McGonagall and winked at her. "The Head Girl, would, I hope, have at least a few nice things to say."

McGonagall almost giggled. Most of the rest of the staff nearly goggled from surprise, except for Dumbledore and Flitwick, who remembered the pair's flirtations during their last year, although both had married later on and were both now widowed.

"I went through auror training and worked as an auror for the British Ministry until Grindelwald's defeat. I then moved to the International, first as an auror and then as a hit-

wizard. So, I have extensive field training, but will rely on some of you, and Remus Lupin, with some of the dark creatures material."

Snape saw the younger man smile at that.

"Our final new member is Doctor Tyler Powell, who will be taking over the position in Muggle Studies. He was brought to my attention by his uncle, here," Dumbledore and Law both smiled, "but I assure you he is well-qualified."

"My mother is the twin sister to my uncle's wife," Powell said. "Perhaps some of you know of the Canadian Cariadus family?"

Most did. Many Irish, Scots, Welsh, Breton, and Cornish magical families had emigrated to North America a century before the Muggles started to settle. The Cariadus family were famous as dark-hunters -- of dark creatures, wild werewolves, unregulated vampires, and especially dark wizards.

"The Powells are famous as magical artificers: wands; dark detectors; foe glasses; and even cheaper items like the more inexpensive sneakoscopes. I was determined to avoid both callings, and have failed to some degree. I opted for Muggles as a speciality. When I graduated from school, I went to Los Angeles. I earned a Muggle bachelor's degree in Classics -- that's Greece and Rome -- and master degrees in political science, history of science, and art history, and a doctorate in the history of science."

"All in eight years! Most Muggles would take at least twelve!" his proud uncle proclaimed. "Pretty good for some one who had never so much been to a Muggle village until he was fifteen!"

Powell shrugged. "So, I'm over-qualified to teach teenagers. While I have spent most of my adulthood living within the Muggle world, I have never left this one, and in fact was the North American Dueling Champion in 1987. More to the point, this Voldemort" (most of the staff winced at Powell's casual use of the term) "hasn't been the only dark wizard out there since Grindelwald. A wizard named Marco Znati, for example, organized a dark coven in Florida, where I was teaching at a Muggle university." Powell's face darkened in anger and pain.

"My nephew was instrumental in taking the coven apart," Law said, "although his wife was killed in retribution just before the end. He has since helped both the International and the North American Wizarding Union with some complicated problems."

Powell sighed. "Anyway, I'm here to help."

"Doctor Powell's dueling prowess and . . . his fight against dark wizards are NOT to be discussed with students or anyone else, without my express permission," Dumbledore stated. "I would like to keep his non-academic abilities in reserve."

The staff nodded their understanding.

"Now, on to new problems. Professor McGonagall, could you appraise us on the new students?"

Chapter I

Saturday, October 26, 1996

Harry and Hermione entered the Common room together, having taken their post-run showers. They found Colin alone. "Where's Dean?" Harry asked.

"I sort of ran him off," Colin confessed. "He might as well have a good time in Hogsmeade."

"Is there anything we can bring you back?" Hermione asked.

"No, nothing I can think of," Colin nearly snapped. "I wish people would stop asking!"

"Poor Colin," Ron teased, coming into the Room. "That time of month, and all that."

Colin growled, which startled Ron a bit. Harry put a hand on his brother's shoulder. Colin's anger faded. "Sorry, Ron. But why did the full moon have to be tonight?" Colin complained. "No Hogsmeade, no candy, no Halloween dance tonight."

Ron looked a bit abashed. "Sorry, Colin. I promise, we'll get you a load of sweets."

"Actually. . . ." Colin looked around and made certain no one was nearby. "Could you bring back about six of the blood-flavored lollys? We'll put them in separate rooms, so we aren't tempted to fight over them."

"No problem," Harry said, with no obvious reaction. "I'll buy a case, so you'll have some each month."

"Thanks, Harry."

"Do you need any photography things?" Hermione asked.

"Dean has the list," Colin responded. "I'll be ready for the first Quidditch match!"

So far, the truces had held at Hogwarts. Zach Smith had been rather ostracized, but nothing had gone past the verbal. Draco and his cronies held themselves fairly aloof, although a number of Slytherins, led by replacement Sixth year prefects Blaise Zabini and Tracy Davis, were helping to plan the cultural courses for the next years' Second years and some informal classes for the spring.

All the eligible Gryffindors were in the DA, as were more than half of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. A few Slytherin Fifth years had even joined, to make certain they were prepared for the O.W.L.s, and some of the Sixth years were trying to rally the entire House for the cause. It was by far the most normal start to a school year for at least three years.

Outside of Hogwarts, things were not as bad as people had feared they might become. There had been no large-scale attacks on civilians since late July. There had been no further attacks on Azkaban since early August. Six Ministry officials and their families had been attacked, however, with a number of casualties.

The wizarding Press had raised an uproar about the treatment of both The Quibbler and of Arthur Weasley (whose suspension had been lifted in early September). Minister Fudge was still in power, but hanging on only because he claimed everything was under control.

The Order had picked up rumors of giants and known rogue werewolves, but couldn't pin anything down. Except for six Muggles found Kissed, there were no signs of the dementors.

In the struggle between those who opposed Fudge and Fudge's supporters within the Ministry itself, most of Fudge's luke-warm supporters had adjusted by going over to a general opposition to the Minister. When Arthur Weasley returned, he had arranged a junta between himself, Diggory, and Bones; they were working together to overthrow Fudge, and then they would decide who would take his place.

To Arthur's surprise, one of the first to approach him with unconditional support was Percy. Unfortunately, the only sure way to dislodge Fudge would be a major victory on the part of Voldemort. Voldemort, realizing this, was keeping his plans close and his remaining, loyal Death Eaters under a fairly tight reign. Snape was unable to bring back any information; Voldemort was merely using him to observe the behavior of those at Hogwarts.

Hermione and Harry walked into Honeydukes with such purpose that it drew the proprietor himself to serve them. "Are you being served?"

"We have written permission from the Headmaster, allowing us to order quantities of goods from Hogsmeade merchants," Harry said, handing a copy to the owner. While students could order from Hogsmeade, the orders were limited to what a post owl could carry. "As you can see, a house elf will be calling at Four to pick up most of the order."

"So I see. And you will be paying. . . ?"

"Gringotts cheque."

"And what are you ordering, Mister Potter?"

Harry merely handed him the list Hermione had written.

"An entire case of the blood lollys?"

"And a case Toothflossing Stringmints, a case of chocolate frogs, and we'd like you to select two hundred pounds of mixed chocolates, from milk to dark. A house elf will pick that, the frogs, and Stringmints up next Thursday, if it can be ready. We'll take the lollipops with us."

The owner stared at Harry, and then smiled. "Yes, sir!" Harry was determined that each House have a chocolate reserve, under preservation spells, in case of dementor attack. The DA House Captains would make certain it would stay well-preserved, instead of nibbled away, as the students themselves had all contributed some pocket money towards the idea.

Harry went around the village, spreading largesse, to make up for the short visit the students would pay that day. Everyone was interested in visiting, but since most students would be attending the second dance that evening after dinner, the visit was to end at 3:30.

Harry and Hermione had spent most of the day together, but they had separated at 2:00 to shop. Harry was at the coach stop first, waiting for the carriages.

The carriages showed up at 3:10. Harry moved from thestral to thestral, patting them.

"Beautiful, aren't they?"

"They are," Harry agreed. "Where's Ginny?"

"She still with Hermione," Luna answered.

"Are you coming to the dance tonight?"

Luna shrugged. "There's little reason to. Ginny and I aren't accepted as more than friends, even though everyone knows we're more."

"It seems to be acceptable for girls to dance everything except the slow dances together," Harry reminded her. "And, if you'd like, I would still like to dance with you."

Luna smiled. "Perhaps, or perhaps next month. Dean, Ginny, and I are going to be with Colin and Professor Lupin until after dinner. Dance with Ginny, though, if I don't make it."

A crowd of students then came out of the village, being herded by the prefects. The Head Boy and Girl were making a final round to get everyone else moving. It was time to get ready to dance.

One student, almost the last to board, looked at where the moon would soon rise, and mouthed a phrase heard from a Mudblood: "Time to dance with the devil in the pale moonlight."

The autumnal dances were much more informal than the Yule Ball had been. Like the first, this one started right after dinner. The tables were moved off to the side, the lights dimmed, and a local combo played. The first half of the dance was rather decorous, and included waltzes, polkas, and other such dances. The second half featured covers of more current songs from magical groups. Ginny, who had been teaching Harry the older dances over the previous month, showed up about half way through the first set, dragging a reluctant Luna. Harry, in turn, was teaching Hermione. Harry even managed to coax Luna into dancing the one slowish polka with him.

As usual, Professor Snape seemed to be carrying on the most extensive campaign to prevent any students from getting 'too close' or from straying outside. Snape had caught Ron and Henrietta trying to sneak into the Rose Garden three times. All in all, it was a successful dance, after a good day in Hogsmeade.

Sunday, October 27, 1996

"Master Harry," came an insistent whisper. "Master Harry!" A finger gently poked Harry's upper arm. "Master Harry!"

"Wha iz 't?"

"Master Harry, Headmaster Dumbledore asks that you wake up and come to his office. Very important to hurry."

Harry managed to open one eye. "What's happened, Dobby?"

"Dobby does not know. But something is happening. Probably something very bad."

"Like what?"

"Dobby does not know. Only a feeling, which Dobby would not ignore."

"Is Colin alright?"

"Mister Colin and Professor Lupin have returned in good health a short time ago."

Harry heard Dean lay back down, and by the time Harry was dressed Dean had joined the other boys in soft snores.

Harry rushed to the Headmaster's office. "Mocha Monkey," Harry declared before rushing up the stairs. Harry knocked on the door, which swung open.

"Ah, Harry . . . thank you for hurrying." Dumbledore was alone, except for the portraits. Few pretended to be asleep. "I have just received information of a trio of werewolf attacks. One was on the Diggorys. They and their guards were all killed, I regret to say, overwhelmed by the werewolves, although most of them were killed as well. A second was on the Bones', who were able to drive off the attackers without casualties. The other attack was a two-pronged attack on a large group of Muggles. One prong was the third werewolf attack, and was on a group of school boys camping out as part of some school project. The second was a Death Eater attack on a neighboring camp of school girls, who were raped, then mutilated and killed. Some of the werewolves might have been involved with that as well."

Harry paled, and then frowned. "And?" Harry prompted. While thankful to be let in on what was happening, Harry was wondering why he had to be told at dawn.

"Minister Fudge is likely to try to meet the problem by imprisoning all werewolves, or at least imprisoning all werewolves which are not totally under control."

"Well, we can at least prove Colin and Professor Lupin are 'under control'," Harry answered.

"For now. Remember, we can not allow them to stay here over the summer. We must take steps to provide a safe haven for the pair next summer. If you will allow me to make the arrangements to make the cellar of Grimmauld Place secure?"

Harry nodded his agreement. Dumbledore looked up. "I believe the Minister has arrived even earlier than I predicted."

Fudge, followed by Percy Weasley, one of the men from the Werewolf Registry who had come on September 1st, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, marched into the room. Fudge stared at Dumbledore and Harry for a moment, then collected his thoughts. "I see your information services have already informed you of the attacks last night?"

"The basics, although none of the details," Dumbledore replied. "I can assure you Colin Potter and Remus Lupin did not take part in the attacks. They were in secure quarters and under the full Wolfsbane Potion. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape were actually quite pleased with the results of Mister Potter's first transformation under its influence."

"Good," Fudge said simply. "One less problem to worry about. You'll send the results to the Registry?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"I presume you have already informed this Mister Potter that, if he wants his . . . brother and friend to remain free he must make similar arrangements for the summer months?"

Dumbledore and Harry both nodded. Both regarded Fudge with suspicion.

"Good. Then on to the real reason I'm here. The attacks on the Muggles, you know about that?" Dumbledore Nodded, "were on two camps of school children, aged fourteen to seventeen, from three different Public schools. Thirty boys and thirty-three girls. Twenty-four of the girls were raped and killed, three were raped and survived, six seem to have been taken, and are presumed bitten, although we are still trying to ascertain that for certain from the four witnesses. Six of the boys were killed, twenty-three believed bitten and taken. One was mauled, but his injuries were not severe." Fudge sighed. "It seems he was partially protected by an ancient charm."

"Dudley?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Yes; your cousin. Without that protection, he would have been either killed outright or bitten and taken. My question is, do we erase his memory of the event like we are the girls? They are being told they survived a double bus accident just before their arrival. We will have to provide false remains for the missing."

"My first inclination would be to tell the Dursleys the truth," Dumbledore mused. "What do you think, Harry?"

"Is there any reason to think these students were targeted because of Dudley?" Harry asked.

"Certainly not," Fudge and Dumbledore both said.

"Your cousin would certainly have been taken had they realized who he was," Dumbledore explained.

"Why ask that, Harry?" Fudge asked, honestly puzzled.

"Because it would just be one more thing to hold against me," Harry said. "Did you actually meet them back when, well, when Aunt Marge was. . . ."

"I did," Fudge said slowly. "You mean that was not an . . . aberration on their part?"

"The Dursleys have unfortunately shown themselves to be the most unsympathetic of Muggles," Dumbledore said.

Fudge thought a moment. "We will not release that information to the press. Weasley, you talk with Mister Potter, here, and then deal with the Dursleys as you think best. Try and make 'em see reason. If they won't, tell the squad to obliviate them and the boy, no matter what they claim to want, and plant the cover story." Fudge turned to Dumbledore. "I've no doubt that I'll be out of office by the New Year, maybe sooner than that. So, let me warn you, you might think Bones is more capable than I am, and more reasonable, at least according to your lights. That may even be mostly true. But she did the actual drafting of Delores' anti-werewolf legislation. You three, stay here. Weasley has his assignment, you two doublecheck on the two werewolves so we can cross them off. Good morning." Fudge marched out.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said, dismissing Harry. "I will seem you are informed of what happens with your cousin."

"Should I tell Colin and Professor Lupin, or will you?" Harry asked.

"You may inform them," Dumbledore said. "I'm certain Professor Lupin will wish to come and see me. Tell him he may do so after lunch." He looked at Percy. "You two may use the conference room off the Great Hall."

Harry nodded, and he and Percy left together. They didn't speak as they made their way to the Great Hall. Hermione, Ginny, and Luna were already waiting for him. "You may of course brief them later," Percy said as he walked Harry past them. Harry shrugged, and the pair went into the small room where the Tri-Wizard Champions had been briefed after their selection.

"I take it your relations with your relatives haven't improved any?" Percy said after a few moments of silence.

"Not much," Harry admitted, deciding not to mention Percy's 'relations' with his own family. "They still hate our world. They will be terrified by obliviation, but if you remind them it was done to Aunt Marge, they may be more willing."

"So do you think it best I explain what happened, mentioning what **WOULD** have happened if they had known who Dudley was, and then give them the choice of remembering or not?"

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "Just expect them to bluster a lot, and maybe threaten. Oh, and one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Keep in mind they have met Fred and George."

"Ah . . . yes. That tongue incident. That might make things . . . sticky."

"Percy . . . this means that the other Muggle families will be told their children, the ones missing and presumed killed, will be told their children were . . . killed and not enough left to really be recognized except with a medical exam?"

Percy acknowledged that was the case.

"Then what happens to the children if they're recovered? Do you remodify their families' memories?"

Percy sighed. "If the student is returned . . . unbiten, yes. Muggles who are bitten go insane after two or three years. Nothing is known to stop the process. Therefore, Muggles who are discovered to be werewolves are . . . destroyed."

Harry just stared at Percy.

"In fact, considering your cousin's wounds, he's going to suffer very painfully at the next two full moons, although it should decrease after that. It's well within the law to have him . . . put down as well, to prevent Muggles from wondering why. The main reason that wasn't even considered is because he's your cousin and therefore he and your family already know about us. I'll be certain to let your aunt and uncle know that, too."

"Thank you. Is there any . . . possibility of saving those Muggle werewolves, to see if they can be helped in any way?"

Percy sighed. "I'll look into it, Harry, but I can't promise anything."

"I understand. Thank you."

Percy turned towards the door, and hesitated. He knew this meeting had been mostly unnecessary, and he knew why Dumbledore had brought them together. "Harry, could you please see if Ron's out there?"

"Sure," Harry answered neutrally. Harry peeked out. "No Ron yet, but Ginny's still there."

"Ginny's not quite as angry and unforgiving as Ron still is."

"Yes, I can't understand why Ron would be upset," Harry said with some sarcasm.

Percy winced. "Yes, well, we go with the information we have available, Harry."

"You chose the sources you preferred to believe, Percy," Harry pointed out, gently for once. "Even if you had good reason to think I was crazy, which I don't think you did, you chose wrong. You could just admit that to Ron and move on. You did with your parents, after all. But you're both equally proud and stubborn."

Percy smiled a little. "I'm working on it, Harry. I know there's no reason to believe I'm on your side now, but I am." Percy walked out and over to the Gryffindor table. Harry followed a few steps behind. Percy spoke to Ginny, who stood up and walked Percy out of the castle.

"What's happened?" Hermione asked.

"Get the group together," Harry said. "I have to talk with Colin and Remus."

"Bad?"

"Bad enough to bring Fudge here at dawn," Harry answered.

"You should eat something," Luna said.

Harry smiled at them and picked up a pear before heading off to the Infirmary. Luna and Hermione smiled back.

A small group had gathered around Harry in the previous weeks. They led the DA, and were some of the more influential students in their Houses. The core of the group were all Sixth years: Harry, Hermione, and Ron from Gryffindor; Millicent, Blaise, and Tracy from Slytherin; Susan, Ernie, and Justin from Hufflepuff; and Padma, Lisa, and Terry from Ravenclaw. Ginny and Luna also usually attended.

Harry carefully explained what had happened, leaving out the information that Dudley had been one of the mauling victims. The next full moon would be November 25. "Obviously," Harry concluded, "we don't have much to fear from werewolves here. However, there's a good chance there might be a number of other attacks. Riddle might not have many Death Eaters left, so far as I know, but he still controls hundreds of dementors and may have dozens of giants. Either could be used on an attack on us."

"So that gives us some things to think about for the DA," Hermione pointed out.

"Do you really think the Headmaster would allow us to fight?" Terry asked.

"If there is sufficient warning to clear us all out without giving away the evacuation, probably not," Harry answered. "However, Sixth and Seventh year students should be well-able to defend themselves, and Fourth and Fifth years able to contribute to defending the younger students. Remember, if we're dispersed, unexpectedly or for vacation, the individual students are going to be more vulnerable to attack, like Dean and Colin's families were last summer. It's possible we're safer defending the castle against an attack than we would be at home."

"What about the winter holidays, and next summer?" Justin asked.

"The Headmaster is trying to see if a summer term would be possible," Hermione answered, "but the finances are still very much up in the air."

"So the initiative is still in . . . Riddle's hands," Ernie said, frowning.

"Unfortunately, yes," Harry agreed.

Chapter II

Thursday, November 1, 1996

The day had started out cold and stormy. The Hogwarts joggers therefore stayed inside and ran up and down the stairs. The group had now grown to sixty runners from all the Hogwarts Houses.

As the Gryffindor members returned to their Common Room, they were met by Professor McGonagall. "Mister Potter, Miss Weasley, Miss Granger, Miss MacDonald, the Headmaster wishes to speak with you before you breakfast. Please bring Mister Weasley and Miss Grant with you. And no, I do not know why he wishes to see you. I will learn just before you do."

"I'll get Doreen," Katie Bell said. "Dean, get Ron moving. The rest of you get cleaned up. We'll find out when we can. Move!"

The runners moved.

Fifteen minutes later, the group Dumbledore had asked to see were moving towards his office. All six were silent, each wondering what they had in common, other than being in Gryffindor. When they arrived at the entrance to Dumbledore's office, they saw there were twenty-one other students there as well, from each House.

"Do you know what's going on, Potter?" Julia Collins, the Seventh year Ravenclaw prefect asked Harry.

"No," Harry answered. "Why are you all waiting here?"

"Because we don't know the password," Margo Fields, a Fifth year Slytherin, retorted.

The passage opened, revealing Professor Snape. "Potter! Come along. The Headmaster will need to speak with the rest of you in a few moments."

Harry didn't hesitate, and followed the Potions professor. Inside the Headmaster's office were the other three Heads of Houses, plus Professors Law, Lupin, Powell, and Hagrid.

"Ah, Harry. Have you divined the common denominator between all the students downstairs, other than yourself and Miss Granger?"

"Ah . . . no, sir."

"Never mind," Dumbledore said, waving it away. For once, the old man was very brisk in his speech. "In short, there were a number of dementor attacks last night. I am asking you to do two things. First, to tutor ANY Hogwarts student who wishes to practice the Patronus spell. You may wish to do that separately from the DA. Second, there are three other spells which may be used against dementors. These are so advanced that only Professors Law, Powell, and myself can currently use all three. Still, I would like you to practice them with Professor Powell, to see if you can use any. Normally, I would not think of having any student learn

these, but you have a knack of picking up such advanced magic -- one is so advanced it is not even taught to aurors, but we shall have you at least try two of them. All the faculty will be seeing if they can learn the ones they do not currently know as well. Are you agreeable?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said simply.

"Thank you. Now, I must ask you to take Miss Granger and stand aside while I talk with the other students." Dumbledore stood. "Come along. This will not be easy."

Harry moved Hermione off to the back of the students, with Hagrid moving with them. Dumbledore came down about two minutes later with the Heads of House. The other students' attention were on Dumbledore and the rest of the faculty present.

"Last night, there were many dementor attacks, spread across the country. As of this moment, we are only certain of attacks on members of the various enforcement branches of the Ministry."

'So that's the connection,' Harry realized.

"Classes are canceled for today, and possibly tomorrow, as we expect more reports of attacks to be coming in. Some of you will no doubt be called home. For those who stay, or return, Mister Potter and Professor Lupin will be organizing workshops to learn and practice the Patronus. Madam Pomfrey is available, should any of you wish to talk with her. Your Heads of House will now inform you of any . . . casualties." Dumbledore fled the scene.

Each Head move their students down one of the corridors. Harry, Hermione, and Hagrid followed the other Gryffindors trailing behind McGonagall. Finally, inside a small, disused classroom, McGonagall sighed and faced her students. "There is no easy way to say this. Miss MacDonald, both of your parents and your younger sister were Kissed by dementors last night. Miss Grant, your mother and younger brothers were Kissed, your father is recovering in St. Mungo's. Mister and Mrs. Weasley are also recovering in St. Mungo's. Miss Weasley, could you please see to Miss Grant? We will be arranging all students who have family in St. Mungo's to visit this afternoon. You will meet in the entrance hall at One thirty. Miss Granger, could you please attend Miss MacDonald?"

The relieved older girls escorted the two crying younger girls away.

"No one else was at the Burrow?" Harry asked Ron.

A very shaken Ron responded, "There shouldn't have been. Thank goodness." He looked at Harry and McGonagall. "Was there something else, Professor?"

"The Quidditch captains need to decide if the games will go on starting at the end of this month," she replied. "Wait until Sunday evening; that's when Madam Hooch will call a meeting." She nodded to the pair and left.

"Why wait until Sunday?" Ron wondered.

"Who can tell who else might have been attacked, or will be attacked?" Harry answered.

"Do they really think we should cancel the season?" Ron demanded, appalled.

"Would you feel like playing if either of your parents had been Kissed?"

"That's not what I meant," Ron protested. Harry glared. "Alright, that's what I meant, although I shouldn't have said it. What I should have said was, would you go along with canceling the season?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not likely to be affected," he answered. "I'll back up your decision, no matter what it is."

Ron nodded his understanding.

"If I don't see you at breakfast, I'll see you at lunch," Harry said, putting his hand on Ron's shoulder. "I have to talk with Professor Powell and with Hagrid."

Ron followed Harry's eyes, and saw Hagrid waiting nervously down the corridor. Ron nodded again and went to see if he could find Ginny.

"What can I do for you, Hagrid?" Harry asked.

"Well, the thing is, Harry. . . ." Hagrid grimaced. "It's a bit embarrasin', me bein' a teacher an' all. . . ." Hagrid's accent was getting thicker by the word. Harry knew that meant his friend was getting nervous.

"What can I do for you?" Harry asked simply. "You know I'll help, if I can."

Hagrid wordlessly pulled a long wand from his sleeve. "Oh, well done, Hagrid!"

"The thing is," Hagrid said, calming down, "well. . . ."

"Is there anything we can work on together?" Harry asked.

Hagrid smiled. "Well, I was wondering if you and Hermione might be able to stop by during class time? Since it's free?" The students were taking care of puffskeins for the term, instead of meeting during class time.

"I will, and I'll ask Hermione," Harry said soothingly. Hagrid smiled and ambled away.

Harry sighed, and moved off to get some breakfast.

He didn't quite make it. He was intercepted by Luna. "Harry! What's happened to the Weasleys? Is Ginny alright?" Luna grasped the lapels of Harry's blazer, and looked at him with wide, fearful eyes.

It was the first time Harry had really seen Luna flustered. He forced himself to smile. "Ginny should be alright. Mister and Mrs. Weasley are shaken up, but are recovering in St. Mungo's."

"Thank goodness! So many people Kissed by those awful . . . things! Thank goodness at least some were just shaken up!"

"Did you eat breakfast yet?" Harry asked, trying to distract Luna, who looked like she was still on the verge of tears, although now from relief.

Luna shook her head. "Come on, then," Harry said. "Let's eat, and then we'll go see if Ginny can come out of the Common Room yet. Alright?"

"Alright, but I'm not very hungry."

"You can have a chocolate croissant and some hot chocolate," Harry said in an encouraging voice.

"They don't let me have either," Luna almost pouted. Cho and her friends had not been friendly outside the neutral Saturday make-overs. That was actually an improvement; none of Luna's possessions had been taken so far.

"You'll sit with me and have both," Harry said soothingly, rolling his eyes and putting his arm around his friend.

The Hall was barely half-full, so there was room for Luna to sit at the Gryffindor table. Luna was soon chewing happily on a chocolate croissant.

Despite the lack of half the students and nearly all of the faculty, the Hall was even noisier than usual. Still, the eruption of screams drew everyone's attention without difficulty.

Standing and looking around quickly, Harry saw what had caused the yelling and panic that had erupted around the Hall. Three pairs of mountain trolls had appeared, along with one giant.

Harry had of course faced a mountain troll when he was eleven, and had seen a giant, Hagrid's half-brother Grawp. Harry was also around the ten foot tall Hagrid more than most students. But Grawp was something of a pygmy giant at sixteen feet; this giant was nearly twenty-four feet tall, just a few inches under the lowest parts of the open hammer-beams of the enchanted ceiling. The giant roared out a word of command over the screaming of the students, and the trolls raised their clubs.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" Remus Lupin, the first to react, screamed. One of the trolls fell. Trolls and Giants are almost totally immune to stun spells. Only an immensely-powerful wizard could stun a troll, and not even Dumbledore could stun a giant.

A different troll's club started to swing right at a stunned-looking Draco Malfoy and Gregory Goyle. Harry, who had stood up when the screaming had started, didn't hesitate, knowing there was only one spell he could use by himself that could really stop a troll in motion. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Eight Slytherin wands then swung in unity at a pair of trolls. "STUPIFY!" While not impervious to stunning spells as giants are, it normally took at least two wizards working together to have a chance at stunning a troll. The pair trolls fell. Unfortunately, the giant's sword swung twice as the students turned towards the remaining trolls.

"Harry, the giant after two," Remus called. "One, two, AVADA KEDAVRA!" Both their spells hit the giant, which blinked twice, and then collapsed, crushing the great Hufflepuff table, but fortunately none of the students. The other trolls were now stunned as well.

The entire episode was over in less than a minute. Harry leaned against the table, shocked and nauseated at what he had just done.

"SILENCE!" Lupin demanded over the students' uproar. "If you're not injured, and not next to anyone who is injured, sit down and be quiet! If you are next to someone who is injured, sit down and raise your hand! Malfoy! Take two other Slytherins and guard the exit! No one out without my or Pomfrey's permission!"

Harry noticed for the first time that Madam Pomfrey was standing, eyes wide with shock, right behind Lupin. She immediately came out of her surprise, and took charge of organizing the students and caring for the injured.

Lupin came over to Harry. "Call Dobby," Remus said quietly. Harry rang the bell.

"Masters?" Dobby asked. His eyes went wide, seeing the chaos and huge bodies.

"Dobby, someone planted at least four portkey targets in this room. Find them and keep anyone from touching them. Call for help if you need it." Dobby nodded. He flashed away, and was back some fifteen seconds later with five other elves. They started searching the room.

Meanwhile, Lupin had turned to Harry. "Only Dumbledore or a current staff member could make a portkey into Hogwarts. However, there is such a thing as a portkey target -- the portkey homes in on it. That's the most likely explanation. Now, I need to bind the four surviving trolls, and figure out where to move them and the bodies." The atmosphere was getting very rank from the typical troll-stench. "Line up fourteen other students, at least Fourth year, who can help move them." Harry nodded.

Dobby came over to Lupin. "Portkey targets have been found, Professor, sir. Each has house elf standing over, and are charmed not to be touched without permission of casting elf."

"Well done, Dobby." Professors Sinistra and Vector and Madam Pince, the only other faculty present, had been helping Pomfrey. They now came over.

"Madam Pince, could you take the uninjured First through Third years to the library?"

It was phrased as a suggestion, but she took it as an order and moved off with just a nod. Remus put Vector in charge of moving the dead bodies out to behind the greenhouses, with five students to help. Sinistra was put in charge of the other students, moving the surviving trolls to a securable dungeon with the other students.

Lupin turned to Harry again. "I'll stay here; you find Dumbledore. I'm worried that he's not here already." Harry merely nodded, while Lupin signaled to Malfoy to let Harry out.

As Harry started to go past Malfoy, he found the way blocked. "Professor Lupin said I should go," Harry stated.

Draco took a deep breath, and said, "You saved us, at least from near-injury, Potter." He grimaced, and added, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry answered, refusing to make more of it. Malfoy stepped out of the way.

At the same moment the trolls and giant had appeared in the Great Hall, the same thing had occurred in five other locations.

A pair of trolls had appeared in the Gryffindor Common Room, materializing on, and crushing, the Fourth year Doreen Grant. Led by Ron and Ginny, the Gryffindors had made short work of the pair. Although the harshest hex used were stunners, each troll had been hit with at least twenty stunners and a dozen lesser curses in less than ten seconds.

The pairs of trolls that appeared in three dorm rooms caused the most destruction. The entire group of Fifth year Slytherin girls were killed before their screams alerted the other nearby girls to make up their minds to help. That pair of trolls also totally destroyed the room before they were killed.

The Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw Fourth year boys only suffered one fatality each, although the other boys sustained moderate to serious injuries before putting the trolls down, with some aid from their Housemates from other years.

Harry found the final pair of trolls standing threateningly in front of the Headmaster's guardian gargoyle, waiting to hit whomever came out. As one slowly turned towards Harry, he panicked a little and sent off a stunner, not wanting to send another Death Curse. To Harry's surprise, both trolls collapsed. Harry stood there, shocked, for a few seconds.

Down the corridor, a figure observed this under an invisibility cloak. The details would be sent to the Master.

Harry gave the password and rushed up the stairs, hoping the portraits would tell him where the Headmaster was. To Harry's surprise, he found Dumbledore and Law in conference.

"Is there a problem, Harry?"

Harry stared for a few seconds, then managed to say, "Well, yes sir. Several!" before explaining.

The two older men simply sat in shock for a moment. Then Dumbledore leapt to his feet and drew a breath as if to yell. For a moment, Harry thought Dumbledore was going to yell at him,

then he realized that the anger was directed against the portraits, and both Dumbledore and Harry only then realized that the portraits really were all asleep.

For over five long seconds, Dumbledore just stared at the multitude of paintings. Then he turned to Law. "Take care of the two trolls downstairs," he said simply. Law merely nodded and left.

Dumbledore had already turned his attention back to the portraits. After some two minutes of silent study, Dumbledore touched a frame and muttered three long sentences in a language Harry couldn't identify.

Instantly, the portraits started moving, all shouting alarms. "SILENCE!" Dumbledore called out. "You should know how to report!"

It was then that they learned of the four invasions of the Common Rooms.

"How is this possible?" Harry asked.

"Someone has of course snuck in the portkey targets," Dumbledore said. "That could by-pass many of the wards, alas. The de-animation spells on the portraits are more troubling. Those both would cancel out the remaining relevant wards and show an alarming knowledge of the inner workings of Hogwarts."

"Would Professor Quirrell have known?" Harry asked.

"It's possible," Dumbledore answered. "He would only have known the basics, but would have been in a position to have observed too much. I thought I had made enough changes to render that moot. Obviously, I was either wrong, or I have seriously under-estimated Voldemort."

"Would Crouch have been able to send him any information?"

Dumbledore had to admit, "Yes; yes he would have been able to. Again, I thought I had. . . ." Dumbledore's eyes went wide. "Crouch could have come back from the Yule or Easter holidays and partially started a set of curses, which were then only activated this morning. The incomplete curses may not have shown up."

The elderly headmaster shrugged. "No matter. It is time to clean this mess up, and then decide on what steps to take next. Come, Harry."

That evening after dinner, a small group met in the small meeting room off the Great Hall. The Heads of House, Professors Law and Lupin, and Harry, Hermione, and Luna met with Dumbledore.

"This has been a horrible day for Hogwarts," Dumbledore said quietly, remorsefully. "The giant killed three students in the Great Hall, while the trolls there slightly injured six students. In the House areas, eleven students were killed, four students sustained serious injuries, and many others sustained moderate injuries. Fourteen dead."

"There can be little doubt who the suspects are," Law stated firmly. "It had to have been one of the students who gathered in front of the entrance to the Headmaster's office this morning, unless there is a mass conspiracy."

"We are tentatively excluding those killed, although it is possible they were under possession or the Imperius." He read off the first part of the list: "Gryffindor, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Natalie MacDonald, and Doreen Grant (killed)."

"I take it, since Potter and Granger are here, you are either excluding them or accusing them, Headmaster?" Snape drawled.

"At this point, we are excluding all the remaining Gryffindors except Miss MacDonald, unless you would care to make an accusation," Dumbledore stated.

Snape sneered a bit, but said, "No, at this time I must agree these two particular Gryffindors at least should not be major suspects."

"Hufflepuff, Adam Dawlish, Laura Mockridge, Susan Bones, James Perkins, Moray Hopkirk, Lawrence Munch (killed), Jane Pilliwinkle, Henry Mockridge, and Polly Podmore."

"I can think of no reason to suspect any of them," Professor Sprout said.

"Ravenclaw, Eddie Carmichael, Julia Collins, Marietta Edgecombe, Archibald Peasgood, Michael Marchbanks (killed), Dixon Scrimgeour, Donna Scrimgeour, and Stuart Ackerley."

"Miss Edgecombe might have something of a grudge against Mister Potter and his friends, but I hardly think that would extend to the entire school," Professor Flitwick said. "Miss Collins is part of the same group, of course." He paused. "I rather think Mister Hopkirk and Mister Scrimgeour might be rated lower than the others, as they would have been seriously risking their lives being in the same room as the portkey targets."

"Very possibly," Dumbledore agreed.

"Miss Scrimgeour is very close to her twin, I might add," Flitwick went on, "and was developing a relationship with Mister Marchbanks, to her brother's approval."

The group nodded.

"Slytherin, Margo Collins (killed), Georgia Baddock (killed), Malcom Baddock, and Margaret Bletchley."

"I suppose I must say that Mister Baddock was very fond of his sister," Snape said. "This gives us Miss Edgecombe and perhaps Miss Julia Collins as slight suspects, and nothing else to work with, does it not?"

"Would there be any way of knowing how complex a hex would have been needed to disable the warning systems?" Hermione asked.

"No," Dumbledore confessed. "None can be let out because of age. Thanks to your hard work this summer, you three are the only students we can be certain are not possessed. If the person is possessed or under the Imperius, it could be anyone. Even the Weasleys could have been

struck by possession while at Hogsmeade. Professor Law will be instructing you, and refreshing us, on how to identify those under coercion. Until we find the culprit, we are all in danger."

"Nonsense," Snape stated. "The Imperius curse is unlikely, even if it is being used by the Dark Lord himself against whichever of those is the most weak-willed child. The control would have to have lasted, without renewal, from Saturday afternoon through this morning. That would be over a hundred hours without renewal, through the various wards here at Hogwarts. Possible, but just barely. We are most likely dealing with a case of possession or willful aid. Unless there is a period of prior contact, possession is difficult to establish in less than a hour, which I doubt would have been available Saturday." He stood and looked from Harry to Dumbledore. "So, it is most likely someone did this with full will, unless they have already been possessed. And we all know there is one student who was already successfully possessed by the Dark Lord."

"Who?" Law asked, puzzled.

"I don't believe it," Harry growled.

"Of course not," Snape conceded, "that is why the possibility must be investigated."

"Who?" Law demanded.

"Ginny Weasley," Dumbledore said sadly.

Chapter III

Thursday, November 1, 1996
continued

"NO!" Luna nearly screamed.

"Calmly, Miss Lovegood," Dumbledore said. "First, Miss Granger, I want you, Mister Potter, and Miss Lovegood to draw up a complete, minute by minute, account of Miss Weasley's day last Saturday, from the time she left the castle until the time she boarded the carriages."

The three students glowered at him. "But either Luna or I, if not all three of us, were with Ginny all day," Hermione protested.

"It must be done, if only to close out the possibility," Dumbledore said simply. "The three of you are excused from classes tomorrow, should you need that much time. Severus, please see if you can find anything out." All four nodded, and the meeting broke up.

"Where can we work?" Luna asked as they walked away from the Headmaster's office.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, communicating silently. Harry took off his tie, and Hermione wrapped it around Luna's eyes. "We'll take you to some place we can work in total privacy," Hermione said.

"I understand. I trust you."

Luna was very impressed by Hermione's hide-away, and promised not to reveal its existence. Harry rang and asked Dobby to bring them hot chocolate, and they set to work.

By midnight, they had most of Ginny's Saturday charted. There was one short gap of at most two minutes missing at Honeydukes, and a ten to fifteen minute interval when Ginny had gone to the girls' toilet by herself at The Three Broomsticks. The missing two minutes at Honeydukes was irrelevant, since Ginny had certainly not left the store and, unless Voldemort had the type of connection with Ginny he had with Harry, he would have had to have been in the store with them. The ten minutes at the Three Broomsticks would have to be investigated, just in case someone thought the time interval might actually be long enough to reestablish the type of possession in question. Ginny would have had to have been portkeyed away, possessed, and portkeyed back. Even with a time turner, it would have been a tight window.

"What do we do now," Hermione wondered.

"You go and talk to Ginny," Harry said.

"Harry, it's after midnight," Hermione pointed out.

Harry showed them the Marauder's Map. Ginny was pacing in the Gryffindor Common Room. Hermione took a deep breath, and left.

"Do you really think she'll be alright?" Luna asked.

Harry merely pointed at the Map, showing he was keeping track of her. Luna nodded and drank more hot chocolate. Then, she looked up. "We might as well start on all the others."

"We might as well. There will be huge holes, but we'll sic the Lavender gossip network on them and see what we can fill in. Maybe we'll get lucky, and some one saw something."

Luna smiled in hope.

"Hi," Hermione said softly.

"Hi," Ginny said morosely.

"What's up?"

Ginny looked about ready to run and hide, but then steeled herself. "I'm trying to remember if there are any blank spots where I might have been possessed."

"The good news is, Dumbledore believes anyone who was possessed would have had to have been Saturday. You were with Harry, Luna, and myself all day. We're only missing ten or twelve minutes or so, which is almost certainly too short a time to be repossessed. Still, let's see what you remember."

Friday, November 2, 1996

A tired Hermione made her way back into the hide-away at 2:30 am, having dropped off a copy of Ginny's time-line for Dumbledore to read in the morning. She felt she had proved Ginny was out of things, at least. Ginny had been talking to a group of Third years the entire time she'd been away from their table.

Hermione was a bit surprised to see her classroom empty. Peeking into the bedroom, she saw the fire was burning, casting light on the open-curtained bed. Harry was sleeping in his usual spot (on his left side, on the left edge of the huge bed) while Luna was sleeping on her back in the center. Hermione shrugged, took off her clothes except for her socks, put her work robe back on, and curled up next to Luna.

Luna woke up, warm yet sad. The warmth hit her first, and for an instant she was back in August, waking up to Ginny's eager kisses. She leaned over to kiss Ginny first.

Then she remembered where and when she was, and opened startled eyes to see she had been kissing Hermione, and feeling her rear-end.

Luna tried to pulled back and apologize, but Hermione held her closer and continued to kiss her. It was then that Luna realized why she had woken up feeling sad.

Harry was behind her, his arms wrapped around her, sobbing into her neck.

Hermione released her liplock, and whispered, "Don't say anything. Harry's not awake. His Occlumency keeps his temper level during the day and Voldemort out all the time, but some mornings he wakes up crying or thrashing in anger. He'll wake up in a minute or so."

"All right." Luna hesitated, and then said, "Sorry about the kissing and the touching."

"I've learned to be more open, more accepting, of affection," Hermione said as she stroked Harry's hair. "Harry has, too. We care for you and Ginny and Colin, and know you care for us. We talked a lot last month about it, in fact, and decided that at times we could likely be affectionate with one or more of you. Affectionate, not sexual."

"Not Ron or Dean?"

"We care for both of them, of course, but Ron is still too possessive, and we're still waiting to decide on Dean. He cares for Colin, but hasn't actually said that he loved Colin. They're obviously more than casual lovers, but he's still a bit shocked at himself for coming out."

Luna nodded slightly, and went on to another obvious target of Hermione's famous anger. "We were tired, and, well. . . ."

Hermione smiled again. "Neither Harry nor I are the jealous type. That's Ron. Harry's starting to wake up."

Harry had stopped crying with a small choking sound. "Sorry, Angel," Harry said a few seconds later.

"Which angel are you addressing, Harry?" Hermione teased.

"Huh?" Harry then realized he was holding Luna in a rather explicit way. "Sorry, Luna."

"You're about the only male I not only don't mind touching me, but whom I enjoy having touch me," Luna said. She twisted around and hugged Harry. "Thank you for trusting me enough to show me your inner struggles."

"Err . . . you're welcome."

Hermione leaned over and hugged Harry. "What was upsetting you? Casting those curses yesterday?"

Harry rolled onto his back. "Yes."

"Considering the crowded conditions, you had very little choice, Harry," Luna stated firmly.

"Exactly," Hermione agreed.

"It still means I killed an intelligent being, and one that was to some degree self-aware," Harry said. "I HATE having done that, I HATE having had to use THAT spell, and I LOATHE the feeling of power I got from using them."

"Very few wizards would have any qualms in killing trolls, fairies, gnomes, pixies, and the like," Luna told Harry.

"Then I think they're wrong," Harry said firmly.

"Most wizards would probably have few qualms about killing giants, centaurs, merpeople, goblins, or elves," Hermione said drily, "not to mention vampires . . . or werewolves."

"I wasn't stating my opinion," Luna replied. "I was merely pointing out that, legally, Harry should not be in a precarious position."

"Do you really think it will be that easy?" Harry asked.

"No," Luna said simply.

Hermione stretched. "Let's get ready and face the day."

It was nearly 9:00 when they approached the exit at the mirror. Dobby was waiting for them.

"Master Harry? Headmaster Dumbledore told Dobby to tell Master Harry to come to the conference room off the Great Hall."

"Fudge?" Harry asked.

"No, Master Harry." Dobby hesitated, then said, "Madam Amelia Bones has arrived, with a group of aurors and hit wizards."

Harry squared his shoulders, and the trio marched off to the Great Hall, with Dobby following.

It was clear from the crowd of students that all classes were still suspended for the day. The entire staff was present. Harry split off from Hermione and Luna when they reached the dias. Hermione and Luna went to present the incomplete time tables they had on the other students' movements in Hogsmeade, and some information gleaned from Dobby, to Professor Dumbledore. Harry went over to the door where two men in black robes were standing.

"Yes?" one asked dismissively.

Harry smiled inwardly. After all he'd been through, it would take a bit more than a wizard with a black robe, deep voice, and snotty manner to intimidate him. He merely pulled his hair back to reveal his scar.

"Your wand," the wizard said.

"No."

"No one sees the Minister armed."

"Then the Minister does not see me." 'Minister?' Harry thought. 'Interesting.'

"Look, kid, give me the wand, or I'll take it."

"Voldemort and thirty Death Eaters tried two years ago and failed," Harry answered, looking into the man's eyes. "She wants to see me. I don't care if I see her."

"Let him in," the other wizard said. The deep-voiced wizard gave them both a dirty look, but opened the door and followed Harry in.

"The Potter boy," he announced. "He refused to give up his wand."

"That's alright, Harold. Harry and Dumbledore are two exceptions."

Harold made a small noise of contempt and left, shutting the door.

"Should I offer you my congratulations, Minister?" Harry asked.

"I'm not certain yet," she admitted, adjusting her monocle. "I was only appointed last night around Eight." She sighed. "Why the hell couldn't it have been Law and McGonagall, or Powell, who cast those curses? No, it has to be you and a werewolf."

"Just emphasize he's a Defense teacher," Harry said. "Werewolves have to be kept track of, of course, but this recent set of rules is ridiculous."

Bones smiled. It was nothing like the pretty, warm smile of her niece. "So speaks a young man who adopted one werewolf as a brother, and who is the protege of another."

"We're going to get those regulations changed sooner or later," Harry said simply, yet with conviction.

"Perhaps, if you defeat You-Know-Who." She gazed at Harry a moment. "Dumbledore told me the Prophecy."

"Then you know, if I lose, you lose, too. You're better off backing me and helping me than harassing me like Fudge."

"So I should back you in whatever whim you have, young man?"

"You'd be the first adult to do so," Harry retorted.

"Technically, I can have you and the werewolf arrested," Bones said off-hand.

"You could. Why would you? For our saving the lives of the students? Even Fudge would have had a hard time selling that one."

"True," Bones admitted. "His announced intention to do just that is what got him ousted last night. So, I couldn't touch you on this even if I wanted to. I could pull Lupin from Hogwarts easily enough, but I won't. Despite his . . . condition, he is a good teacher and a worthwhile consultant here. The werewolf legislation stays until the current dark werewolves are destroyed."

"Or surrender," Harry said.

"Or surrender on their own," Bones amended. "If they surrender in their human form in any type of fight, they still go down."

"I understand," Harry said, regretfully.

"When you win, the last group of laws will go."

"And what do you want from me?" Harry said. He knew that a Minister of Magic did not normally make political deals with a sixteen year old, not even with the Boy-Who-Lived.

"I want a statement of support and confidence in the Ministry. Not necessarily of me, but of the Ministry. You can send it to The Quibbler or The Daily Prophet, as you please."

Harry thought about it. Bones misinterpreted his silence. "What else would you really want, Mister Potter?"

"Maybe just some information. What happened to Mister Weasley?"

"He has my old job."

Harry smiled. "Can Mister Lovegood get his Ministry Press accreditation back?"

Bones frowned. "I thought he already had. If not, then yes."

"Just three more people to ask about then. Percy Weasley, Dolores Umbridge, and Minister Fudge."

"Fudge has retired, Umbridge was retired on a reduced pension in September. Arthur had his boy assigned to his old job. Any problems?"

"Umbridge did set dementors on me and my Muggle cousin last year."

Bones nodded. "I believe she did, but the only evidence we have is your and your friends' word. She was fired for her actions here, and on a greatly reduced pension because of her use of that damn quill!"

"May I assume there will be more cooperation with the Headmaster on the fight against Voldemort?" Harry was glad to see that, even if she didn't use the title, she didn't flinch at it.

"He is NOT going to run things on his own, living legend or not," the Minister said, "but yes."

"I'll have to talk to a few people about how to word any statement," Harry said.

"It might seem more natural if you sent it along with a small piece about yesterday's events," Bones offered.

"I'll talk to them about that, too."

"Is there ANYONE at Hogwarts, student or staff, you don't have confidence in?" the Minister asked.

"There must be at least one, whoever snuck the portkey targets in," Harry said. "It wasn't the usual group of suspects, because two trolls would have killed them if I hadn't stopped them, and there was no way anyone could have known I'd be there to save them."

"Fair enough. Dumbledore mentioned you and some friends were researching at least one of the students. Any evidence?"

"We cleared her. We also learned that the elves sweep the Great Hall every morning at Five forty-five. So, whoever laid the targets did it yesterday morning. If anyone who was in the group that could have planted the targets in the students' robes is known have to been in the Great Hall, we'll have a suspect. Miss Granger is informing the Headmaster, in case he wasn't already aware of it."

Bones sighed. "He probably was. Now, when we dumped Fudge, Arthur insisted you be rewarded somehow. We all agreed."

Harry blushed.

"Have you heard of the Dark Arts Defense League? Professional and amateur Dark hunters, scholars in fighting the Dark Arts, and professionals, such as aurors, are all eligible. Invitation only for full membership. Arthur offered to pay your membership dues, but the Membership Board agreed on my recommendation, along with Alastor Moody's, to give you a free lifetime membership." She stood. "Professor Law, seconded by Professor Powell, are in charge of Hogwarts' defense. I have no doubt they will follow Dumbledore's lead, but it's best that he has some room to work in. I am also sending three aurors. Any preferences?"

"Tonks."

"Why?"

"She's young enough to blend in, and I trust her. Not Harold at the door."

"Harold is a hit wizard. Tonks and two others will stay here. If they want to name a student coordinator, it will be you. Report to Law and Dumbledore." Bones glowered at Harry. "Shoo, boy!"

"Yes, Minister." Harry stopped half way to the door. "Thank you for telling me at least some of what's going on."

"Potter!" Bones called just as he reached the door. "In traditional families, we listen to our elders. Might not follow their advice, but we listen. Mistress Merry vouches for your character and your ability, and that of Miss Granger. When she and Dumbledore agree on something, I pay attention."

Harry smiled.

"Just one more thing."

"Yes, Minister?"

"If you can . . . keep an eye on Susan."

"We'll do our best. She's our friend."

"Thank you." Bones bent down to her reports, and Harry left the room.

And found himself facing Snape. "Come along, Potter. You're in demand this morning." Harry followed the professor out to the faculty lounge, where Professors Dumbledore, Law, Powell, and Lupin were waiting. Snape left the room.

"We just felt you should know. . . ." Dumbledore started, but he couldn't go on.

"We're stuck," Powell finally said. "None of the students who could have planted the portkey targets on the students had been in the great hall. That means there are at least two students involved. We don't like it, but it's best to face reality."

"Your DA is in all four Houses, to some degree," Law said. "You have some degree of trust amongst most of the students. Therefore. . . ."

Dumbledore roused himself. "Sorry, Harry. Yesterday was quite a blow. You are now the School Security Prefect. Do you have the Map with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please hand it to Professor Lupin."

Remus smiled reassuringly. He took the map over to Dumbledore, who laid it on a stack of parchment. They murmured over the map for several minutes, after which the pile glowed in multiple colors. Remus handed the original to Dumbledore. Ten more minutes of incantations were said, and then Dumbledore handed Harry the map back. "Go with Professor Lupin," he said weakly.

Remus took Harry to his office. Harry could barely restrain himself on the walk. As soon as the door shut, Harry asked "What's wrong with the Headmaster?"

"He hasn't slept since about three yesterday morning. At his age, it's hard to keep going full out for thirty hours on three hours sleep. And he has been expending a lot of power, testing the wards. Now, I'm going to teach you how to really access the map."

"You mean I haven't been?"

Remus smiled. "You haven't accessed it's full power. Only four people could do that. Now, there will be a fifth."

"And the copies?"

"They have the same information as the original. Dumbledore, Law, and I will each have a copy." Remus smiled. "I did cut out the password to the passage to your little hideaway on Law's map."

Harry flushed a little.

"I also checked it out again. I knew part of the tunnel had collapsed. Checking from the Hogwarts end, I figure there's at least fifty feet of collapsed tunnel, and at no place it is easily vulnerable. I set up wards in all the tunnels to Hogsmeade, including yours, so we'll be warned."

Harry nodded his understanding. "But there are at least two spies here. We have to be on our guard."

"We all will be. Voldemort is being careful. He's likely not to strike again until he's ready."

Chapter IV

Dementor attacks on isolated wizarding homes occurred every night between November 3 and November 15. By that point, most magical families had moved, either to towns or cities, or were actually hiding with Muggle or Squib relatives. In any event, they were either protected by larger numbers or hidden.

The only silver lining for Harry was that his induction into the Dark Arts Defense League went almost unnoticed. The Quidditch teams had met, and decided to cancel the formal Quidditch season -- every team had at least three players whose family members had been attacked or killed. Instead of Quidditch every late afternoon, Third through Seventh years were found practicing defense in groups, while the First and Second years practiced a bit less often.

Even the Slytherins were fully participating. Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini had joined forces and convinced the entire House to join in. All of the student leaders knew there were at least two students who couldn't be trusted, but there was no way to determine who the two were. The students therefore didn't have a great deal of trust in each other as a whole, but the different factions all hoped that their particular group didn't harbor the traitors.

Saturday, November 16, 1996

Harry ducked out of the morning defense groups to go deep into the dungeons. He had been making the rounds of the many different groups the students had broken into to practice defense, so it was unlikely he would be missed. Hermione, Ron, Luna, Ginny, and Colin all knew where he was going, and therefore would cover for him if any asked.

Harry arrived at the door he had been directed to. As he raised his hand to knock, the door opened on its own.

"Come in, Mister Potter."

Harry walked in. It was a long room, with high stone walls. Except for Dr. Powell, a few odd looking devices at one end, and a dented metal bull's-eye target floating a few feet above the floor at the other, it was empty. "Doctor Powell; I was wondering if it would be you."

Powell smiled a little grimly. "My uncle is out supervising the various student groups, and the Headmaster needs his rest. Lupin, Flitwick, and McGonagall have learned the third spell, but need a bit more practice before they can teach all three, if we ever teach the third. That leaves me."

"So what do I do?"

"First, tell me what fights a dementor?"

"A Patronus, which is a physical manifestation of our positive thoughts and feelings," Harry answered almost automatically, and then added, "and light." The first was the textbook

answer, but he had remembered that Dumbledore had punished the dementors his Third year with a bright light.

"Very good. The first spell is therefore a sun spell. An upswing hook, with the incantation of 'helios.' As you complete the incantation, flick the point of your wand where you want to light to go. It's a fairly concentrated cone of light. The downsides to this spell are 1) if you miss you give away your position and 2) most people don't have enough power to do serious damage to the dementor. For it to really work, you have to hit under the hood."

"Understandable."

"In combat conditions, you have to be careful not to hit anyone on your side. Someone of your supposed power could permanently blind someone."

Yes, sir."

The pair worked on the spell for twenty minutes. Powell had studied Harry in class, but had never seen him in action. True, he had what his uncle, Lupin, and Flitwick told him, but he was shocked at how quickly Harry had picked up the spell and how much power he actually had.

"Well done," Powell finally conceded. "Questions?"

"Light works; does fire?" Harry asked.

"No. They don't like heat, but even the heat of a fire doesn't really hurt them. It merely burns their robes off. Not an attractive sight." Powell wrinkled his nose in disgust. "What?" he asked, seeing the thoughtful look on Harry's face.

"If light affects them, but not heat, would ultraviolet be effective?"

Powell gave that some serious thought. "Perhaps. So far as I know, no one has ever made the suggestion before, but it makes sense to try. I'll consult with Filius. Now, For the second spell. This will NOT be taught to any student except yourself and perhaps Ms Granger this term. It is a very dangerous spell. It can kill a dementor, but it can also seriously injure, or even kill, a person. It is based on the Patronus. First, I know you have a corporeal Patronus, but have you ever driven away even one dementor with it?"

"I drove away two, almost a year and a half ago. And I drove away about a hundred at the end of my third year."

Powell looked very disbelieving.

"It's true!" Harry insisted. "I was probably able to do it because I was far enough away from them that they weren't affecting me."

"Fair enough," Powell said. "Having a corporeal Patronus is the first real requirement for this. Casting the Patronus is of course done with a mere lift of the wand. It can also be cast as a weapon. You were Muggle-raised; did you ever play cricket?"

"A few times at school. Not since I came to Hogwarts. Why?"

Powell materialized a cricket ball and handed it to Harry. "Imagine you just fielded the ball. Hit the target."

Harry wound up and flung the ball. It hit the edge of the target. Powell summoned the ball and handed it back to Harry. "Use more of a stride, and throw a bit more overhand than side-armed."

It took Harry about ten minutes before he was making the motions Powell wanted him to make. He was also hitting the target better by that time. Powell then had Harry alternate for ten minutes between throwing the ball and holding his wand, which threw sparks towards the target. Then he had Harry send stingers, a sort of concentrated spark-blob, at the target.

"Now comes the hard part," Powell told him. "What you need to do is the same motion, while thinking your positive thought and using the incantation 'Patronum!' After you complete the incantation, imagine hitting the target. All right? Let's see what happens."

Harry eyed the target, then went into his stride. "Patronum!" A small silver dart shot from Harry's wand and the target rang when he hit the bull's-eye.

"Well done! Again, you have to aim for the head. Dementors have a humanoid shape, but the only vulnerable area is the head. They don't have hearts, hitting one in the chest or abdomen might weaken a dementor a bit, but usually doesn't hurt them any more than hitting one in the arm or leg would. In any event, that's never fatal."

"Usually?" Harry asked, going back a sentence.

"Hitting them in the center of the body may release a captive soul or two, but even that's not common. Best to aim straight at the center of the head."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, again, you have to be careful with this spell. Try it again." Powell waved his wand in a repair spell, and all the dents on the target evened out.

"Patronum!" Harry scored another bull's-eye.

"Come look." Harry saw there was a significant dent in the metal target.

"Hit a man with that, and you'll likely give him a concussion if you hit him in the head, or break a few ribs if you hit him in the chest, at the very least." Powell seemed to hesitate.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"A Patronus dart will go through a neutral shield, or one powered by Dark magic. That's one reason my uncle is teaching the Sixth and Seventh years those shields powered by positive

thoughts. The three different Love Shields will protect you against anything except an Unforgivable, as do the material shields you're learning to materialize. And, if you can up the power on your dart, and Voldemort doesn't protect himself with a material shield. . . ."

"I might be able to kill him using this dart?"

"Exactly. He cannot project any of the Love Shields. It's likely that few of the remaining Death Eaters could, either."

Harry nodded his understanding. Of course, he also remembered the material metal shield Voldemort had materialized in his fight with Dumbledore the previous June. This gave him a second weapon, along with his Occlumency, in fighting Voldemort, but it wasn't a likely knockout. Still, anything was better than the Killing Curse.

"And the third weapon against dementors?" Harry asked gamely.

Powell smiled. "Potter, you're a determined young man, I'll grant you that. We've been working about an hour, and you're tired. We'll meet again next Saturday and see how you're doing with these two. We'll also set the door to recognize you. You may practice in this room at any time. Do NOT use those two spells anywhere else, unless it's against a dementor. Do NOT bring anyone here, other than Ms Granger. Do NOT demonstrate those spells to her unless she is standing behind you and to your left. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then repeat the three conditions."

Harry did so. Powell expressed himself satisfied, and the pair left.

"How were your private lessons? Who was it? What did you learn? Where did you go?" Colin, Ginny, and Hermione were each shooting questions at Harry as he sat down to lunch. Dean gave Harry a sympathetic smile. Neville, on the other hand, completely ignored all the by-play, too concerned about what Lavender and Parvati had planned for him. The pair were giggling in the manner that Neville had come to associate with the pair having deviant plans for their boyfriend.

Neville loved to hear that giggle.

Ron, on the other hand, was trying to eat as fast as he could, so he could sneak some quality snogging time with Henrietta before helping out with yet another defence group at 1:30.

"Calm down!" Harry said. "I learned two of the three anti-dementor spells from Doctor Powell. Everything went well. I'll meet with him to practice them down near the Ravenclaw tower next Saturday. Alright?"

"What are we all going to do for Christmas this year?" Ron asked as he grabbed a slice of apple pie.

The table went silent. Frowning, Ron looked around at the stricken table. Puzzled, he looked towards Harry. Harry's eyes gestured to Colin and Dean.

"Right. Sorry."

"Mum said that the Burrow might be safe by then. There are new wards. So, we may have to go home, at least at first," Ginny said. "Luna and Henrietta may be coming, too." That cheered Ron a bit.

"I'm taking Colin and Dean with me, wherever I go," Harry said softly, "although we're claiming to stay."

"So am I," Hermione added.

"We're going to Neville's," Lavender stated. Parvati giggled.

The group stayed at the table, teasing each other, until it was time for the next set of voluntary defense groups.

The students straggled back to the Great Hall between 5:30 and 6:00, tired from their work. Most had taken the time to shower, and those who hadn't were sent off to do so. The students ate quietly, as they had over the last week or so.

It had been a horrible month so far, and no one was trying to deny it.

The staff surveyed the quiet students, concerned.

"How is their morale?" Professor Vector asked. "They're working hard in class, but I don't really get to see them, other than at meals and in class."

"I'm surprised, but morale isn't terrible," McGonagall said. "Most seem determined to believe that hard work on their part will help them get through this."

"You doubt it?" Flitwick asked. "Without this extra work, they would certainly have lesser chances to survive."

"True, but the students are going on grit alone, and that might not be enough to keep them going," she replied. "Perhaps we should have kept the Quidditch season after all."

"Perhaps," Snape agreed. He sighed. "I never thought I would say this, but I almost wish the Weasley twins were still students." He looked at the shocked faces. "I said 'almost'."

"I think the dance should go ahead next week," Sprout said. "I understand why merriment in such a time as this doesn't feel quite right, but we must do something. These are children. Children in a horrible time, but they are safe, or at least relatively safe, and need some positive relief."

"Other than snogging in my astronomy tower," Sinistra growled. "If we don't get them doing other things they might be finding the wrong kind of relief."

"My dear professor!" Flitwick protested.

"We have always been liberal towards any non-coercive sexual conduct, other than intercourse," Snape stated. "Peer pressure kept anything beyond a casual kiss or non-intimate caress private. Things are becoming much more public. Normally, the most we see in the Great Hall is a kiss on the cheek in greeting, and that was both rare and usually just between committed couples in their last two years. Eighteen couples have kissed long on the lips so far tonight, and that does NOT include Longbottom and his two gigglers, or the multi-House harem Zabini seems to be gathering. In addition, while we have always ignored inversion, there are now at least fifteen openly gay couples."

"Does this bother you, Severus?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not as such. I am merely pointing out that, for the first time I am aware of, relationships are becoming much more open. Even if they are refraining from actual intercourse, they may be engaging in other sexual behavior, or perhaps even merging their magics."

"You can't think they would!" Ivy Sprout protested.

"Why wouldn't they? Although there are rules regulating it, it's not totally forbidden."

"We would never have DREAMED of any sort of . . . merging, either physically or magically," McGonagall sniffed.

"At least not until our Seventh year," Law muttered, causing McGonagall to blush.

"At least that's more 'cross-House dating," Hagrid put in to cover up the sudden silence.

Snape frowned and then said, nearly snarling, "I am certain that is NOT what the Sorting Hat meant about bringing the Houses together these last two years."

"No, it is not," Dumbledore agreed. "However, it helps. Before this term who would have predicted that couple?" Anna Lloyd, Fourth year Slytherin and proud Pure-blood, was walking arm-in-arm with Seamus Finnigan, the half-blood Gryffindor.

Snape sighed. "Come, Severus," Powell teased. "Ms Granger has persuaded all the Muggle-born and raised to take lessons in wizarding culture next term. If they were coming together to move into Muggle culture, I would agree with your complaints. But coming together to celebrate our culture? I, for one, rejoice."

"I do not object as such," Snape retorted. "While ideally I would prefer the students following both wizarding manners and customs, I will settle for them following a mixture of wizarding and Muggle manners within wizarding customs. I do wonder about how serious and how deep this situation is. I do worry about how long this truce between Pure-blood and Muggle customs will last."

"I agree," Remus said. "We must encourage them, but keep a close eye on them at the same time."

On that agreed-upon declaration, the high table broke up.

Harry caught up to Remus and Tonks as they were leaving. Seeing Harry wanted to talk, Remus invited him to come along to his office.

"What's on your mind, Harry?"

"Christmas," Harry said bluntly. "You two stuck me with Grimmauld Place. I want us, and my friends and the Grangers, and perhaps the Weasleys, to have Christmas together. If you approve, I'll approach Dumbledore, not just for permission to go, but to allow Dobby and Winky time off to really strip and prepare the house." Harry had other plans, but didn't think he needed to discuss those with any but Dobby.

The pair looked at each other. "Neither of you told me what happened to Kreacher, but may I presume it's gone?" Harry finally asked.

"He is," Tonks said.

"And Mrs. Black?"

"She cannot be removed, as best we can tell," Remus said. "Not even Dumbledore and Flitwick working together could pull that evil thing down. You, as the house owner, may be able to get her and that tapestry down, but I won't swear to it."

"I'll risk it. Hermione will enjoy researching it." He looked at Remus and Tonks. "Well?"

"Ask Dumbledore," Remus said after exchanging glances with Tonks.

"Thank you." Harry left them.

"He's up to something," Tonks observed. "Is this his Marauder's heritage?"

Remus smiled. "No. No, James plotted jokes and campaigns, but not like this. Harry looks mostly like James, but while he's mostly just himself, of course, he's more like Lily than James in personality. Sirius had a hard time believing that."

Harry's plan won over the Headmaster's approval, at least once it was more-or-less fully explained. Harry next sought out Dobby.

"Master Harry?"

"Did you get to make a survey of Grimmauld Place, as I asked?"

"Yes, Master Harry. Headmaster gave Dobby and Winky permission."

"Remind me of the general floor plan." Harry hadn't paid much attention, beyond the ground floor, kitchen, and his bedroom and the bath on the third floor.

"Cellar has kitchen in the back, servant dining room, and three storage rooms, one set up as Order meeting room. Sub-basement has boiler room with elf lair off that, wine cellar, and two storage rooms, one set up for wolf-Lupin. All of cellars is now ready for remodeling. Ground floor has dining room, breakfast room, parlor, small washroom, and the sitting room. All walls and floors need painting and polishing, but Mrs. Wheezy and Master's friends got out most nasty things."

"Go on."

"First floor has drawing room, front parlor, and back parlor. Second floor has master suite; two bedrooms, two small dressing rooms, small sitting room, and bath. Also, two bedrooms and bath outside of suite. Third and fourth floors each have six rooms and two baths. Attic is all storage, although with partitions dividing it into four parts. Each bedroom has fireplace, each bath has gas heater. No nasty creatures left, except for boggart in attic, nasty tapestry in first floor drawing room, and nasty and evil picture in front hall."

"One of the areas of the attic has a north-facing window, right?"

"Yes, Master Harry."

"The Headmaster has given you and Winky permission to take twelve hours off three days a week between now and the start of the winter vacation. Your Hogwarts pay will be halted for those times, and I will be paying both you and Winky instead."

Dobby jumped up and down in joy.

"You have the power to draw money for paint and other supplies, rugs, mattresses, et cetera. Professor Lupin and Tonks will continue to occupy the master suite. Ask them if they want any of it restored, changed, painted, or polished. One second floor bedroom may be occupied by the Grangers. Ask Hermione what needs to be added, and what colors to paint it. Mister and Mrs. Weasley may be occupying the other. Ask Ginny about colors and anything else needed there. Ask Hermione about updating the plumbing. Anything you can't handle, let us know."

Dobby was nodding happily.

"As for the fourth floor and attic, only Hermione, Colin, Dean, and myself, and you and Winky, should be able to access it. Take a look at the roof, and see that it's both in good shape and able to repel attackers. I leave it for you, Winky, and Hermione to work out how, but I want no one else to be able to access it."

Dobby gave Harry a sly grin, which Harry ignored. "Dobby understands."

"A bedroom in the front for Colin, which Dean can share, plus a room for his study. A bedroom for Hermione and myself, a study for me, and a study and a library for Hermione. I want sky blue walls and a white ceiling in my study."

"Yes, Master Harry!"

"Set up a store room as a gym. Here's a list of Muggle exercise equipment we'll need."

"Yes, Master Harry!"

"The section of the attic with the north-facing window? That needs to be fixed up as a studio for Dean, if it can be done. Dean or Colin can fill you in. Alastor Moody will be by sometime to get rid of the boggart."

"Dobby will fix it, Master Harry."

"One bedroom on the third floor for Ginny and Luna, one for Ron, and the one next to it for Henrietta."

"Why, Master Harry?" Dobby asked, puzzled.

"So Mrs. Weasley doesn't yell," Harry replied.

"Ah, Dobby understands."

"The other two rooms should be set up for visiting members of the Order. Can three beds be fit into those?"

"Small beds, yes Master Harry."

"One should be the room with the portrait of that old Headmaster," Harry said with a smirk.

"Yes, Master Harry," Dobby said knowingly. "For Headmaster, when he stays?"

"Exactly." Harry frowned. "There should be some way for the portrait to . . . to. . . ."

"Dobby understands and will arrange."

"Thank you, Dobby. Feel free to arrange quarters for yourself and for Winky in someplace better than the room off the boiler, or more than one place, if you want."

"Winky and Dobby have decided to be together, if Master and Mistress approve," Dobby said.

"I approve, of course, Dobby."

Dobby bowed and disappeared.

Chapter V

Sunday, November 24, 1996

It was nearly 10:00 pm, and Colin Potter was pacing the Gryffindor common room. Dean and Ginny were waiting with him; his dorm mates had just left to go to their room.

The full moon was still some six hours away.

Every inch of Colin's skin itched, and his clothes all chaffed. His nose was sensitive to more smells than a human should ever smell. He felt like he should scream and run naked down the corridors. He wondered how his friends would react if he did. Ginny would probably petrify him.

He coughed, although it sounded more like a bark.

Dean sighed and looked at his watch. They were waiting for Harry and Hermione to show up, so Colin could make that long trek to the Shrieking Shack.

It was a horrible walk, not so much the walk itself but the horrors that would await the pair of werewolves at the end. True, under the Wolfsbane Potion, it wasn't nearly as horrible as August had been, but it was bad enough.

Colin wondered how Remus Lupin had survived so long without the potion. Colin stopped and looked at the exit. Some ten seconds later, Harry and Hermione were let in.

"Sorry we're late, Colin," Harry said. "We stopped in to talk with the Headmaster and ran into a meeting with representatives of the Ministry. If Voldemort and his . . . rogues are active tonight, hopefully they'll be ready." Hermione was still harsh on swearing, so Harry was learning to pick his words.

"Okay . . . can we get going?" Colin pleaded.

"Sure."

Dean stood up and hugged Colin, handing him a sack with six blood lollies in it. Colin had asked Dean not to go with them, afraid that would make things even harder. Dean would sleep in the Infirmary, waiting for Colin to return.

Hermione kissed Colin on the cheek. She had felt so tired all day, Harry had insisted she go to bed early. Ginny polished her prefect's badge and went out with Colin and Harry.

"You didn't say earlier," Colin said to Harry, "how did the anti-dementor lessons go yesterday?"

"Pretty well, but I still haven't been taught the third spell." Harry shrugged. "You took the Potion?"

"Yes," Colin said, making an awful face. Harry smiled and wrapped his arm around Colin's shoulders. Ginny walked beside them, feeling a little jealous. She loved Luna and was happy with her as a partner, but a small part of her still wished for Harry.

Fifteen minutes later, the trio met up with Remus and Tonks. Colin and Ginny looked surprised. "I can't stay, but my shift doesn't start until Eleven." She kissed Remus gently and sensuously. She kissed each of the trio on their cheeks, and left. Harry put his hand firmly on Remus' shoulder, and then hugged Colin tightly. Ginny kissed Colin lightly, and Remus led him out into the rainy November night.

"I **hate** this," Harry growled.

Ginny forgot the small pangs of jealousy and simply put her arms around Harry, to comfort and receive comfort. "At least he's not alone," Ginny said. "That's the worst. Colin and I both know you'll never love us as we wish you could, but we know you'll never let us be alone. That you love us in the most important ways."

Harry quietly put his arm around Ginny's shoulders, and walked her back to the common room.

Monday, November 25, 1996

Hermione came down the stairs feeling refreshed. Harry had perhaps taken on more than he could handle, coaching many of the defense groups, especially the DA (now just Fifth through Seventh years), but Hermione was coordinating all the groups, moving upperclass students around to tutor as needed, and making certain there were always enough Sixth and Seventh years available. After an incident with some First and Second year Hufflepuffs, Hermione also made sure certain Slytherins did not tutor unsupervised. Add in all her studies and projects, and worries about Harry, her parents, and a host of other things . . . it was no wonder Hermione had been exhausted.

But now, she was awake and ready to run a few minutes early. Coming down to the common room, she saw Harry was waiting for her, but not dressed to run. "Aren't we running?" she asked Harry.

"No. Or at least I'm not. Ron will take them out today. Go grab a work robe. If you want to, we can both check on Colin and Remus, and then see if there's any news.

"Alright."

The two walked hand-in-hand to the Infirmary. They met up with Madam Pomfrey and Dr. Powell along the way, leading the two stretchers. Remus merely looked like he had spent a very restless night, but Colin looked awful.

Dr. Powell looked inquiringly at Madam Pomfrey, who merely signaled the pair to follow. "Thank you, Doctor Powell," she said to the professor once they were in the Infirmary. "You two, wait here."

They were both allowed to see Remus a few minutes later. He assured them he was as fine as he looked, and that he would be back in the swing of things by lunch.

Only Harry was allowed to see Colin, as Dean was still sleeping. "Rough time?" Harry asked quietly, sitting on the bed.

"Not compared to the first two times," Colin said. "And at least tonight was short. Taking the Potion is awful, but right before . . . the change, it sort of affects you like Muggle cold medicines, you know, the liquid stuff that makes your drowsy."

Harry nodded his understanding.

"But even with the Potion, you don't keep your mind. I'm still no better than a wolf, a drugged wolf at that. Remus says after a few years of taking the potion, you start remembering things more. He still can't think clearly as the wolf, but he can control things a bit. That's how he was able to help save me at least."

Colin took a hold of Harry's hand. "I'm so afraid you and Dean will leave me."

"I won't, and I don't think Dean ever would, either. Can't you hear him snoring at the other end of the Infirmary?" Colin smiled, as Dean was snoring rather loudly. "And neither would Remus, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, or Luna. And how about William Lloyd?"

"Wills?" Colin smiled again. "No, Wills is a true friend."

"See? Most things are horrible," Harry said soberly, "but we still have each other."

"Thanks, Harry."

Harry ruffled Colin's hair, and he left a few moments later, walking towards the Headmaster's Office with Hermione.

"What's bothering you?" Hermione asked when they were about half way there.

"Just thinking about losses." He shrugged and changed the subject slightly. "How do your parents like their new house?" After the Death Eater attack had partially wrecked the Granger home, they had claimed it as fire damage, repaired it, and sold it. They had moved to a new location, where hopefully the Death Eaters wouldn't think to look for them. Fortunately, Voldemort and his remaining followers were ignorant of things like telephone directories, let alone the internet.

"They like it. They aren't too happy I won't be staying with them, but they are planning on joining us for at least part of the vacation."

"Dumbledore wants me to visit the Dursleys at some point."

Hermione understood the unspoken plea. "Not alone," she stated.

Harry managed a smile, and kissed the back of her hand.

They had arrived at the Gargoyle. Harry was about to give the new password, when the entrance opened. Harry and Hermione stopped holding hands and backed up against the wall as a group of very stunned-looking Slytherins, led by Snape, exited. All of them looked like they were in serious shock, and neither Harry nor Hermione dared ask what had happened.

Draco Malfoy glanced up and saw them, and after dropping his eyes for a moment, squared his shoulders and broke away from the group. "Somehow, you're involved in all this, Potter," Malfoy spat. To Harry's surprise, he added, "If you need more help from me, let me know." He marched away, leaving a very stunned pair of Gryffindors.

"Come on!" Harry said to Hermione, and they ran up the stairs.

"Come in!" Dumbledore commanded even before they could knock. "I see you also wish to know what, if anything, happened last night? Well, something did indeed happen. Voldemort must have decided Severus was leaking information. He was fed a false lead, and the Ministry concentrated its forces in the wrong place."

"Where was the right place?" Harry asked, since Hermione seemed unable to ask herself.

"Azkaban and a few other places where we were holding those Death Eaters who were resisting rejoining Voldemort. The dementors Kissed them all. Thirty-nine Death Eaters and twenty-one guards." Dumbledore rested his head in his hands, his elbows on the desk. "Please, spread the word. Try and make certain now one takes public pleasure in their misfortune. The Death Eaters have paid the price for their folly."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said, as she and Harry backed from the room.

No one publicly rejoiced at the fate of the Death Eaters, although some, like Dean and Ron, took some grim satisfaction in it. It wasn't difficult to persuade Ron not to taunt Malfoy, although he did take some slight sadistic pleasure in hovering near Malfoy whenever feasible for the next few days. Ron never said a word or made a rude gesture, but it was clear Malfoy was nervously awaiting some sort of comment.

Finally, Malfoy had demanded to know if Ron had anything to say. "Of course not," Ron said in mock surprise. "Why, I would no more say anything than you would have mentioned any misfortune to one of us . . . last year." His point made, Ron backed down from further confrontation.

On the surface, the Hogwarts students and staff were working together brilliantly. Never had the students paid as close attention in class. Never had the staff worked so closely with the students, or the students worked so well together.

Never had they been so close to fighting each other, as tempers were frayed nearly to the breaking point. It was only the fact that everyone was keeping an eye out for trouble, and none wanted that trouble to break out, that kept the peace. Whenever anyone's temper was about to blow, friends would take care of the person, instead of egging the situation on.

Draco was now more determined than ever to find out who amongst the students was working with Voldemort. There was little doubt what he would attempt to do to any of Voldemort's minions if he could. There were other segments of the student population equally determined to catch Voldemort's agents for similar purposes.

Millicent Bulstrode acted as the agent between these revenge groups. Unknown to them, she also got word to Harry about any small fragment of information they managed to come up with.

In the larger magical world of Britain itself, the island went quiet after the attacks of the 24th and 25th. Between November 24 and December 18, there were nine giant attacks outside of Britain, however. The first was in Norway, the last in northern Russia near the Urals. There were also twelve dementor attacks, starting on November 27. The first had been in Belgium, the last in Tunisia. Each attack had been just a bit further away.

Of course, no one believed that this meant the attacks were going away forever. Most of the students, and their parents, hoped this meant it would at least be safe to have the children visit for the holidays. Dumbledore admitted to Harry that he was worried about most of the students leaving, but there was nothing he could do about it.

The Sixth, Fourth, Second, and First years went through December more irritable than they had been, as each had major exams right before the break. The Fifth and Seventh years might not have had major exams, but they were buried under O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. preparation. Normally, the upper years had at least Hogsmeade weekend to look forward to. This year, Hogsmeade came to the school.

On December 14, most of the merchants set up stalls in the Great Hall. They sold merchandise and took owl orders for Christmas presents. Compared to a Hogsmeade weekend, it was a total let-down. Compared to what the students had been going through, it was a welcome relief. Hermione was especially grateful, as she had gone through a growth spurt and was now almost an inch and a half taller than she had been in August, although just as thin.

Professor Grubbly-Plank had been recalled to Hogwarts in October, and was looking after the owls full-time, making certain they were all both in good health and untraceable. Between the merchants at Hogwarts and postal owl orders, Christmas plans went forward. Hermione also started making arrangements with Mistress Merry to get her parents to Grimmauld Place.

On Monday, Harry and Hermione led the class when tested on their various disillusionment and concealing charms. Hermione was equally happy to get back her test results on the theory, since she had topped the class.

Going to the Care of Magical Creatures class, the Slytherins seemed happy to be turning in their puffskeins. The other students, including the four Gryffindors, were more than a bit sad to be giving up their charges. Even Ron, who had made the least of his puffskein (at least when there was anyone there to see him) had grown very attached to Puffy. Since Professor Law had arranged for the puffskeins to be sent to a magical orphanage in North America,

however, none of the students were more than a little tempted to plead to keep their charges as pets.

Hermione and Harry went off to their hide-away to wait for lunch. The pair simply collapsed on the bed.

"It was just a ball of fluff," Harry said.

"They still weren't even old enough to determine the gender," Hermione agreed.

"I've gotten more emotional feed-back from Hedwig and Crookshanks," Harry declared.

"Aurora kept on waking me up," Hermione complained.

"I know. Why do they wait until the middle of the night to stick their tongue up your nose?" Harry shuddered. "Blech." Then Harry grinned. "Of course, there was the night Puffy, Trevor, and Goldie all tried to stick their tongues up Ron's nose at the same time."

"We all heard that scream," Hermione agreed. She rolled over and hugged Harry closely. "It's silly, but I already miss them." She started to cry gently on Harry's shoulder.

Harry held Hermione tightly, knowing her reaction was only partly caused by the loss of the puffskeins. There was also all the tension produced by the attacks, by the unsolved importation of the trolls and giant, of coordinating all the student defense clubs, of coaching the Fifth year Gryffindors and many of their friends towards their O.W.L.s, of trying to get ahead of this year's work to start on her own N.E.W.T.s, and her worrying about the upcoming holidays. Yes, Harry knew he was shouldering a huge burden, and any number of other ones. Yes, he knew Hermione was carrying nearly as large a load.

And, Harry knew, Hermione carried one other burden. She loved him. She loved someone who would likely die at some point over the next year or two. And, if he didn't die, she would love a killer. 'No,' Harry thought bleakly, 'she already loves a killer.'

A few moments later, Hermione had noticed Harry's attention had wandered. "What are you thinking about, my Harry-bear?"

That caught Harry's attention, and he grimaced. "You know I hate that, Mione."

Hermione smiled and pretended to punch him on the arm. "Stop complaining and start talking."

Harry sighed and hugged her closer. "Sooner or later, I'll have to walk out and challenge Voldemort again. I have to be ready, but I also can't put it off too far. I mean, I can't really feel TOO bad that people like Lucius Malfoy have been destroyed, but there are also innocents being hurt and killed. And we know Voldemort's likely going to set those werewolves on Muggles again. How many more people, innocent or not, are going to be killed or Kissed before I'm ready?"

"I don't know," Hermione told him. "I want this stopped, too. It could be my parents, or my aunts and uncles or grandparents, that he strikes at next. It could be another group of school

children. It could even be me. But, if you go too early, it will not just be you, but all of us anyway. You'll know when it's time."

"I suppose you're right, but it's not an easy answer to live with."

"I know." She looked at Harry. "What else is bothering you?"

Harry sighed. It had always been difficult for them to hold back with each other. "I've already killed once; killing again is not going to be easier. And the Killing Curse . . . used against the troll and the giant felt a lot different than using it against a bug or a lizard. I hope I don't have to use it again."

"It's never good to kill," Hermione agreed. "However, sometimes, there really isn't much alternative. I'm still hoping there's some way for you to simply turn Voldemort's power against him, so that he destroys himself."

"A more complete outcome than when he killed my parents?"

"Exactly," Hermione agreed. "If it's out there, I'll find it. I swear it, Harry. And if I don't, I'll still be with you."

Harry reminded himself that not all of Hermione's time in the library was spent on her own studies and tutoring. "I thought you said you were trying to get ahead on your N.E.W.T.s?"

Hermione shrugged as well as she could, considering she was laying in Harry's embrace. "I'm sure the knowledge will be useful somewhere on the exams."

Harry hugged Hermione tightly. The pair sighed, and got off the bed to go to lunch.

Technically, Harry had a quiz in the Muggle Studies class. Since it was on a book he knew well (Lord of the Flies), he hadn't been too worried. He scored a 19 out of 20, good enough to get him out of the review on Wednesday.

Dr. Powell walked out of the class with Harry, going off to practice dueling and the anti-dementor spells. As the other students had started the many dueling/combat meetings, Harry's friends had been diverted from practicing with him to helping the other students. At first, it had been Harry alone just one day a week, but now it was Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

"Any chance of learning that third anti-dementor spell, Doctor Powell?"

"No, but only because we'll need to work on it several days in a row, once you get started. No, today we're going to take things up a notch and consider teaching you the final spell in January."

"So what are we doing what?" Harry asked.

Powell smiled a cold smile that would have done his uncle proud. "My uncle, Professor Snape, and I are going to fight you and Professor Lupin. You're decent, even by hit-wizard standards, fighting solo. Now it's time to see how you function as part of a group."

"Three against two?" Harry asked in shock.

"There are still some Death Eaters around, and they don't play fair, Harry. And neither will we."

Chapter VI

Technically, desks as well as tables in the library were available on a 'first come, first served' basis. In reality, some of the desks were granted to hard-working researchers. Usually, these were Ravenclaws. It was not unknown, however, for a few students from the other Houses to be ceded one.

Hermione had had the same one since her Third year, when she had been researching a defence for Buckbeak, the hippogryff. While Harry was taking his quiz and dueling in the dungeon, Hermione was planning on working on five different research projects in the nearly deserted library.

So engrossed was she within minutes that she jumped a little when she finally noticed a shadow looking over her shoulder. "Professor Snape?" she asked in surprise, when she'd managed to look up.

"Miss Granger." Snape sat down in a chair next to her. "Were you aware that taking some books in the restricted section off the shelves cause a notice to be sent to various members of the staff?"

"No, I wasn't," she answered calmly.

Snape reached past her and gently pulled a thin volume out from underneath one of the piles of books on the back of the desk. "This is one. Have you found the answers you were looking for?" He glanced at it. "The Wedding Night Potion: A History of Why Witches Wait." He glanced at her.

"I'm not certain. I mean, it's difficult to believe that it has to be . . . that blood. Chemically, why should it be different?"

"I'm not certain if it is different or not, and if it is, why. There may be a different concentration of hormones present, or it may come from the flow of magical energy, or both. May I ask why this is a concern?"

Hermione flushed a little. "It's not what you probably think."

"That would be good to know. I approve of this movement you have helped to start, bringing a greater awareness of wizarding culture to Muggle-borns. It would be . . . good to know your interest isn't merely academic."

"It's not. Not in general, or in this case." Hermione had to think several moments (since she was still rather tired from the extra work she was putting into this and into ideas to help Harry defeat Voldemort, run the DA, and all her other projects, done on top of her immaculate studying) and then addressed Professor Snape. "Voldemort has put a price on your head."

"True." Now that Snape had been proven a traitor, Voldemort wanted Snape rather badly.

"What would you do if you met some woman and fell in love with her over the next few months? When everything is still up in the air and you're a hunted man?"

"I rather doubt I shall ever fall in love again, Miss Granger. However, let's agree to your supposition. We might decide, with the end of our world perhaps at hand, to be . . . impetuous."

"Possibly," Hermione agreed, "but wouldn't you be more likely to put some things off, like children if not marriage, under those circumstances?"

"Probably," Snape agreed. "Go on."

"But she would really like to have your child, if not now, then in the future. Even if you do not survive."

Snape looked puzzled. "How. . . ?"

"Oh, Muggles have been able to do that with farm animals since the 1940s, if not earlier, and developed more advanced ways of helping mothers conceive back in the 1970s."

"Really?" Snape seemed both interested and impressed.

"Really. Shall I gather some information for you?"

"Yes, thank you." He looked at her. "So, you intend. . . ?"

"I intend to take Harry to a clinic I know of, where he will donate at least two samples over time. If Harry defeats Voldemort, but is killed, or is killed by His forces later on, and I survive, I will have Harry's child later on. I believe I have a method to create the Wedding Night Potion, and to make it effective, at least enough to promote the odds of our having a magical child, even if Harry and I do not have a wedding night."

Snape looked at Hermione strangely. At last, he stood up. "I doubt if that need ever be a concern of any child the two of you might have. If you need guardians to accompany you, for Potter's protection, I will be available over the holidays. I will also loan you a more detailed work."

"Thank you. Will you be riding the train on Saturday?"

Snape actually smiled. "I will be now. Good afternoon, Miss Granger." He left to make the dueling match.

Hermione shook her head. 'Not even Luna would believe this!'

Harry came out of his dueling exhausted and slightly bruised. Hermione had met him at the entrance to the dungeons and guided him into her hide-away, where they could enjoy a long soak in the tub, and then Harry was able to have a short nap before dinner.

After dinner, Harry had no choice but to study. He had to study anatomy, as they were having a test the next morning on all the muscles, tendons, and cartilage, and how they connected. A score of 90% was required to carry-on through the next term in the course. There was also a

major test on transfiguration theory that would require more thinking, if slightly less memorization.

When Harry stumbled out of the Medical class the next day, he was mentally exhausted. Hermione had finished early, and was waiting for him. "How do you think you did?" she asked. "I'm certain I did well on the anatomy, I mean, I've been studying that since I knicked . . . err, borrowed some of my parents' books when I was nine. But I'm not certain how complete my answer was to that third transfiguration question. . . ."

As Hermione prattled on, a tired Harry managed to lead her around a corner. Seeing they were alone, Harry grabbed Hermione and kissed her firmly as she was trying to explain the connections only she could see between the transfiguration theories and their anatomy lessons for the eighth time in the last two days.

Hermione gave a muffled 'squack' sound as she tried to keep up the explanation, but she quickly realized what was happening. Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry and returned the kiss with deep enthusiasm.

They surfaced back into reality a few minutes later. "I was doing it again, wasn't I?" Hermione said apologetically. She knew Harry and Ron hated it when she recapped exams in detail.

Harry kissed Hermione's nose and just smiled. Hermione hugged Harry again, and laid her head against his chest and smiled back. This was a much nicer way of ending her talking than picking a fight, which Ron had used to shut her up.

"Shall we have an early lunch, so we can cuddle before we practice with Mistress Merry?" Harry asked.

"Cuddling only," Hermione said. "I think it's time I told you about an idea I have for Saturday."

Harry stared at Hermione at amazement.

"Harry, could you at least blink?"

Harry blinked. Once.

"Are you alright?"

"You . . . you're serious?"

Hermione smiled gently, and stroked the underside of Harry's jaw. "Yes, Harry. I'm serious. If I survive, I am determined to have your children, or at least child. Not soon. Not next year or the year after. But someday. If it's alright with you."

"Wow." Harry was stunned, to say the least. "Is it legal?" Harry finally asked. "I mean, considering we're underage?"

"My uncle runs the clinic," Hermione stated. "He's the only person in my family, besides my parents, who knows about magic. He knows about you, even though he doesn't know that the girl is me. And I trust him not to tell Mum and Dad when he figures it all out."

"And how does he know about magic?" Harry asked.

"Well, he was tickling me the spring before we started school, and I got mad and his hair fell out."

"All at once?"

Hermione nodded. "Even his mustache, eye brows, and, well, apparently everything. We got a visit from the Ministry that afternoon, and they explained about magic. My parents convinced them not to Obliviate him."

Harry was still too shocked to go into the details of why Hermione would wish such a thing. "How will we get there?" he finally asked.

"I talked with Professor Dumbledore yesterday. We'll take the Underground from the station to the clinic, and then go from the clinic to a few stores. After shopping, we take a taxi to Grimmauld Place. He said as long as we take Tonks or Snape along, there's no problem. Tonks agreed, and Snape will be coming along, too."

Harry looked at Hermione in horror. "You . . . you mean Tonks and SNAPE are going to know I'm going to . . . to be in some little room and . . . well, into some little cup?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Hermione admitted. "But please, for me, Harry?" She batted her eyes. "If you do, we can try to blend our magics together over the holiday. We'll stop at a chemist pick up some lubricant, and we can finally try Greek. We can try both! You've wanted to do both since August."

The images flowed through Harry's mind, and he would have agreed to almost anything.

Both Harry and Hermione had made some strides in wandless magic. Spells which needed complicated wand-work were well beyond them (and nearly all other practitioners for that matter). Both had made great strides in summoning spells and shields, however.

At the end of the lessons, Mistress Merry praised them, and then told them, "I shall not be seeing you Thursday. I may see you Sunday, when I help escort Miss Hermione's parents to your home." She smiled at Hermione. "When I come to take them back, I hope to see that lovely ring on the correct hand."

"What was that about?" Harry asked after the old witch had left.

"Once I tell my parents about us, well. . . ."

"You'll move the ring from your right hand to the left?"

"I'm going to consider it, anyway, if you wouldn't mind."

"I won't." They left together to supervise some of the younger students' independent defense work.

Hermione spent Wednesday morning going through the stacks of books she had from the library. She was shocked to find she had 117 books checked out. She knew she was well-over the limit (25), but hadn't realized how much she had taken advantage of the special permission the Headmaster had allowed her that year. Hermione finally returned 93 of the books, and requested permission to take six with her on vacation. Madam Pince wrinkled her nose, but agreed.

For once, Hermione was glad she didn't have that much class work to do over the vacation. There was no new work for Charms, Medicine, Transfiguration, Care, or Defense, only review. She would have a translation for Runes/Ancient Languages and some Arithmancy, but not too much. She had her own research projects, and wanted to spend some real time with her parents as well as with Harry.

After lunch, the entire Medical class made their way towards the Infirmary. There were twelve students in the class, and came from each House. Neville, Harry, and Hermione were pushed towards the front when they saw the grades weren't posted yet. "One of you three should ask," Zabini stated.

"Why us?" Neville demanded.

"Granger has done the best in anatomy," Tracy Davis told them, "and you always have the answers whenever Granger doesn't get to answer." Neville smiled nervously at that -- he knew he didn't usually test well, no matter how well he knew the information.

"And Potter, you've been in the Infirmary more than anyone else," Blaise drawled, "you MUST have made friends by now."

"Fine," Harry growled. He came out a few minutes later with a handful of folded parchments.

"Let's wait and open them together," Susan said, anxiously. Everyone nodded nervously.

Harry passed them out. "Abbott, Bones, Boot, Davis, Finch-Fletchley, Goldstein, Granger, Longbottom, Macmillan, Turpin, Zabini."

Everyone looked and sighed. They stared at each other with averted eyes.

"Oh, bother," Hermione said. She opened the paper, and everyone else did the same. Every gave a small sigh of relief.

"We all made it?" Hannah asked.

"Two hundred and seventy out of three hundred," Neville said. "Just made it." Everyone announced their scores, and they had all made it. Ernie and Tracy had also both just made it. Harry was satisfied with his 279. Hermione had had the only perfect score.

"So, are we going to need some of this for Defense?" Susan teased. All the Medical people except for Tracy were in the N.E.W.T. Defense class. Harry was scheduled to test everyone's mutual shield spells, while Professor Law supervised.

"That's up to you," Harry retorted. "With Law looking on, I certainly can't pull my punches."

"And I suppose you can't tell us which hexes you're going to use?" Ernie asked.

"Nothing Unforgivable," Harry said with an evil smile. "And you all get tested separately."

"You're a right bastard, Potter," Seamus growled late that afternoon.

"We practiced all those hexes," Harry protested to his fellow Gryffindors. "You each defeated them! I picked hexes I thought you would all beat and look really good doing it!"

"Sorry we let you down," Lavender almost snarled. "I don't think Law was impressed when I landed on my arse."

Harry sighed. Seamus, unable to keep an idea unexpressed, said, "I'm sure he was very impressed by your arse."

In part to divert Lavender's wrath, and in part to defend himself, Harry quickly said, "You all completely blocked at least three hexes, and nobody completely blocked all five."

"Did your stinger get everyone?" Neville asked. That had been the one spell he hadn't completely blocked.

"Yes," Harry answered, "and I don't understand that. I've seen you all block them before; even last year you all blocked them!"

Neville smiled, and took them into an unused classroom. "Parvati, fling a stinger against the far wall."

Parvati looked thoughtful, but did as she was told. A small bluish-indigo blob went from her wand to the wall, hitting with a splat!

"Ron, you do it."

Ron shrugged, and a slightly smaller, faster, and more indigo blob was flung to the wall, hitting with a slightly higher-sounding splat. Neville then performed the same spell, and an even smaller, faster blob of pure indigo raced across the room. SPLAT!

"Now you, Harry."

Faster than the eye could really follow, a spot of purplish-indigo whizzed across the room. **SPLAT!** It actually left a small mark on the wall.

"You saw us stop OUR stingers, Harry. You've become a lot more powerful than any of us. Our shields couldn't handle yours."

Harry flushed. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"Don't be silly," Parvati told him.

"We're GLAD you're getting so powerful," Lavender agreed.

"Just don't demonstrate it on us too often," Dean put in.

For Harry, Thursday and Friday were busy days, although as far as Hogwarts was concerned he merely had to pack his clothes and study materials. He had never appreciated how much work it was to organize a household. Hermione, Dean, and Colin would be at Grimmauld Place the entire two week period, and both Tonks and Lupin probably would be as well. Ginny and Luna would be there most of the time. Ron and Henrietta would be splitting their time between Grimmauld Place and the safe house the Ministry was providing the Weasleys. The Grangers, the Weasleys, and perhaps even Bill, Fleur, and the twins would be spending part of their time with Harry, and Order members would be dropping in at unexpected times. Dumbledore had even mentioned that he and his brother would try to spend Christmas Eve with Harry.

All this meant Harry and Dobby had to decide on meals, seating and bedding arrangements, et cetera. Harry was thankful that Percy hadn't fully reconciled with his parents, and would be spending Christmas with Penny's parents (who were a well-hidden Muggle and a Squib) and that Charlie wouldn't make it either.

Saturday, December 21, 1996

This was the first time Harry had left on the train for the winter break. Most of the younger students, especially the first years, were really excited to be going home. The older students were quiet, worried about the dangers they were going into, and that their parents had been living with since September at the least.

There was a strong adult presence: Lupin; Law; Powell; Snape; Hagrid (who was going on to France for the holiday); and Flitwick were aboard, as were Tonks and three other aurors.

Harry and his seven friends from the summer were in one compartment. Ron spent most of the ride trying to pry the purpose of Harry and Hermione's side trip (since they wouldn't be directly traveling to Grimmauld Place, it had roused all their curiosity, but only Ron wouldn't let it go).

Once they arrived at the station, Tonks and Remus herded the friends off to Grimmauld Place. Tonks and Dumbledore had decided the larger group needed the extra protection. While they waited for a taxi, Harry, Hermione, and Snape quickly walked to the Underground station (they had left their luggage with Remus to deal with). In less than an hour, they had gone to the clinic, concluded their business (which had still left Harry very quiet and embarrassed, especially when Snape and Hermione had persisted in discussing the scientific methodology to and from the area), and Harry and Hermione had picked up packages they had ordered from some nearby shops, and made just one impromptu stop plus their planned visit to the chemist. Thirty minutes later, they had arrived at Grimmauld Place.

To their surprise, they found the entire group in the entrance hall, where Mrs. Black had obviously been shouting for some time. "What's the problem?" Harry shouted over the din.

"Moody won't let us go any further," Remus shouted over the yelling Mrs. Black.

Harry rounded on the portrait. "SILENCE! THIS IS NO LONGER THE HOUSE OF BLACK! THIS IS THE HOUSE OF POTTER, BY LAW AND BY INHERITANCE!"

The portrait stopped yelling. "No," she said softly, "no, that can't be true."

Harry raised his hands, his wand pointed high. "As there are no longer any of the Black family who go by that name, and I was willed this property by my godfather, your rule is over here. I command that your spells be lifted!" Harry's wand came down in a rainbow of sparks.

The painting fell to the floor. "**NOOOOOOOOOOO!**" she screamed. "This is **MY** house for eternity!"

Dean stepped forward and said a spell very softly. The portrait froze. "Sorry," he said, "that wouldn't have worked while she was stuck on the wall. The painting is now just a painting, until reactivated." He grimaced. "Hope I don't get a notice for that!"

"Underage magic won't be detected here," Moody said. "Now, nobody moves until someone explains to me why the top floor and the attic are sealed off!"

"Because they're our private quarters," Harry answered. "Only Hermione, Colin, Dean, and myself, and our elves, may enter. Dobby!"

Dobby appeared. "Yes, Master Harry?"

"Explain to Mister Moody why the spells that keep him out of the top floors also protect us." Harry turned to Moody. "I explained all this to the Headmaster, and thought he would explain it to you."

"He did, lad, but he didn't tell me it would be impenetrable! It wasn't when I got rid of that boggart in the attic a few weeks ago!" He thought a moment. "Come along in here, elf, and talk to me. You lot, stay out of the top floor until I finish talking here!"

"Why?" Snape asked. "This sort of protection, coupled with the Fidelius, should be more than sufficient."

"Should be, but that doesn't mean it is!" Moody whisked Dobby into the front room. Snape, Tonks, and Remus went with them.

"Winky!" Harry called.

"Yes, Mister Harry?" she answered, appearing with a 'pop'.

"Could you show the guests to their rooms, and then take care of the luggage, please?"

Winky led most of the students upstairs, while Dean lifted the painting up to examine it. When the four were left alone in the entrance hall, Harry joined Dean and examined the painting.

"I'm glad it worked," Hermione said.

"Well, you, Dean, and Dumbledore all told me the formula. How could you all be wrong?" Harry asked, smiling.

"Just be glad I had borrowed those books on magical painting," Dean pointed out.

"I'm still shocked there weren't any in the library," Hermione complained.

"It's not THAT big a library," Dean pointed out, to Hermione's displeasure. "Come on! Compared to any half-decent Muggle research library, Hogwarts' is pretty sparse."

"I always figured it was because the magical world is still a lot more secretive, almost medieval, in its approach to knowledge," Colin put in.

"You are quite correct, Mister Potter," Snape said, coming into the hallway. "Even today, it often takes decades for some discoveries to become common knowledge. How many Muggle publishers are there, just in Britain? There are really just two commercial wizarding presses in London, one in Scotland, and one in Ireland, plus one in Wales which publishes in both Welsh and English. Most small-run books come from hobbyists."

"True," Hermione said with a sigh. The other adults also came out of the parlor. She roused herself, remembering she should be helping Harry and act as hostess. "Professor Snape, Mister Moody, will you be joining us for dinner? And staying the night?"

Snape looked at Moody, who sighed. "Aye, lass. Thank you. Your elf is very persuasive. And I'll be here at least until your parents arrive."

"I would be pleased to stay for dinner," Snape added.

"Dobby?" Hermione inquired. Dobby stuck his head around the corner.

"Yes, Miss Hermione?"

"We will have two more guests for dinner, and Mister Moody will be at least staying the night." She frowned slightly. "When is dinner?"

"Fifty minutes, Miss?"

"That would be fine. If you would excuse us, we need to change for dinner." Hermione turned to Harry, who hurried to her side, allowed her to take his arm, and together they ascended the stairs.

Dean and Colin looked at each other, snorted, and followed them, hand-in-hand.

When they were out of sight, Moody turned to Snape, "That is certainly the most interesting combination of brains, grace, and talent I have ever seen in a witch her age."

"She has developed depths this term I never would have anticipated," Snape admitted. Willing to sacrifice oneself for the perpetuation of a wizarding line, especially one as old as the Potters, was a goal most modern witches, especially Muggle-borns, did not appreciate. Snape had decided that despite her birth, Hermione really was worthy of the respect her abilities demanded. That Hermione's motivations were different than the ones Snape attributed to her would have made little difference to him had he known, since the result was the same.

Chapter VII

Sunday, December 22, 1996

Hermione Granger stretched slowly and languorously in the huge bed. Since she had first arrived at Hogwarts, Hermione had felt like a fish out of water, no matter where she was. She loved her parents, but once she had gone back to her parents that Christmas of her first year, she hadn't thought of their house as home.

Neither had Hogwarts been her home. The Weasleys, Grimmauld Place the previous year, and the cabin the previous summer, had also failed to fulfill an intense need deep inside her.

It wasn't that she didn't love her parents; she did, intensely. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy being with the Weasleys or living at Hogwarts. She did. Upon months of reflection, over the course of her Third through Fifth years, Hermione had finally realized she couldn't feel at home at any of those places, because they were all one thing or the other -- Muggle or magical. She was now a child of both, and she wanted to live in both.

And she had always known she didn't want to live alone, no matter how alone she had often felt as a child. Ever since she had woken up from being petrified, freed of her crush on Lockhart, Hermione had realized that there was a good chance of her ending up with either Ron or Harry. For the first three years she had felt closer to Harry, but from her Third year through the middle of her Fourth, she had despaired of attracting either boy as more than a friend.

During most of her Fourth year and all of her Fifth, Ron had seemed the more likely candidate -- she and Ron, joined together to help Harry. She had come to decide at the end their Fifth year, however, that Ron was a bit too needy and selfish. Their fights, which she had always hoped would evolve into witty banter, had devolved into petty arguments. Perhaps worst of all, their embraces, although pleasant, had never really turned Hermione on physically. When Ron had blown up about her visiting Viktor, Hermione had let the romantic part of the relationship go without regret.

She had also regretfully written Harry off as dating material long before, which was why Harry's tentative letter had confused her so much. Her mother and Tonks had seen what she hadn't; between her mother's timely advice and Tonk's opportune shove, Hermione had found her true love, then her career and her future. And now Harry only had to look at her and she was tempted to drop everything, even study, to rush into his embrace.

The previous evening had opened Hermione's eyes to other horizons of her future. She had coaxed Harry into dressing up, and she had done the same, and they had played host and hostess. Or at least they had started off that way. By the end of the evening, they hadn't been playing.

Hermione stretched again, and rolled over. An equally nude Harry laid next to her, sleeping quietly. The lines of tension that had been with Harry even during his sleep the previous summer were now mostly gone. Harry had in part grown into his responsibilities, and now had a support network that he trusted whom he could share some of those responsibilities with.

She knew those responsibilities; she had known them for some time. The night before, however, they had merged their magics together. This was an act that wasn't necessarily sexual, although it heightened a person's awareness of the physical contact with the partner necessary for the merging to work. It allowed a glimpse into the magical powers of the other person, and more importantly it allowed the partners to feel the other person's psyche, feelings, and personality, although not any of their thoughts. In its own way, it was as intimate as sex or mutual Legilimency. In some ways, it was more intimate than both together.

Hermione now knew how much Harry loved her, and how powerful, passionate, honorable, and just plain good Harry was. And Harry knew her, too.

As she remembered and watched, Harry woke up. Seeing Hermione, Harry embraced her, and they both forgot that the pair of them had been planning on running that morning, even though the others weren't.

Harry and Hermione managed to get dressed and out of their bedroom by 7:15. They had both been tired the night before, and so Hermione had not been able to look at her and Harry's other rooms. They explored them now.

The floor had a not a not uncommon floor plan for the mid-to-late Victorian period, when the House of Black and the rest of Grimmauld Place had been rebuilt on an old site long in the Black family. There were two bright rooms in the front of the house, and two in the back. There were lightly-frosted transoms over each door, letting some light into the two side rooms on one side and into the two bath rooms and the stairs on the other. Gas lights were everywhere.

Harry and Hermione shared the smaller of the two back rooms (or perhaps the slightly less roomy chamber, since it was still some 20 x 25 feet). A bed, the widest Hermione had ever seen in person, three wardrobes (two for her and one for Harry), two dressers (a high one for Harry; a wider, shorter dresser for her with a silent mirror), a small bookcase, a pair of night stands on either side of the bed, and, between the windows, a stuffed chair with a pouffe, a table, and a padded rocking chair. The plastered walls were painted a dark yellow, the curtains dark crimson. The Persian carpets picked up those colors, and added living greens. There were no magical or Muggle works of art on the walls, although there was room for them.

The room next door was Hermione's study. This was partially set up as a mere study and partially as an office for ROMP. There were wooden Muggle file cabinets as well as rows of pigeon holes for owled letters, and of course lots of bookcases. There were also a pair of large desks. Again, there was no magical or Muggle art work, although here there was little room.

The other room bordering the study was Hermione's library. Some two-thirds of the books which had been scattered around Grimmauld Place had been burned by Sirius or confiscated the previous summer. The remaining books had been collected and filled a small portion of the room. Hermione eyed the empty space with a mixture of sadness and anticipation.

Harry's study was between Hermione's library and Colin's study in the front of the house. It had elements of both Hermione's study and library, although with a very different color scheme. Winky had found three old flying brooms, two pre-dating the development of the

modern racing broom. These were mounted over the desk. Dobby had found the true prize in the attic, however -- an unfinished portrait of a fifteen year old Sirius Black. Since it was unfinished, it had no movement and certainly couldn't speak. Harry, finally seeing the actual painting, was very grateful to Dobby.

As for their bathroom, they decided it (and all the others in the house) would have to be remodeled at some point. Still, it was functional.

Harry and Hermione finished dressing and made their way down to the breakfast room. Winky had set up a buffet. Copies of The Daily Prophet, The Sunday Times, and several other Muggle journals were available to read. Over the next half hour, all the others made it downstairs and each, in their own way, were a bit surprised as what they saw.

Grimmauld Place was a slightly chilly, drafty house. Hermione had seen a period clothing store the day before, and she had decided they should dress appropriately for the house. Hermione was dressed in a long violet high-necked dress, wearing a string of pearls. While Harry was wearing khaki trousers and a blue flannel shirt, he had found a dark crimson velvet smoking jacket the day before. It could have looked very silly, but instead it looked right. The rest of the household, as they drifted in, realized that Harry and Hermione hadn't just been playing the night before. They really were in charge.

After breakfast, Hermione led the group into the front drawing room on the ground floor. When Mrs. Black's portrait had fallen the evening before, the tapestry on the first floor had fallen as well. Dobby had previously painted the rest of the sitting rooms and hall ways a bright green. During the night, Dobby had painted over the peeling olive paint and had moved the rolled-up tapestry down to the ground floor.

"What are you going to do with the tapestry?" Ron asked, looking at it standing in a corner.

Harry thought a moment. "When the war is over, we'll give it to Malfoy."

"Why wait?" Henrietta asked, curious.

"You don't know exactly where we are, do you?" Harry asked.

"No, I had to keep my eyes closed." While Henrietta's father was an active and trusted auror, she hadn't been totally filled in on the details of the Order.

"Giving away the tapestry might signal the location to some people," Hermione explained.

"The Fidelius charm would still hide the actual location, but they could surround the area and trap us."

"Oh . . . that makes sense."

"Anyway," Harry said, "the reason why we're here . . . give me a hand, Ron." They moved an old empire-style sofa a few feet to the side, opening up the outside corner of the room.

"Alright Winky, signal Dobby."

Winky nodded from the doorway leading to the dining room in the back of the house. An instant later, a tall Christmas tree, its roots in a large clay pot, appeared in the corner. Hermione again signaled, and soon a swarm of fairies swept into the room, and made their home inside the tree, blinking and twinkling.

"Mister Moody?" Hermione asked, "would you care to make the first ornament?"

Moody looked shocked. After a moment, he smiled and hobbled over to the tree, and created a small delicate orange and pink glass ball. Each person added a glass ornament of their own. "The rule is, each person may add one ornament each time they come in the room. We'll finish it off, if we have to, Christmas Eve," Hermione told them. "You'll be with us through Christmas, I hope?" she asked Moody.

"Really?" Moody asked.

"Of course," Harry said warmly.

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll stay through the late evening of Christmas Eve. Then, I'll be taking the shifts of some aurors with families for that night and the next two days."

"Your parents will be here at Eleven, right?" Harry verified.

"That's right, why?" Hermione asked.

"I have an errand to run. Remus is coming along, so I'll be safe. Let me go change."

"Shall I come along, Potter?" Moody asked.

"If you want to," Harry answered, already out of the room. "Wear your coat and bowler!" Ten minutes later, Harry was back, wearing a Muggle suit, a leather driving cap that covered his scar, and an overcoat. "I promise we'll make it back by eleven," he told Hermione, kissing her cheek.

"What's that all about?" Ginny demanded.

"I have no idea," Hermione admitted. "If anyone wants to put gifts under the tree, go ahead. I'm going to get mine."

Harry was as good as his word. He and Remus arrived at 10:40, carrying a small chest between them. Each also had a large garment bag in their other hand, while Moody clomped along behind them with a grin on his face. Harry managed to hide his mysterious burdens and was downstairs just as a pre-Great War Rolls Royce pulled up to the curb. The scene seemed to shimmer for a moment, showing someone had cast a distraction spell, preventing the Muggles from noticing what went on. Mister Diggle popped out, and led Mrs. Granger, her eyes closed, up to the front door. Emmeline Vance, another member of the Order that Harry recognized, escorted Mr. Granger. Mr. Granger had a valise in his other hand, while Hestia Jones, another Order member, carried a larger suitcase and brought up the rear. Harry and Moody opened the door.

As soon as Hestia Jones crossed the threshold, the street seemed to shimmer again, and the Rolls pulled away. As soon as the door was closed, Hermione threw herself into her parents' arms, which they happily reciprocated. Harry drew the three Order members into the drawing room and invited them to add a Christmas ornament. Emmeline Vance, a rather stately witch, hesitated, but the irrepressible Diggle and young Jones hurried over to joyfully add an ornament to Harry Potter's Christmas tree. Emmeline then strode over and added a crystal blue star. All three agreed to stay for lunch.

In fact, they had stayed until the Weasleys arrived a little after 5:00. Molly Weasley was a bit put out at first when she found that she had been dispossessed in the kitchen, but Arthur convinced her to look upon this as a vacation. She was also a bit disturbed to learn she was expected to just be a guest. There was no doubt that she was no longer in charge of the house, as she had mostly been the year before. The house was Harry's, and he and Hermione had taken it firmly in charge.

Emma Granger had studied her daughter over luncheon (it seemed far too formal to be called 'lunch') and dinner. Her daughter appeared and acted much more than five months older than when she'd last set eyes on her. It wasn't just that her daughter was now the same height as herself. She seemed more relaxed inside her skin than she had ever been.

If anything, Emma thought, Hermione reminded her of her own mother. Her father had been a Church of England cleric who had married a young Oxford bluestocking while he was in his forties. She remembered the countless times her mother had acted as a hostess much like her daughter was. 'How can you stand it?' she'd asked her mother once, when home from University. 'You had a First in Classics! You had a fine mind!'

Her mother had looked at her with a small smile. 'And I still use that mind every day. I still study, and I apply my mind to solving the everyday problems around us; 'us' meaning the parishioners as well as our family. I'm more than a hostess, as you would know if you ever paid attention. Since you don't pay attention, you may not have noticed I reminded the Mayor of an up-coming meeting and why it was important, settled a dispute about the Hunt Ball, managed to talk three women into chairing committees that will actually get some work down, and convinced your brother that the Beatles look was five years out of date.' Hermione had done much the same sort of work here, making all the guests feel at ease, even some who had seemed determined to feel out-of-place.

It had been even harder to believe the changes in Harry. It had once been hard to believe that Harry, whom she had only previously seen as a skinny, short, poorly-dressed ragamuffin, could be the savior of the wizarding, and perhaps her own, world. He now presented a well-dressed, and even formidable appearance, even if he was still hardly an imposing physical presence. In direct discussion, however, those intense green eyes nearly mesmerized her, and she realized that there was indeed immense power there. Young Harry had played the role of host well, and had first stared down and then consoled the volatile Molly Weasley, who had wanted to take back the role of housekeeper and universal mother.

While Harry had stared down Molly Weasley, Hermione had cajoled both her own mother and Mrs. Weasley into their roles as guests. Hermione had also managed to keep Ron Weasley cosseted when he had seemed bored, kept the three younger teen girls happily

helping her, made the three escorts welcome, and made her parents feel comfortable around the disturbing Moody and the two house elves.

It was a bit difficult for the Grangers to grasp that two of the nicest members of the company were werewolves. The point had been driven home with the rather frightening Professor Snape had appeared with the potion which would keep the pair calm at the next full moon, which would be a little after 9:00 Christmas Eve.

It had also been a shock to Mrs. Granger to realize that urchin Harry had done more than transformed his appearance. This house, wherever it was, was large and nicely decorated. It spoke of money and taste (she had been very surprised to learn most of the 'taste' had been Harry's and Dobby's, with only a little input from Hermione). At dinner, the company had been stunned by a totally new set of Wedgwood china and new silver settings, both custom-made. Harry had explained he had had the old china and silver sold off, and had used the proceeds to partially pay for the new (including matching stainless steel settings for Colin and Remus). Still, the trade-off could have cost Harry a few thousand pounds. (It actually had brought Harry a net gain, as there had been many sets of silver, but he didn't think that was anyone's business except Hermione's).

All told, Emma Granger realized that her daughter had decided she had found the love of her life and the niche she wanted to fill. It was always a bit disconcerting for a parent to learn their child has picked out a mate and a career with such a sense of purpose, especially with the child is just sixteen. Emma just hoped Hermione wouldn't be hurt or disappointed.

She sat on the bed with a sigh.

Her husband sat next to her. He understood that sigh. "If it was anyone other than Hermione, I would be worried," he said, easily reading his wife. "I really think she knows what she's doing."

"I am worried about what she's likely doing right now," Emma complained.

"Remember that pamphlet they sent us? If witches are supposed to wait, I'm sure she will."

"I was hoping she'd go to a real university, not some vague apprenticeship," Emma complained. "Now, it's not even certain she'll do that."

"Nonsense! I reminded her she could go to University while living here. She told me was still researching degree programs. She's going to be a rights activist, and isn't certain what degree would help her the most."

"Our daughter, the activist." Emma sighed. "Well, it could be worse."

"We'll sign her up for Greenpeace and Amnesty International, and see where events lead us."

Monday and Tuesday morning went by in something of the blur for most of the inhabitants of the House of Potter. Numerous members of the Order came and went, most stopping by at least once to add to the Christmas tree. (Moody checked it periodically 'just in case'. Luna

thought he just liked looking at the tree and having an excuse to add ornaments.) Bill and Fleur stopped in Monday evening for dinner. They were acting as couriers to some Order members on the continent, and would spend part of the holidays with Fleur's relatives.

Mid-Tuesday afternoon, however, Harry and Hermione went for a walk in the back garden. No one had paid much attention to the garden or the large mews behind it during their previous stay. The 'garden' had been a lawn of weeds, and the mews had been probably been abandoned since Sirius' grandfather's time. All were covered by the charm, however.

"This looks a lot nicer than it did eighteen months ago," Hermione remarked. The weeds had been cut back, revealing the gravel path to the mews. Parts of the lawn had been turned over, so that it could be planted to herbs in the early spring.

The mews was a three-sided building, forming a horseshoe pointing towards the main house. It had been repainted and the roof and windows had been repaired. The center would have been the actual stables and carriage house, with a hayloft over the end. The left side would have been the wash house, the right for the groom and coachman.

"I'd originally thought we might turn this either into a separate place for Colin, or a guest house. In the short term, though, it would take way too much time and labor to fix it over for people."

"What did you fix it up for, then?"

"Not for a what," Harry said, opening in the door.

Hermione walked past him and into what had been the carriage area. Thirty-three eyes looked at Hermione, who stared back. "What. . . ?"

"This is the Mistress?" a little, high, nervous voice asked, "the other one who wants us?"

"Harry? Harry, where did these elves come from?"

Eighteen heads drooped in shame. "We's bad house elves." Eighteen hands slapped eighteen foreheads. "Bad! Bad! BAD!" seventeen voices called out.

"Stop that!" Harry commanded. He turned to Hermione. "Some people, when they're angry with their elves, hurt them and then, because they're ashamed at how badly they hurt them, give them clothes and throw them out. I had Dobby pass the word that they could gather here. Some helped out with the restorations, under Dobby's directions." Harry gestured. "They're from all over Europe, not just Britain."

Hermione walked into the group of elves. Three were missing an eye, nine others were missing at least part of one finger, one was missing three. One was on a crutch, having only half a foot. All had scars, from cuts or whips or rope burns -- or all three. The youngest had had an ear mostly ripped off. One of the elves missing an eye had also had his throat cut, and couldn't speak.

"What do free elves want?" Harry asked.

"House elves wants to work!" they chorused.

"And to work, what must you be?"

"Healthy!"

Harry smiled. "That's right. You all work to help each other to become healthy."

"Yes, Master Harry!"

"Is this the other one who wants us?" the young elf with the torn ear repeated.

"We both want you, and we both want to help you," Harry answered.

"And we will help, you and all your kind, as best we can," Hermione promised, tears in her eyes.

"Now I know you don't like wearing clothes," Harry said, "but I want to see those hats and scarves worn! You don't want you to get sick! Doli?"

"Yes, Master Harry?" the eldest elf answered.

"Do you have the correct amounts of medicines available? And everything you need to live as I ordered?"

Doli considered. "Dobby has said the remaining supplies will be here before dusk. Houses elves will have more than enough, enough to make even Master Harry happy."

"Good. Happy Christmas!"

"Happy Christmas, Master and Mistress!" they chorused.

"Harry . . . what IS all that?"

"Exactly what I said it was. I guess right now it's a shelter for rejected house elves. As they recover, I'm hoping we can rent some of them out as domestics, with a reasonable work schedule and a set of reasonable regulations. Then, it'll also be in part a labor exchange."

"I'll start looking into it."

"Just remember, they love to work and need to take care of people. That need has been abused, but they still feel it. You've seen it in Winky and Dobby. They'll always be happy doing three times as much work as any sane person at a fraction of the wages. The trick will be to find some medium that satisfies their needs, pays them at least enough live on, and doesn't allow them to be abused."

"No unionization?" Hermione asked.

"I don't think so," Harry replied. "Come on, let's see if the twins and the Dumbledores have arrived yet. We need to eat before Colin and Remus have to take today's dose of that awful potion."

Chapter VIII

Tuesday, Christmas Eve, 1996

The twins and the Dumbledores had indeed arrived. Diggle, Figg, and Fletcher were also there for dinner, as were Moody, Remus, Tonks, the Weasleys, the Grangers, and of course Ron, Henrietta, Luna, Ginny, Colin, Dean, Hermione, and Harry. Twenty-two at dinner crowded even the large dining room, although they could have perhaps squeezed in two more.

Harry and Hermione had decided on traditional roast beef. Two large roasts were on the side board, and the table was laden with potatoes, breads, Yorkshire pudding, six kinds of vegetables, bowls of gravy, and an assortment of other items. Since Harry was standing to carve, he merely raised his glass of wine. "To my family!"

"Fred! Get that eyedropper away from the gravy! Put it down, or else I'll skin you alive!"

Everyone laughed, and returned Harry's toast. Dean and Diggle, seated on either side of George, had their hair turn into mistletoe for a minute.

"We'll get it right for next Christmas," Fred stated.

It was a pleasant dinner, although of course Remus and Colin didn't eat much.

Colin and Remus stripped outside the room which would be their prison most of the long winter's night. They slipped on some heavy robes and entered the room, fifteen minutes before local moonrise, which was very early that night. Tonks secured the door, and they heard her walking away, sniffing.

"Pretty shitty year, uh, Remus?" Colin said as he paced.

"Very bad," Remus agreed. "There were still some good points, especially recently.

"A few. We'd both give it all up to have them back though, wouldn't we?"

"That we would."

Upstairs, the party started to break up as soon as Remus, Colin, and Tonks left. As the host and hostess, Harry and Hermione saw Mrs. Figg, Mr. Diggle, and Dung Fletcher off, bade goodnight to the Grangers, the gaggle of Weasleys, Luna, and Henrietta, and made certain that Tonks and Dean, who were planning on spending the night in the kitchen ("Just in case," Dean had said), had a large pot of coffee and some brownies to hold them through the night.

Harry and Hermione stayed in the kitchen and talked for a while. Moody, Tonks, and Remus (and most likely Dumbledore) already knew about the growing house elf colony, and it made for a neutral topic of conversation. Harry didn't have to explain his reasoning to Dean -- Dean

knew by now how Harry had been treated by the Dursleys. It was easy to see why Harry would want to help anyone or anything suffering from abuse.

Dobby brought two of the elves in (Trixie and Dilly) to help keep watch of the watchers and the werewolves. Harry and Hermione finally went to their room at little before 10:00. "What's wrong, Angel?" Harry asked as they changed.

"Those elves . . . in some ways, SPEW and ELF and ROMP have been theoretical. But they're going to need something in addition to freedom, aren't they? It's at least as much about preventing abuse as it is gaining their freedom."

"They are going to need more than just their freedom," Harry agreed. "And I wasn't really hiding them from you," Harry hastened to add.

"I know. That was the surprise you were hinting at?"

"One of them," Harry answered, "but the rest waits until tomorrow."

Hermione pretended to pout, but handed Harry a very large something that struck him as 'book-shaped'. "You may open this only on the condition that it NEVER leaves this room without my prior permission."

"Sounds interesting," Harry said with a grin. "I promise." He unwrapped the book, and found it was a large scrapbook. He opened it, and his jaw nearly dislocated.

Harry leafed through the book, very slowly. There were nine (unmoving) sketches, thirty Muggle photos, and nine wizarding photos of Hermione, obviously done between that August and just a few days before. All were not only of Hermione, all were nudes.

Harry was speechless. He looked at Hermione.

She shrugged. "It was a little embarrassing, especially at first. I hope you like it."

"I love it!" Harry had finally reached the blank pages. He started to turn back, so he could see them all again. Especially that one magical photo where Hermione was demonstrating exactly how flexible a certain spell could make the female body. . . .

"Turn to the next to last page."

Harry did so, a little worried. Then Harry blushed. Hermione, Ginny, and Luna looked back at him and waved. "Ron would kill if he knew that existed," Harry stated in awe. "Seamus would likely explode seeing you three naked at once! Maybe I can arrange both at the same time. I wonder if Ron would kill me before Seamus exploded and killed us all? It would probably be worth dying to see that."

"Don't even tease about that," Hermione scolded.

"Sorry," Harry said.

"Turn the page."

Harry took a deep breath and did so. Colin, at full attention in every respect, grinned and smiled back.

"I didn't have to see that!" Harry informed Hermione, closing the scrapbook.

"But Colin thought you did, and since he shot me, I got to shoot him."

"Fair is fair, I guess," Harry said doubtfully.

"He certainly is your 'little' brother," Hermione said with a giggle.

Harry snorted, then laid the book aside and stood to embrace Hermione. Then Harry stiffened, managed a faint groan, flung his hand to his scar, and collapsed into Hermione's arms. Hermione fell on the floor, with Harry on top of her.

She managed to hold Harry as he writhed on the floor for perhaps twenty long seconds. Hermione's mind raced, wondering what to do.

"It's over. Help me get to Dumbledore's room," Harry said from the floor a few seconds after he had stopped struggling.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I have it contained."

Dumbledore opened the door. Obviously, Moody had told the Dumbledore brothers who was approaching. "What has happened, Harry?"

"I just caught a flash. It felt like Voldemort was feeling so triumphant, he let his guard down. I know," Harry said, holding up a hand, "he could be sending a false vision. But you decide."

Dumbledore nodded. "What was the vision?"

"There had been some kind of fight, in a huge, fancy room, like a ball room. There were bodies and blood all over. My impression was it was Malfoy Manor. Voldemort was ecstatic, because Snape had been captured and was being brought before him by Bellatrix and Wormtail -- I didn't know he had escaped! Now, you tell me, is Snape at Malfoy Manor?"

"He is," Dumbledore said. "And a few of the Death Eaters escaped in early October, although that was not made public. Still, I should have informed you. Many of the unarrested Death Eaters and the children of Death Eaters are, or were, meeting at Malfoy Manor to work out a policy to oppose Voldemort. Alastor was just getting to leave on patrol, but I think he and I must alert the aurors. Aberforth will notify the appropriate Order members."

The old men hadn't changed for bed yet. They were instantly ready to go.

"Should I tell anyone else here?" Harry asked.

"Not tonight, although you may wish to alert your elves to be alert. Take a quarter dose of the dreamless sleep potion, both of you. Have the elves wake you up at Six. Tell everyone as they awake. If it is a false alarm, we will leave a note. If it is not, we will not be back by Six."

"Tonks and Dean are sitting up," Hermione reminded the Headmaster.

"Very well. Inform Tonks, and tell her not to leave the house."

Christmas

By 7:30, everyone was awake and had had a scanty breakfast. By 8:00, everyone was getting more than a bit anxious, but just sat, staring at their cups.

"I think we should open our presents," Arthur finally said. Each guest had woken up and found a stocking awaiting them on their fireplace. In each stocking were Muggle and magical candies, fruit, and a coffee mug (Harry had seen an advert for an office supply store the previous July, offering personalized items -- these were light gold, embossed with what Hermione had identified as the Potter coat of arms). Mugs like these were common for Muggles (the Grangers used the same firm for their office supplies and office gifts), but a treat for the magical (especially Arthur Weasley).

No one seemed interested in tackling the pile of presents under the tree, however. "We'll feel even less interested later," Arthur went on. "We put in a lot of effort into the presents; we might as well get a little enjoyment out of them."

Everyone was as pleased with their gifts as they could be under the circumstances. Dean was especially happy with the equipment which would allow him to set up a nice studio area in the attic. The Weasley twins had distributed a wide range of test products. Hermione and Remus had both given a wider range of books. Everyone present, including the Grangers, sported Weasley jumpers.

Harry had sent Dobby a wide-range of socks, Winky a scarf, and had had small smocks sent to the elves. As everyone looked glumly (and guiltily) at their presents, Harry cleared his throat, gathering everyone's attention.

"There is one other thing," Harry said. "It's not really a present; what's in there is more of a loan." Harry pulled the chest he'd brought home Sunday out from behind the Empire sofa, and set it in front of Hermione.

Just as she was about to open it, however, the doorbell rang. A few moments later, Aberforth Dumbledore came in.

"Bad?" Arthur asked.

"'Bad' doesn't begin to describe what happened," the old Hogs Head barkeep answered, sadly. "In a nutshell, fifteen current Slytherin students who were children of Death Eaters, nine adults who had been Marked, and twenty-seven other relatives of various Death Eaters met last night around Nine. About forty-five minutes later, all the werewolves Voldemort had collected or had had created attacked, followed by trolls and dementors. While perhaps all the

werewolves were killed, most of the people were killed or Kissed. At that point Voldemort and his remaining Death Eaters showed up. As best we can tell, two of the students and four of the relatives had betrayed the others. No doubt he would have tortured the other survivors, but Snape pointed out that he had felt Voldemort's pleasure, and Harry here had no doubt felt it and understood it as well. So the other survivors were quickly killed, except for Snape and young Malfoy."

"What happened to Snape and Malfoy?" Ron asked after a moment of stunned silence, since no one else wanted to.

"They were . . . eviscerated." Molly, Arthur, and the Grangers all turned pale. Harry looked stunned. Hermione closed her eyes and threw herself into Harry's arms, crying.

"They were what?" Ron and Fred demanded.

"They were gutted," Harry answered.

"What?" Ginny asked.

"It used to be how the English Muggles punished traitors. They were hung until they were partially senseless, then they ripped out their intestines and burned them in front of them."

"You mean . . . Professor Snape and . . . Draco . . . ?" Henrietta fainted. Ron caught her, and Hermione and her mother went to revive her.

"I'm afraid so, or at least most of their internal organs, other than the heart and lungs, were cut out of them. They were left alive, but dying slowly."

"But. . . ." Mister Granger objected.

"Wizards have stronger constitutions than Muggles, plus Voldemort cast several strengthening and anti-shock spells," Aberforth explained, his face drawn with tiredness and emotion. "They were still alive when I left, a little after Six this morning. They are probably dead by now. If you'll excuse me? I need some rest. My brother will no doubt be here in the early afternoon."

"I doubt if anyone is in the mood for a formal lunch or dinner. I'll speak with Dobby," Harry told Dumbledore and the rest of the group. "We'll set up a buffet in either the dining room or breakfast room by Eleven and we'll keep food there until late tonight. There'll be a fire here and in the sitting room on the first floor if you don't want to be alone. I'll ask Winky to move your presents." Harry left.

All the adults looked at each other, yet again surprised at how mature Harry was acting.

When Harry came back ten minutes later, the ground floor was deserted. He picked up the unopened chest, and mounted the stairs up to his room. It was empty so he sat in the rocking chair and rocked. He needed to meditate and practice his Occlumency.

Hermione came in about twenty minutes later. She still looked pale. "Everyone . . . get settled?" Harry asked.

"Henrietta is laying down with a cold towel, Ron has been banished to the twins' room so they can make morbid jokes, Mister Weasley and Tonks have left for the Ministry, Ginny is crying and Mrs. Weasley and Luna are with her. My parents have been introduced to fire whiskey by Remus, and are simply sitting in their room, giggling. I'm not certain where Remus, Colin, or Dean are" She stood in the center of the room, swaying from foot to foot.

Harry stood and embraced her. "I understand. Malfoy treated us like dirt. Snape hated me and was unfair to all of us. Still, I wouldn't want anyone to die like that."

Hermione hugged Harry back. "Ron is almost . . . gloating. Especially about Draco."

"Just remember, Draco died on the right side for the wrong reasons. Maybe, if Draco had lived, he would have seen the light, but he didn't oppose Voldemort because Voldemort was doing evil, he opposed Voldemort because he was a half-blood doing what Draco thought was right."

"True," Hermione admitted. She sniffled a little, but looked into Harry's eyes. "What was it you were saying about that chest?"

Harry walked her over to the strongbox, which was set next on the foot of the bed. "These aren't yours, but they are yours to use."

"What's in here?"

Harry smiled. "Why some of the Potter family jewels. I thought you should see them, at the least. They were in my vault."

Hermione opened the box, which was some three feet long, two feet wide, and eighteen inches deep. "Oh my!" It was crammed full of bracelets, necklaces, broaches, and earrings. Diamonds sparkled, and emeralds, rubies, and other jewels shone. There were even two tiaras.

"There are actually eight more boxes just like it," Harry said. "There are six more that I inherited from the Blacks -- Tonks got nine. There's a ledger with most of the Potter stuff listed. We can go through it some day and decide if we want to keep it all. Most of it is likely just jewelry, but some might have historical value, even if it's just for the family."

Hermione said nothing, but led Harry to the bed for some comfort and joy.

Harry and Hermione decided they couldn't stay in bed all day, although they wished they could. They came down stairs a little after 11:00, and saw that the first floor sitting room was empty. The ground floor parlor just had Remus sitting in front of the fire.

"Everyone else still upstairs?" Harry asked.

Remus nodded.

"Are you hungry?" Harry asked.

Remus and Hermione both wrinkled their noses. Harry shrugged and went back to the dining room, where he rang the bell.

"Mister Harry?" Winky answered, popping next to him.

"I see you're handling the food. Any problems?"

"No problems, Mister Harry. Perhaps Order people will come through and eat the nice food?"

Harry smiled. "Perhaps. Thank you."

Winky bowed and disappeared. Harry made six sandwiches, and fixed a mug of coffee for himself and tea the way Hermione and Remus liked it, and rolled it all in on a tea cart that was sitting in one corner. Hermione and Remus drank the tea, but while Remus managed to eat one sandwich, Hermione only managed half of one. They sat until they heard the doorbell a little after noon, and Dumbledore came into the room.

"They're gone?" Hermione asked in a sorrowful voice.

Dumbledore nodded. "Almost four hours ago. I had many errands to run. Could you please go get Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley? I have to speak to the five of you."

Hermione did as she was asked, while Harry fixed Dumbledore some coffee and sandwiches.

"Thank you, Harry. Good afternoon," he added to Ginny and Luna. "I'll get straight to the heart of the matter. I am rather tired, and part of this needs to be handled soon. Professor Snape and Mister Malfoy were very lucid, up until they died. I know, for I was with them the entire time. Both made out wills. Miss Granger, Professor Snape left you most of his library at Hogwarts, and a thousand Galleons. Remus, he left you a note." Dumbledore handed it to Remus.

"Mister Malfoy's will was more complicated. Apparently, in the time between Voldemort's leaving and our arrival, Mister Malfoy expressed his dismay that his line would die out. Apparently, Miss Granger had acquainted Professor Snape with her maternal uncle's profession."

"What's he do?" Ginny asked, puzzled.

"He runs a fertility clinic," Hermione said, puzzled.

"In short, Mister Malfoy's . . . essential fluid is being . . . harvested. He has turned a third of the estate over to his closest Malfoy cousin. The other two-thirds will be held in trust for up to thirty years. You three ladies will receive a stipend of a thousand Galleons a year for that period. If one of you has Mister Malfoy's child by these Muggle methods, that child will inherit. There are other incentives, but that sums it up. You may also recruit a Pure-blood witch, but the incentives are less for that. If no such child is born, then the Malfoy cousins inherit after thirty years."

The four teens looked at Dumbledore, stunned. "Yes, yes, it will take some time to digest. Miss Weasley, he also left you his broom. Miss Lovegood, he left you nothing more. Miss Granger, your additional inheritance is more complicated, and the reason why this cannot wait."

Dumbledore clapped his hands. Nine house elves popped into existence. "Mistress!" they chorused.

"What!"

"Mister Malfoy has left you all the house elves associated with the Malfoy estates. Three were assigned to Malfoy Manor, one each to Lucius and Narcissa, and one each to other houses. They are yours, on the condition you do not free them for six years."

"FREE! NO!" the elves screamed, cowering.

"What am I going to do with nine elves!"

Harry hid his smile. "Are any of them from houses given to the cousin?" he managed to ask.

"Spiki is," one elf with a voice higher than any other Harry had ever heard said, raising her hand.

"Was much damage done to Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked.

"Nothing too extensive, other than the blood, except for the ballroom, why?" Dumbledore asked.

"Then these eight ought to go back to the houses they were assigned to and keep things in order, and also they should take an inventory of everything," Harry said. "Someone has to act as caretakers, and an inventory has to be made."

"But. . . ." Hermione protested. Harry signaled her that they could talk later.

"Spiki should go back to the Manor and help them clean there. Who would be the senior elf?"

"Spool, Master," a male elf answered. "Spool has served the Malfoys his whole life."

"Spool and the others can report to Doli, or to someone Professor Dumbledore here assigns, in case of a break-in or any other problem."

"That sounds reasonable. What do you say, Miss Granger?"

"I guess that would work."

"You are the new mistress? Mistress Granger?"

Hermione sighed. "Yes, I'm Mistress Granger."

Chapter IX

Only Harry knew how upset Hermione was with inheriting nine house elves, and how sickened she was by the death of Snape and the Slytherin students. To everyone else, she presented a business-like demeanor as she participated in discussions setting up the trust to administer the Malfoy Estate the morning of Boxing Day. Mr. Diggle helped with the legalities, and Dumbledore helped persuade people to join the trust committee. Dumbledore, Diggle, and three other members of the Order would make up the group, and Hermione, Luna, and Ginny would become members when they became of age at 17.

While no one was anything but unhappy with Malfoy's conditions, Ron was taking them the hardest, or at least the loudest. He fought with Ginny so much Christmas night and Boxing Day, she took to staying close to her mother. He had harassed Hermione so much that they had a nastier fight than the one that had broken them up the previous June. Harry had had to intervene, before one said something that couldn't be forgiven. Even Luna was affected. Every time Ron walked into a room, she would walk out unless Harry or Mrs. Weasley nearby. Henrietta had somehow also been drawn into the arguments, and was mostly hiding in her room (which Ron was now barred from), swearing at Ron at every opportunity and swearing to everyone else that she was through with Ron Weasley and through with the entire insane group.

Boxing Day night, just after most of the household had retired, Harry held Ron back. "What's the matter with you? Are you saying Malfoy was right?"

"What do you mean?" Ron demanded.

"Look, I wouldn't like Hermione, Ginny, or Luna to have Malfoy's child, but if they decide to do it, what of it? Are you objecting just because it's Malfoy? Or the procedure? Or what? Because when you're harassing the girls, it sounds like the only problem you have is that's the child will be Malfoy's, that blood triumphs over everything. Why does that part bother you? Do you really think any child that's part Malfoy is going to be an evil, insufferable git?"

"Look, first of all, this artificial insemination . . . insemination . . ."

"Insemination."

"Whatever. YOU might be used to the idea, but while 'artificial' might not automatically be bad, neither is it generally seen as a good thing, at least in our world. Harry, I know very well that the Muggle world is bigger than ours. In some ways it's better and in some ways it's not and in most ways it's the same. But just in case you haven't noticed by now, wizarding culture is very conservative. Malfoy's, no, Snape's bright idea is being kept under wraps right now, but can you imagine the publicity once it gets out? Because you know it will if anyone has the child. Would you want Ginny to go through that? Or Luna? Henrietta's family doesn't have much. I could tell she was tempted. She sees the fortune, not the trouble it would cause. Would you want her to suffer for a little money?"

"Of course not." Harry looked at Ron. "Not worried about Hermione?"

"Not really," Ron retorted. "First of all, she's got you. Unless she gets it in her head to make some grand anti-Pure-Blood statement, she won't be having Malfoy's baby. But if Ginny and

Luna stay together, THEY will want to have kids. I know Ginny wants some, anyway. She's very interested in these Muggle ideas, and if she doesn't have Malfoy's, she'll probably be after you, or maybe Colin. And I overheard her and Luna last night, debating the merits of you or me fathering a child with Luna! And worst of all, this is Malfoy's ultimate revenge on us -- make us supervise his estate, and maybe having one of us have his child." He shook his head. "I don't think I'm overreacting, Harry."

"I think you are," Harry replied in a doubtful voice, "but not as much as I thought you were. Still, you should know better than to talk to them like that! There might be a girl who will tolerate it, but I haven't met her yet."

"You're right," Ron admitted.

"Go get something from the kitchen. I'll see if any of them are willing not to throw things at you."

Ron winced. "Thanks."

Luna and Ginny's room was empty. A soft knock on Henrietta's brought forth a stream of curses that would have had Molly Weasley reaching for a bar of soap, even if one of the cursers had been Mad-Eye Moody instead of her daughter.

"It's me," Harry stated.

"No git?" Henrietta demanded, as Ginny was now mumbling invectives while Luna tried to comfort her.

"No," Harry said with a sigh.

"Come in."

Luna, Ginny, and Hermione were with Henrietta. "Are you here to excuse the git?" Ginny asked.

"No and yes," as Harry closed the door. He was glad Fred and George had left that afternoon, so he wouldn't have to worry about the extendable ears.

"What does THAT mean?" Ginny demanded.

"It means I would never defend the way he spoke to any of you," Harry answered. "But if you consider what he was trying to say, you know, he does have a point."

"And that being?" Hermione demanded.

"In the Muggle world, the fact of the first in vitro children were announced, but they and their relatives were given privacy for a while. But the child of Draco Malfoy, created by a Muggle technique, inheriting a huge fortune out from under a bunch of distant Pure Blood relatives? Imagine the fuss. Imagine the lawsuits. Imagine the teasing the child would get, especially if

he, or she, is sorted into Slytherin? Ron doesn't want any of you to go through the hell of publicity. I don't either, but I know I certainly don't have any right to impose my opinion on anyone."

The four women looked a little abashed, but not much. "So," Harry went on, "since the whole idea is just theoretical for at least a few years any way, why not allow Ron to apologize for his delivery and drop the subject from open conversation?"

Three of the girls reluctantly agreed. Henrietta, however, was not in a forgiving mood. "He called me a whore, Harry. He meant it when he called me one. I'm not angry at you or anyone else in this room. I will be your friend, and I will certainly keep your secrets. I'll listen to him; I may even forgive him, but I will NOT date him again."

As Harry and Hermione snuggled together half an hour later, however, Hermione asked. "Would you hate me if I had Malfoy's baby?"

"Of course I wouldn't hate you. I wouldn't hate the baby. I would very much dislike the fact that you preferred having his to mine."

"I wouldn't, unless you were . . . gone."

"Oh . . . well, in that case, I would understand." Harry mentally added, 'One more good reason NOT to get killed.'

Hermione wrapped herself around Harry, and they fell asleep.

Friday, December 28, 1996

The Dumbledores had left Christmas night, the twins and Arthur Weasley Boxing Day morning. Mrs. Weasley was returning to the safe house, and was taking Ron, Henrietta, Ginny, and Luna with her, although Henrietta didn't seem overly happy about it. The Grangers would be leaving as well, and would be back at the dental clinic the following morning for half a day, allowing their associates some time off as well.

The Christmas Eve attack had not been reported Christmas Day, and there was only a 'stop-press' notice on Boxing Day. A fuller report was in Friday's Daily Prophet. Between thinking about Snape and Malfoy's grisly deaths and Draco's will, the teens hadn't thought of some of the other details. They were surprised to learn that Vincent Crabbe and Pansy Parkinson had been the two students who had deserted Draco and gone over to Voldemort (assuming they hadn't betrayed the meeting in the first place).

On a more positive note, Ron and Henrietta were at least speaking when the Weasley group moved out a little after 9:00. After the morning traffic slowed down even more, the old large limousine pulled up. Three Order members Harry and Hermione didn't know escorted Mistress Merry up the stoop.

"I ask pardon for not ascending the other day," the elderly witch said. "I could not stand that woman when she was alive, and was not certain if you had succeeded in removing her avatar." She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. "This house nearly feels clean. The darkness of the Place is lifting. A remarkable achievement, speaking well of all the love that has been here recently."

Harry looked puzzled, but Hermione blushed. She kissed her parents, and to their surprise, Mistress Merry. Mistress Merry took Hermione's left hand and smiled, seeing the ring on 'the correct hand' at last. Hermione's parents frowned, but said nothing.

"Well," Colin said after nearly everyone had left, "maybe things will be quiet now. I need to develop my film, and Dean needs to paint."

"You'll all stay in today?" Remus asked. Tonks had already gone to the Ministry.

"Yes," Harry replied. "I think we would all like to go Muggle shopping at least once, and go to Diagon Alley as well, at least once before we go back, but not necessarily today."

"I'll arrange it," Remus said. "You might have a visitor for lunch or dinner." He looked up and down the street, and then went off.

"Alone," Colin said, smiling as Harry shut the door. He pulled Dean down and kissed him deeply.

"Here now, I know you two haven't been celibate since we've been here," Hermione objected.

"No, we haven't," Dean said, "but if you don't mind, we'll dispense with silencing spells."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because we want it in places other than our rooms or the attic. If you can hear us, you won't come in," Dean said.

"Unless you like to watch," Colin teased.

"Go ahead," Hermione retorted. "Come along, Harry. It's time to try that lube."

"Are you comfortable?" Colin asked as Hermione sat down for lunch.

"Shut up, Colin," Hermione grumbled.

Dr. Powell showed up at 1:00, and refused refreshment. Instead, he dragged the group down into the basement. He set up a simple silhouette target, but directed them to a point of the foundation wall next to it. "Now, what color is a stinger?"

"Light blue to indigo," Hermione answered.

"What determines the color?"

The four looked at each other and shrugged. "Power?" Hermione guessed. "No, that can't really be it. Harry's is faster than any of ours, but it's not that much of a different color."

"It's actually fairly different," Dean said.

"For whatever reasons," Powell said while waving his wand along the target, "while sparks may be of any color, these stinger blobs are between light blue to purplish-indigo. We tried everything to get any sort of spell with a pure purple light. There aren't many of them. Then Filius had the idea of using a simple stinger. Just as you can send up sparks of any color that you think of, you can send stingers of any color if you try hard enough. The problem is, anything further along the spectrum than a slightly greenish blue breaks back into sparks after a few feet. Still, you can imagine the stinger a deep purple, and it works."

"Now, we'd shared the theory of purple affecting dementors with some of the aurors, and a group of us showed up at the Malfoy's just as the group was clearing off. The dementors went last. They didn't like any of the purple spells, but a purple stinger blasts them as well as a Patronus dart, and they're easier to produce. Dumbledore showed up at the end, and somehow fired off a purple Patronus dart. That blasted three dementors apart, but I've NO idea how he did it."

"Is that better than the mysterious third spell?" Harry demanded.

"Much," Powell stated. "Dementors are a corporeal minor demon, just as a lethifold is an animal demon. And all demon banishing spells are easily changed into demon summoning spells."

"Which is why you were putting off teaching me," Harry responded.

"You and any student. Now, I've reinforced this target. Feel free to practice your purple darts. Half the Ministry wants to release the information, the other half want to keep it in reserve, to try and surprise the dementors and wipe them out, but I thought you four should know, and Dumbledore agreed."

"Are the violet ones as powerful as the indigo ones against people?" Dean asked.

"Actually, no," Powell said with a grin, "so my uncle will have all the students learn the purple version for practice sessions against shields, even if the Ministry decides to keep this information a secret. You're an artist, right?"

"I am."

"Could you try and get some paint samples, the closest hues to ultra-violet that we can see? It will help students visualize what we mean."

"No problem."

"Great!"

By the time Remus and Tonks made it back to Grimmauld Place around 5:30, all four students had mastered the purple stinger. (Dean insisted it was actually a shade of violet, but even Hermione thought 'purple stinger' sounded better than 'violet stinger'.)

"I see Doctor Powell has been here and gone," Remus said.

"He has," Hermione stated.

"What else can you tell us?" Harry asked.

"It is not to leave this room, understand? Not even Ron or Ginny or Luna."

"Then I think I'll pass," Colin said. "I just don't want, or need, to know."

"I'll go with you," Dean said.

When they were gone, Remus said, "We still have a few spies with the Death Eaters, although none have anything like Severus' seniority or reputation. You should know Parkinson and Crabbe are with Voldemort, and that by all reports it was Crabbe who planted the portkey targets in the Great Hall, Parkinson the ones in front of the Headmaster's. She also sent a report of you stunning two trolls with one stunner. Is that true?"

"It is," Harry acknowledged.

"Amazing," Remus said.

"So we still don't know who planted the ones that ended up in the common areas," Hermione pointed out, frowning.

"True," Remus agreed. "However, from a chance remark overheard, I would say that the person was either in Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff." A pained look flashed across Remus' face. "I never liked Severus very much, but the Order will miss him, even if few others will. We could have used him to keep sorting this out."

"Adam Dawlish, Laura Mockridge, Susan Bones, James Perkins, Moray Hopkirk, Jane Piliwinkle, Henry Mockridge, and Polly Podmore from Hufflepuff," Hermione recited from memory, "Eddie Carmichael, Julia Collins, Marietta Edgecombe, Archibald Peasgood, Dixon Scrimgeour, Donna Scrimgeour, and Stuart Ackerley from Ravenclaw."

"The only one we can trust is Susan," Harry said. He looked at Remus. "We did manage a time-line for her, and most of the others. Whoever did it, must have been under their own free will. We do trust Susan."

"Are there any you don't trust?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. "Not for something like this," Hermione admitted.

"I can't see Marietta doing this out of principle or revenge," Harry agreed. "If someone with authority over her ordered her to, she might, but really, the only two I can think of with that kind of authority would be her mother or Cho. So . . . Remus?"

"Yes?"

"Could Marietta's mother have been put under Imperius, and the attack on the family faked?" Hermione asked. "It doesn't sound likely, but it's possible, isn't it?"

Remus sighed. "Fairly unlikely, but it's worth looking into. Tonks will set things in motion tomorrow."

"On Saturday?" Harry asked in faux shock. "Madam Bones must have really shaken things up."

"Anything scheduled for us?" Hermione asked.

"Actually, you said would you like to do a little Muggle shopping. There's a new power pack available for magically powering electronic equipment. We can get some electronics if you wish."

"Really?" Hermione said, her eyes lighting up.

"I'd have guessed Colin as the one missing the telly the most," Harry teased.

Hermione pretended to punch Harry on the arm. "I want a computer, Harry." She frowned. "Would computers and tapes work in a magical environment?" she asked.

"Yes," Remus told her, "the wards are strong here, but not enough to disrupt shielded equipment. You actually can get special antennas for radios and televisions. Hogwarts would still disrupt them, though."

"When the Fidelius comes off, we can have electricity run in, right?" Hermione asked.

"No reason why you can't," Remus answered, standing. "Tonks should be here for dinner at Six-thirty." He left to tell Dobby.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "Just something McGonagall mentioned, when we started dating."

"What's that?"

"That the reason she worried a bit when two Muggle-raised students fall in love is that they tend to stay more in the Muggle world, instead of really embracing or even understanding magical culture."

"You mean like having a computer and a television?"

"I guess." He looked at Hermione. "I don't want to live as a Magical Muggle, but I certainly can't live like some magical families still do."

"Chamber pots and scouring charms?" Hermione asked with a shudder. "That awful hair potion that makes your hair look like. . . ."

"Like Snape's, or Draco's for the first two years?" Harry went on. "What was it that American exchange student supposedly called it?"

"Greasy kid stuff," Hermione said with a smile. The student, spending his Sixth year in Ravenclaw while they had been in their First, had not appreciated Snape's teaching methods.

"Hogwarts is going to very strange without Snape and Malfoy, isn't it?" Harry said, moving on to what was really on his mind.

"Very," Hermione agreed. "Snape never recovered from the last war. If Draco had taken the Mark, he probably would have at best ended up much like his mentor."

"Probably," Harry agreed. "We'll never know if Draco would have made it all the way to something resembling a civilized attitude, or if he would have joined the next Pure-blood movement."

"It will just be odd for us. Just think what it will be like for Zabini -- the only male Slytherin of his year," Hermione pointed out.

"True. He didn't like Malfoy or Goyle, and he disliked Nott and Crabbe, but after five and a half years. . . ."

"War sucks, doesn't?"

"It does," Harry agreed, "but I guess we have no real choice."

Coming back from shopping the next afternoon, the group (the four teens, plus Remus and Tonks) were hurrying, as the weather was threatening a chilly rain. Colin suddenly called a halt. "I need to go in here," was all he said.

'Here' was a small, plain church. The sign informed them that this was an old foundation, destroyed during the bombings of 1940. On the site of the old Anglican Church, after the war, a new Catholic church had been built.

"I didn't know you were Catholic," Hermione remarked.

"My mum was," Colin replied. "Dumbledore had to send 'round a priest who's also a wizard around to talk to her. Please?"

Remus and Tonks looked at each other and shrugged. The group went inside, and Colin explained what he was going to do, and why. The four teens went up to the Lady Alter. Colin and Dean each lit a candle for each of their murdered family members, Harry one each for Sirius and Cedric. Hermione lit one for Snape and each of the Slytherin students. The three teens then went to the back while Colin prayed near the High Alter.

Hermione, raised a High Church Anglican, understood most of the iconography, but refrained from discussing it. Then she remembered who the Church was dedicated to. She went up to the Saint's Alter, and lit all the candles, and wrote and left a note, along with £180, all the cash she hadn't spent (and which she had been planning on saving against emergencies) asking that a candle be kept lit until the money ran out.

"What was that for?" Harry asked.

"We need all the help we can get," was all Hermione would say, as they left the Church of St. George, slayer of dragons and protector of soldiers.

Chapter X

Monday, December 31, 1996

Hermione and Harry portkeyed to Mrs. Figg's at 6:20. "Now Harry! There's no reason to be nervous," Hermione scolded. She turned to Mrs. Figg. "Thank you for allowing us to arrive here."

Mrs. Figg smiled. "I'm glad you did. I had wanted to meet you since the summer, and now I may also thank you for the lovely dinner last week." She smiled at Hermione while Harry was greeting the cats. "Harry has had so little good happen in his life, I'm glad you're there to be with him. I wish I'd been able to make his life a little better." She turned to Harry. "I am sorry, Harry."

"I understand, Mrs. Figg," Harry assured the elderly lady.

"Now, I'll be out this evening," Mrs. Figg said. "You can activate your portkey anywhere, correct?"

"We can, Mrs. Figg," Hermione assured her. "Ideally, we'll walk back and leave from your stoop."

"I had hoped last summer that I would never be back here," Harry grumbled as they approached #4.

"I know," Hermione agreed, taking his arm, "but they are relations, even if they're also horrid."

"That's probably how Aunt Petunia thinks about me," Harry said. He preferred not to think what Vernon thought of him. Harry took a deep breath and knocked on the door and then tried it. Since it was unlocked, they walked on in. "Aunt Petunia?" he called out politely.

Petunia Dursley came into the entrance hall, a fake smile plastered on her face. "Welcome home," she said in a strained voice. It was clear that she knew Harry wasn't there just to socialize but to strengthen the wards that protected her son as well as her nephew.

Harry forced a smile as well. "Aunt Petunia, Hermione Granger. Hermione, Petunia Dursley."

The two women bared their teeth at each other and shook hands briefly. Before Petunia could turn around, Harry asked softly. "Two things, Aunt Petunia. How is Dudley doing, and I could never find out if his girlfriend was one of the girls attacked."

Petunia came close to whisper. "Dudley is doing better, although he still had a great deal of pain in his joints Christmas Eve. His girl friend, Mary, Mary Smith that is, is here. She missed the trip because she was sick." Harry and Hermione nodded, and followed Petunia into the sitting room.

Vernon had been sitting in his favorite chair, scowling at the very thought of having to see Harry again. At the sight of Hermione, however, Vernon found himself standing politely. Hermione, although still at best only average height, was fashion-model thin and attractive. She was wearing a tight black sheath dress that went past her knee but which was slit slightly higher, showing off her muscular stomach, tight butt, and strong arms. Her low-heeled shoes were fashionable if sensible, as was the jewelry Harry had bought her to match her ring.

Vernon's father and grandfather, although he never mentioned it, had been furriers -- Marge had run the store for over a decade after his death, before selling out and investing the profits. Over her stylish outfit, Hermione was wearing what Vernon recognized as a genuine top-of-the-line three-quarter length mink coat, which Harry had found under preservation spells in one of his vaults. (Hermione, of course, would never wear a new fur.)

Harry didn't look anything like the ragged urchin he had been made to look like for his entire life at the Dursleys. He was now only a few inches shorter than Vernon. If his hair was still a mess, the rest of him wasn't. His glasses were fashionable and straight, his shoes highly polished (thanks to the elves). Harry was dressed in what was obviously a hand-made dark pinstripe suit under a full-length leather trench coat. Harry and Hermione looked closer to 20 rather than under 17.

"Hermione, my uncle, Vernon Dursley, my cousin Dudley, and his girl friend Mary Smith. Uncle Vernon, Dudley, Miss Smith, Hermione Granger."

"Miss Granger," Vernon said fairly politely, out of respect to the fur coat if nothing else. Dudley merely nodded. His ordeal had obviously forced him to lose a great deal of weight. Dudley had kept his muscle, however. By the late spring, he would probably be a rising young cruiser-weight boxer, if he didn't resume his bad eating habits.

Mary Smith had also lost some weight since the picture Harry had seen had been taken, and she'd let her hair grow longer. She now looked less like Crabbe in drag than she did Millicent Bulstrode with lighter hair and almost two eyebrows. She was, however, much more polite. She stood and came over to shake Hermione and Harry's hands. "I've heard a lot about you, Harry. I had hoped it was mostly just from having two boys locked in a sibling conflict, and I'm glad to see that must have been it. Please call me Mary or May, although my family calls me Mary Sue."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, too," Harry said, impressed. He had figured any girl that liked Dudley would have to be horrible.

Harry remembered then that he was, in a sense, part guest and part host. He helped Hermione off with her coat, and then hung it, and his, in the closet near the front door. Petunia followed him. "Did you know your mother wore that coat?" she asked.

"No," Harry admitted. "It was in storage."

"It actually came from Dursley Furriers, although I don't think Vernon ever knew about it." Petunia looked at Harry. "Marge kept the store going a few years after Mister Dursley died. Marge kept the books and ordered the stock, so she didn't know Lily had purchased it, but

Lily wrote and told me about it." Petunia shrugged. "Your . . . friend knows enough of the real world not to embarrass us?"

"She's . . . like my mother," Harry said. "Her parents are both dentists."

"Oh! well . . . good." Petunia decided she should be nicer than she had planned.

Harry and Hermione left a little after 10:30, having had a much better time than they had anticipated. Both knew this was in part because Hermione knew how to act in a very Muggle environment and made no miscues. Ginny Weasley or Luna Lovegood would have created a much tenser atmosphere. It was partly because the Dursleys had been made to realize that even without Harry as part of their lives, the magical world could easily threaten them and so the wards were more useful than Harry was an annoyance. Mostly, of course, it was because Mary Smith had been there, and it was obvious both that she was and would stay good for Dudley and liked and would like to see more of Harry and Hermione. She was not to be frightened off.

Hermione had extracted a fair amount of information from Mary, and would turn it over to Moody for investigation, just to make certain of her past. They had given Mary the Muggle postal drop address used to send Muggle mail to Hogwarts.

"Shall we go home, my Harry-bear?" Hermione said softly. "I want to stay up until midnight, and then snuggle next to you until lunch." They were having guests for lunch.

"You mean you've decided Dobby and Winky know what they're doing, so you don't have to supervise them?" Hermione had refrained from dropping in on their cooking the Christmas Eve dinner, after upsetting them slightly the day before, but it hadn't been something that came naturally to her.

Hermione sighed. "It's not easy, but I have to admit supervising them caused more upset than it does good."

"That's my angel. Let's sit in front of the fire place, watch Colin get silly on the champagne, and hope that he and Dean don't get too involved again."

"If you enjoy having me do it to you so much, you won't go blind watching Colin doing Dean. That doesn't make you gay, unless you'd prefer Colin or Dean doing you instead of me," Hermione teased.

"Would you do it to me with Colin or Dean, or Ginny or Luna or Ron, watching?"

"We're shyier than Colin and Dean," Hermione pointed out. "But while I certainly wouldn't want anyone watching us, I wouldn't be humiliated if Colin, Dean, Ginny, or Luna caught us, or even if we were doing something in the same room they were doing something similar in, as long as we're not in the direct line of sight with them."

"I love an exhibitionist angel," Harry said with faux amazement. "Who'd have ever thought that shy Her-mi-owny would be like that."

"Not me," she admitted. "But back then, I never thought of anything beyond kissing. I had read my parents sex manuals, of course, but I never dreamt of applying any of that knowledge until I found myself in bed with you."

"I love you."

Hermione smiled. "And I you. We need to merge our magics while we're, you know, together - - it's really supposed to enhance the sexual experience."

Harry kissed Hermione deeply, and triggered the portkey. They would have the rest of the week alone in the house with Colin and Dean, with the Order confined to the lower floors.

Saturday, January 4, 1997

"Nice to see you four," Remus said drily as they sat down at the breakfast table. All four had stuck to the top floor and attic for most of the week, except for exercising in the basement.

"I've raided the kitchen a few times," Harry retorted, "and the only strange noises I heard were from the master suite." Remus growled a little at that.

Tonks came into the room. "Moody and the rest of the escort will be here at Eight-fortyeight," she reminded them.

"Eight-fortyeight?" Dean asked.

Tonks shrugged. "Anything to make things a bit different."

"Are the Weasleys still going to be there?" Hermione asked.

"We meet them at the Leaky Cauldron."

"At Nine-seventeen?" Colin asked with a grin.

"None of your cheek, boy!" Moody called out. "You should all know by know how to practice. . . ."

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" everyone yelled, even Remus and Hermione.

"Damn straight!" Moody stated. He was still staring at Colin. "Speaking of cheek, get that wand out of that back pocket! I swear, you kids will keep doing that until someone burns half their arse off!"

"Take it out immediately," Dean commanded. "You know I prefer your arse whole!"

Everyone stared at Dean for a moment, and then everyone but Colin and Moody burst out laughing. Moody and Colin were turning bright red with embarrassment.

A few minutes later, the group was assembled in the entrance hall, their bags packed. "Just out of curiosity," Moody asked, "are these house elves going back with you?" There seemed to be a hint of hope in Moody's voice.

Harry smiled a smile that would have done both his father and Sirius proud. "Dobby, please call the others in; just the ones on the premises."

"Yes, Master Harry." Dobby popped out and back in an instant. Seventeen of the eighteen elves from the mews were present. Everyone's eyes, except for Hermione's, went very wide. Even those who had known about the elf colony hadn't realized how many there were. "The Blacks killed their house elves," Harry said in a hard voice. "Other people discard them. We will offer them sanctuary and an opportunity to work. In return, they will help protect us."

"House elves serve the Master and Mistress," the elves chorused.

"To answer your question, Dobby and Winky will be returning to Hogwarts with us, assigned to the Gryffindor dorms. They will be keeping an . . . taking care of things were, and working on restoring some other properties I own that have been allowed to become run-down over the years."

"Ah, so that's why you had me get the information from Diggle," Remus said, enlightened.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "There will always be at least six elves on the property at all times."

"House elves will serve the Master and Mistress! Free elves will protect the House of Potter!"

Moody realized he had rarely seen enslaved house elves this loyal to their owners, let alone this attitude in the few free elves he had run across over the many decades. He shelved all plans for taking a closer look at the wards protecting the top floor and attic. "Well, come along. This is a pre-set portkey."

"Be well," Harry said to the elves.

"House elves will be well, so free elves can work hard!" they heard as the portkey pulled them away.

After the humans left, Dobby turned to the other elves. "Dobby said Harry Potter was the Kind Master foretold in Prophecy. Master and Mistress will free the house elves, while enabling us to work!"

A small, wizened elf came out from behind the others, where he had been both hiding and observing. "Dobby may be right. Free house elves may, if they wish, for the first time, protect the Man and Woman to the best of their abilities. that is for free elves to think about. Gurt will spread the word."

"WE WORK TO HELP THE KIND MASTER AND MISTRESS!" the free elves vowed.
"WE WORK TO FREE THE HOUSE ELVES!"

The group arrived in a hallway in the Leaky Cauldron. "This is the corridor reserved for our party," Moody stated. "Wards have gone up as soon as we arrived. Here are your room keys. You leave them and pick them up from Tom. You may not leave or enter the area without one of them." He handed them out at random. "Your elves will sort your luggage. Go on with you, the others are waiting!"

The four teens took off.

The eight teens walked through a very crowded Diagon Alley. They made a stop at Gringotts, all bought new sets of school and casual robes, and Luna stopped in The Quibbler's office to greet her father, while Henrietta dropped off letters for her father. Harry, Hermione, and Ron each made short statements on the war, and Colin made a plea that the rogue werewolves be offered an amnesty, and that they take up any offers of clemency. Ginny, Dean, and Henrietta refused to comment at all, while Luna couldn't really comment, as the publisher's daughter.

In thanks, Lovegood took them to lunch at a small discrete bistro, tucked away on an upper floor of a nearby building. After lunch, the group went browsing, picking up odds and ends in the different shops.

Coming out of Eeylops, Henrietta mentioned, "I'm surprised they've let us wander today." Ginny and Colin snorted. "What?"

"Look at all the other students," Hermione said, waving at a trio of Seventh year Hufflepuffs they were walking past. "The days before Christmas and New Years, and today, were announced as 'safe days' -- I don't know that many aurors, but I've seen six so far today, and Gringotts announced they were extending their protection as well. Business has been down, so they wanted to bring customers in."

"That makes sense," Henrietta said.

"Not entirely," Luna said. "Walk-in customers have been down, but owl orders have been way up. The problem was, some businesses need the walk-ins."

"Shall we see how this business is doing?" Harry asked. The group saw they were in front of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes.

The shop was empty. "Sorry," a voice yelled out from the back, "we're closed. . . ." Fred came out, and then stood in shock. Finally, he called out, "George!"

"What?"

"Come here, quick!"

George popped his head out a few seconds later. "Well, hello!"

"Why are you closed?" Ron asked.

"Come on in and shut the door," George instructed. When they had, he told them, "Look, we're not going out of business or anything. We're doing moderately well with owl orders. . . ."

"There are order forms on the counter," Fred pointed out.

"We're doing some special orders," George told them, "and that's really all we can say about it."

"So we adjusted the shop," Fred said. "Moved the walls up, so we can have a larger workroom."

"The current work actually pays a bit better in some ways," George commented. "Still, we'd rather be doing jokes."

"So how's Knockturn Alley doing?" Harry asked.

"Business is booming over there, by all accounts," George replied.

"It was a lot grungier and less interesting than we thought it would be," Fred admitted.

"Lots of business in protection amulets, especially against dementors."

"About the only one that works is Muggle, if there aren't many wards to interfere." Fred thought a moment. "A battery and a flesh bulb?"

"Flash bulb?" Hermione asked.

"That's it," George agreed. "They were selling in Knockturn Alley for two Galleons. Dad and Dung got together, and Dung's selling them three for a Galleon."

"I can clue you in on the most effective flash bulbs," Colin offered.

"How would you know that?" Ginny asked.

"We'll let you in on it later," Harry said. "Right now, it's secret."

Colin finished scribbling on an order form and handed it to George. "Just trust me on this, alright?"

"We will, and not a word," Fred said.

"These are a little more expensive," Colin warned, "but they should work better."

"We'll work things out."

That night, Hermione snuggled next to Harry and held him tightly.

"What are you thinking about, Angel?" Harry asked.

"Lots of things, few of them any good," she admitted. "War . . . I can understand what we're doing. I may be an idealist, but I'm not a pacifist. I understand a defensive war, which is what we're fighting. But to fight for the sake of conquest, to impose slavery on others. . . ."

"Would you fight to stop slavery?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. . . . Maybe I would. But isn't fighting to help others different than fighting to impose my will on others for my own advantage?"

"If we win, we'll be imposing our wills on others, and you wouldn't say that was wrong," Harry answered. "And if we lose, Voldemort will impose slavery until someone else rises up and destroys him."

"I know, but you do see the differences, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, it's easier to see than it is to explain," Harry agreed.

"It's going to be difficult going back," Hermione admitted. "Snape was a horrid man, and even if he knew a lot about potions, he wasn't that good of a teacher. Still, it will be odd without him and all those Slytherins."

"It will," Harry agreed yet again, since Hermione had brought this up a few times since Christmas. "I wonder who will replace him."

"Harry!"

"What?" Harry demanded. "Life goes on, Hermione. Let's say I kill Voldemort by this June, and Dumbledore dies in July or I get hit by a lorry in August. Hogwarts will still start up on the First of September, Ron will still cheer for the Chudley Cannons, and you'll still be on the top of the N.E.W.T.s. I would miss Dumbledore, even if I still don't totally trust him. I know you would miss me, because I know you love me. If I can just kill Voldemort, life will at least go on until the next horrid thing comes along. I just hope, if I'm still here, I'm not the one who will have to handle it."

Hermione hugged Harry closely and kissed his bare chest.

"I'm going to miss holding you like this every night," Harry said, his voice now soft.

"How about like this?" Hermione said with a grin.

"Oooo, I'll miss that even more," Harry teased.

"How about like this?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

Hermione lightly slapped Harry's flank.

Sunday, January 5, 1997

The return train started at 10:00 am. It was a very subdued crowd of students that boarded the train. The prefects didn't have to patrol, as there were plenty of aurors to keep watch.

The eight friends sat quietly for over two hours, Ron and Henrietta carefully avoiding each other. They silently ate the boxed lunches Winky had packed, and the candy and cauldron and pumpkin cakes. Suddenly, Harry sat up. "You know something . . . I have an idea."

"You look tired, Albus."

"I am, Minerva, I am." He sighed as they walked into the Great Hall. "This war has barely started, and as always, the price is already too high."

"I know . . . I remember."

Dumbledore looked around. "Where are the students?" The students who had stayed over should be there at the very least.

Remus Lupin walked over. "Harry came in and called them all out to the entrance hall, then everyone was asked to leave."

McGonagall sniffed. "And I suppose all the staff and aurors just left them alone."

The four House ghosts drifted over. "We thought it wise to leave as well," Nick stated.

"Young Potter was most . . . forceful," the Baron declared happily. He decided he liked the boy, and only wished he'd been sorted into Slytherin.

"I have now been here the longest," the Friar stated, "over six hundred years now. I have seen perhaps five Seventh years who approached the pure presence I have just seen towards the end of their last year. You among them, Headmaster. I have never seen it in a Sixth year."

The rest of the staff and guests had drifted over. Some of the guests looked puzzled. "Do not discount Mister Potter," Flitwick stated.

At that moment, the doors of the room swung open, and the students came milling in. "I suggest we sit down and await developments," Dumbledore suggested.

Even as Dumbledore took his seat, he heard McGonagall hiss in surprise. Dumbledore looked up . . . and saw the problem. The remaining members of the upper three Slytherin classes were seated at the Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor tables. At the Slytherin table sat the Seventh year Hufflepuffs, the Sixth year Gryffindors, and Fifth year Hufflepuffs.

Silence fell over the staff table while the remaining students took their seats. Harry adjusted his chair and simply looked up at Dumbledore, calm and collected. Dumbledore nodded, and Harry stood and walked over.

"Yes, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"We, the upper classes, believe we should assist our fellow students. After tonight, each of the upper three years of Gryffindors will be alternating sitting with the Slytherins at dinner. Each morning, each of the upper three years of Hufflepuffs will alternate at breakfast. Each evening after dinner, the upper classes of Ravenclaws will provide at least three tutors to help the younger Slytherins."

"I see. Very commendable."

"I'll pass the word on, sir."

"No need, Harry." Dumbledore stood, and Harry walked back to his seat at the Slytherin table. "Welcome back," Dumbledore stated. "We are a school in mourning. We have lost nearly half of the top three years of Slytherin House. We have lost our Potions Master and Head of Slytherin." He paused. "We have not had such losses since April of 1981. We can only hope we will not suffer such a loss again in the near future. We must stick together in this time of pain and loss, or else we shall surely suffer all the more. I thank the upper years of all four Houses for their spirit of cooperation. Fifty points to each House."

Dumbledore sighed. "Professor Sinistra is the new Head of Slytherin. I would also like to introduce our new Potions Master, Professor Theodora Napitak, who trained at the Stoa in Greece and then went on to work for the Greek Ministry and then the International." The woman, small and dark, stood and bowed.

"I know you will work hard this term," Dumbledore said. "As an American statesman once said, 'we must hang together, otherwise, we shall certainly hang separately'."