

To the Rescue: Alternative Universe

By

DrT

Table of Contents

Chapter I

Monday, September 28, 1981

"Lily, I really shouldn't be here."

"I know, darling, but we have to talk."

"About what?"

"About Harry, about his future."

James frowned. "What do you mean? We're going under the Fidelius next week. We'll be safe."

Lily shook her head. "I know Divination isn't very accurate. . . ."

"It can be," James said, "but there's it rare for a Muggle-born witch or wizard to have any real talent in that area. Your feelings are just feelings."

"Don't you **dare** give me that line, James! This is our children we're talking about. I. . . ."

"Children!"

"I'm pregnant, about six weeks along. I felt its magic, her magic, actually, when she was conceived. And last night, last night she came to me."

"Darling. . . ."

Lily sat down, tears running down her cheeks. "She had my eyes, just like Harry, but her hair was auburn. She changed, from a toddler, to a child not quite old enough for Hogwarts, and then a younger teen, maybe fourteen or fifteen. She alternated between those forms, but she spoke consistently. She said that she was never going to grow up, because Voldemort would find us. She would die as a fetus or as a toddler, depending on who we choose as a secret keeper. We would die with her. Harry would destroy Voldemort, either in his first or last year at Hogwarts. If Petunia raises him, it will be in his last year. If Tabitha raises him, it will be in his first."

"Sirius. . . ."

"Face facts, James! If we're killed, do you think Sirius would likely live long enough to raise Harry? Peter would be a worse parent than Petunia, and the Ministry would never allow Remus to do it."

"We're not going to die, Lily. Well, not for a hundred to a hundred and fifty years, anyway."

"Then why not let me have my way on this, James? If it won't happen, why worry about it?"

James switched arguments, having lost the first one. "Why Tabitha? She'd likely marry Henry, and he's sworn primarily to the Longbottom baby."

"Neville is the same age as Harry," Lily reminded him.

"Whatever. Until they talk in complete sentences, they're babies. Anyway, Tudor looks more like Harry."

"It would be easier to explain away Harry's black hair than his green eyes," Lily retorted. "And I trust Tabitha. Please James! Before we go under the Fidelius, let's change our wills."

James frowned. There was a thousand years of family pride involved in what he felt, but knew it would be difficult for a middle-class Muggle-born like Lily to understand. On the other hand, there was just that small chance Lily might be right.

"I can't let them adopt Harry," he finally said. "Lily . . . pretend for a moment, we're Muggles, back hundreds of years ago. I'm James, Earl Potter. Harry has been born to a position in life. That position is important. We can't give up his birthright."

"But. . . ."

James held up his hand. "I will agree to Tabitha having Harry's guardianship under the following conditions. One, his name must legally stay as it is. They may disguise his surname until he is eleven. Two, they tell him our story by his eleventh birthday. Three, they don't try to pass off any living person as Harry's father. Four, unless Dumbledore or a Hogwarts professor designated by Dumbledore says differently, Harry **must** attend Hogwarts, and under his real name."

Lily thought about that. It offered Harry slightly less protection than her ideas, but probably fit in with her child's prophecy better. "Alright," she said. "I'll tell Tabitha. You tell Dumbledore and change the wills. We'll sign them before we go into hiding."

Thursday, October 1, 1981

"I'll miss you," Lily told Tabitha and Tom.

"We'll miss the two of you," Tom said, shaking Harry's hand, which made the toddler giggle.

"You're a very happy baby, Harry," Tabitha said softly, tears forming in her eyes. "Try and stay happy. Here," she said to Lily, handing her a conch shell.

"What does this do?"

"Well, right now, if you hold it to your ear you can hear the ocean," Tom said. "We want you and Dumbledore to go over it, to show that there're no enchantments on it right now. We'll enchant it, and five others. We'll keep one, Lloyd will take one, Dumbledore will take one, and you can give the fifth one to one of James' friends. These will only work one way. If you or James call for help -- the phrase will be 'goddess, help us' -- we will be able to reach you despite the Fidelius. We cannot trace you unless it sends out an alarm, and it will not work at all in the other direction."

"And, if any of the three of you are seriously injured, you have twenty minutes to prevent it from calling out a distress call. The phrase is, 'goddess, hold back,'" Tabitha instructed. "If . . . should anything worse happen, the alarm will go off automatically."

"Thank you."

"Do you remember all the rituals we've taught you?" Tabitha asked.

"Oh, yes," Lily said. "I hope I don't need any of them."

"We hope you won't, either," Tom acknowledged.

Lily turned to Tabitha. "Remember your promises."

"I swear to them all," Tabitha affirmed. If worse came to worse, she would raise Harry.

Saturday, October 31, 1981

11:20 pm

"Is somethin' wrong, Professor Dumbledore, sir?"

Dumbledore had been walking around the castle since the end of the Feast. He had been troubled all day. Although he knew his gift in divination was tiny, he did not think he was being paranoid. He looked up, surprised to see Hagrid.

"I cannot believe anything is wrong. However, I cannot shake the belief something is about to happen, or perhaps is even happening."

"Is there anythin' I can do, Professor?"

'Why not?' Dumbledore thought. "Do you have your, well, your umbrella with you?" He led Hagrid back to his office.

"Bit of a raw night, I thought, sir," Hagrid said, although both men knew the night was cold and clear.

"Good. Sugar Quill," he said, giving his current password. "I shall make a portkey for you. If everything is fine, you will appear in what will look like an open field. If everything is fine, keep holding on to the portkey. If everything is not alright . . . access the situation. You will be able to tell, because there will be a small house . . . or its wreckage. If no Death Eaters are outside, drop the portkey instantly and look for survivors."

"Who might I be looking for?"

"Harry Potter."

"What, not James an' Lily?"

"If you see anything other than an empty field, it is unlikely that there will any other survivors, from either side. The most we could hope for is young Harry. Now remember, the portkey will return two minutes after you arrive. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

Hagrid disappeared. At the same moment, the conch shell the Potters had given him began to blow the alarm that signaled at least one of the Potters had been killed.

Dumbledore's face turned ashen, but he hurried to the fireplace to put out the alarm call. The North Americans would be there soon after Hagrid, but it would best if he could signal a general alert.

Hagrid arrived approximately 10 seconds after he had left Dumbledore's office. As far as he could tell, he was standing near a large larch, facing an open field. "Good," he muttered, "no problems."

But about thirty seconds later, there was an explosion which blew Hagrid back into the tree. A lesser man would have been knocked out, and probably seriously injured. Hagrid managed to pick himself up within seconds. He was shocked to see the remains of a small house lay in what had been the open field. He threw down the portkey, and approached cautiously, his umbrella out and at the ready. He couldn't notice a large rat scurrying out of the opposite side of the wreckage and head into the woods.

At that moment, he heard a child crying. Hagrid tore through the rubble, tossing sections of wall as he did so. In less than two minutes, he had uncovered toddler Harry, who was clutching on his mother's robe. There was a jagged cut bleeding on his forehead. A few feet away there was a robe that Hagrid knew instinctively knew had been Voldemort's. "You!" he growled. Had Harry's crying not intensified, Hagrid would have torn through the rubble, looking for Voldemort's body and James'. He flipped another wall out of the way to make certain the rubble wouldn't fall on them, and he saw James' lifeless body. "Poor tyke," he said softly.

Hagrid started to carry the crying toddler out of the wreckage. As he did so, he heard another sound, and looked up, umbrella again at the ready.

"Oh, it's you," Hagrid said as Sirius Black landed.

"Damn!" Sirius swore. "The rotten bastard! I'll kill him! Did you see the rat?"

Sirius meant Peter, but of course Hagrid thought he meant Voldemort.

"Aven't seen anyone alive but Harry."

"Give him to me. I'm his godfather. I'll take care of him."

"Dumbledore said I was to take him if I were to find him."

Sirius looked torn for a moment, then decided to go after Peter first, since Harry was safe. He would come to regard that as the second worst of idea of his life, after suggesting that Peter be the Secret Keeper in the first place. "Fine. Take my bike, then. It'll adjust for you. To ride it like a broomstick, the command is 'Snivellus blows.' To turn it back into a Muggle cycle, the command is 'Snivellus sucks.'"

Hagrid shook his head at that. "Go on," Sirius commanded. "Make sure he's safe, if you're not going to turn him over to me."

"Alright." Hagrid made his way over to the motorcycle. He turned to ask Sirius a question, but he had seemingly disappeared. He had, in fact, transformed into his dog form. Sirius was already trailing Pettigrew's trail into the woods from the other side of the rubble, out of Hagrid's line of sight.

"Where'd he go?" Hagrid asked the still whimpering Harry, suspicious. Hagrid was about to mount the enlarged motorcycle a few moments later when he heard a deep voice say, "Move and you're dead."

"It's alright, Henry," a deeper voice said. "That's Hagrid, one of Dumbledore's people."

"Still, don't move." Four people came around to the front.

Hagrid recognized one of them. "Yer the American's," he said, his accent thickening.

"That's right," Tudor Myrddin answered. "Harry, Johnny, check the parameter. Tabby, check the bodies. Hagrid, tell me everything you know."

In less than five more minutes, fifteen members of the Order and nine more of the Americans, plus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody, had arrived. Hagrid had repeated his tale, and Dumbledore had told them about the Fidelius, plus the fact that the last he knew, Sirius Black was to be the Secret Keeper.

"So that's why he wanted Harry!" Hagrid roared, nearly waking the exhausted Harry up. He had refused to allow Harry out of his massive arms.

"Sirius Black? The spy?" Henry said. "That's hard to believe."

"Do you doubt it?" Tudor asked.

"A little, but if he wasn't, then he certainly knows what happened," Henry retorted.

"Either he is guilty or he knows who is, and went after them," Tabitha stated. "Either way, we must find him. Either way, someone will pay for this. And there is only one treasure that this crime may be redeemed in!"

"Gwaed!" John Alden, one of the druids who had sworn to protect Harry shouted.

"Ni!" Tudor shouted. "GWAEDOLIAETH!"

"GWAEDOLIAETH!" John, Henry, and Tabitha all screamed. All four Old Believers then raised their wands, and again shouted, "GWAEDOLIAETH!" Four bolts of jagged lightning flashed into the sky. "GWAEDOLIAETH!" and all the Americans had joined in.

Tudor turned to Dumbledore. "For the moment, we shall protect the child. None but us, save you, shall approach him without instant death. Henry! Tabitha! I charge you with his life!"

"Our lives are forfeit, should we fail," they answered.

"I want Hagrid with him," Dumbledore stated. "And this is only until Black is found."

Tudor stared at Dumbledore, who stared back. Tabitha and Henry joined their leader and glared at Dumbledore. Dumbledore backed down, reluctantly.

Tudor turned away. "Henry, fly that thing to your house. Hagrid, please carry Harry on the back. Tabitha, return now and guard. Contact Tom and Lloyd. There are to be two of you with Harry at all times."

"I obey."

"I obey."

Tudor turned to the other Confederation members. "You know who we are looking for. Find him!" As the motorcycle took off, all the Americans disappeared.

Alastor Moody turned to Dumbledore. "What was that all about?"

"They have been challenged to enforce what to them is a sacred contract. Their charge, Harry, has been orphaned and hurt. This act can only be paid for in blood. But not just blood, that is 'gwaed'. That is any blood. No, they swore by their blood, the blood of their families, their faith -- it is the blood of the killers or their own. Now, let me try and deduce what happened here tonight."

Monday, November 1, 1981

Dumbledore stood in the parlor of the house used by one of the Confederation teams. Tom Lawrence, Tabitha, and Henry were standing behind Tudor, ready to back him up. Tabitha held Harry in her arms. Tom and Lloyd came in to lend further support.

"The Ministry will not allow you to have Black, let alone allow you to execute him," Dumbledore repeated. "He is captured; Voldemort is disembodied. You are not foresworn. Now, let Hagrid have Harry. We need to take him to his relatives."

"No," Tabitha stated. "We have a copy of the Potters' will. I am Harry's guardian. Lily said her sister loathed her, and loathed magic. How can you allow her to have custody of Harry?"

"You taught Lily the ritual that protected Harry," Dumbledore pointed out.

"Yes, the Mother's Sacrifice," Tom agreed. "I am not so certain that placing Harry with his mother's family will be as effective as you think."

"Especially not when we have a better, and legal, alternative," Tudor added.

"Why do you believe it is better?" Dumbledore demanded.

"On the one hand, we do not believe Lily's sister a fit guardian. We base this on Lily's opinion. On the other hand, Harry needs to be protected. There are still uncaught Death Eaters, and we totally agree with you, Voldemort is more likely disembodied than destroyed. That means he will likely come back. Harry is now the symbol of his downfall, and so will likely be a target. While the Sacrifice will partially protect Harry against the Death Eaters, it will also only partially protect him against Voldemort, whenever he is reembodyed. If Harry is raised with love, the Sacrifice will be stronger in him against Voldemort, although non-existent against the Death Eaters," Tom explained.

Dumbledore had still not said anything about the Prophecy. "Explain that, please."

Tudor went on. "You believe the Sacrifice will protect Harry. We have doubts about its strength, considering Petunia's feelings towards magic. In addition, we agree that it would not be a good idea to raise Harry in the general British magical community. It could be dangerous, it could be almost as bad for his ego as being raised by his aunt, if in the opposite extreme."

"I believe you exaggerate his aunt's disdain," Dumbledore said.

"We do not," Tudor said firmly. "Like it or not, Tabitha is Harry's legal guardian, not you. Anyone trying to harm him or separate them will face the wrath of all the Old Believers."

"I don't have any real family I have to explain my self to. I shall say I married a fighter named John Evans," Tabitha said. "That was Lily's father's name. He was killed before Harry was even born. Henry and I will marry, and live in magical territory. We will raise him to know magical and Muggle culture. After he leaves school in 1991, we will tell Harry the whole truth. We will bring him to Britain, to be educated at Hogwarts unless you believe it will be too dangerous. If so, we will send him to the Ysgol."

"We will come with him, of course. We shall live in Hogsmeade, to help him," Henry added.

Dumbledore bowed his head, knowing this was a fight he could not win.

"No one else in Britain today is to know," Tudor warned. "We five, plus Tom and Lloyd."

"And Professor Minerva McGonagall," Dumbledore added.

"Very well," Tudor agreed.

"Remember, not one word to any else," Tabitha warned. "Harry is Harry Evans at least until the moment he steps aboard the Hogwarts Express."

"Why then?" Tudor asked.

"The scar," Henry said. "It was already in today's Prophet. Unless we can disguise it, Harry will be recognized on the train. Americans will probably ignore it, but here, people will be looking for it."

"Very well," Dumbledore agreed, reluctantly. "I am compelled to go along with you. I shall have to meet with you when you return. In the meantime, I shall let it be known that since the Dursleys hate magic so much, Harry has been placed a some Muggle cousins on his mother's side."

"I shall make the other arrangements," Tudor said. "John Evans needs a history."

Tudor Myrddin commanded a lot of authority. A history of John Evans was created which would satisfy all but the most determined researcher. Tabitha's home near Boston was sold and a new house was purchased in the magical village of Carantouan, in northern Pennsylvania.

Confederation Law Enforcement juggled its personnel, and ex-auror Henry Dorff was now the lead sersiant of the five person staff for the area around Carantouan. Of the many magical towns and villages in North America, this was picked in part because the town apothecary was elderly and willing to sell out. Tabitha took over the shop, and would also serve as the druid for the area, a position that had been open for a few years.

Tom Lawrence bought a small cottage just outside of town. No one was quite certain where his money came from, but since he was Muggle-born, they didn't question it.

Tom's good friend Lloyd Trowbridge was from Carantouan. While he would spend a few months of every year in Britain, he would come back home, building a cabin on the high ridge that formed the eastern side of the valley, which he had just bought. Unknown to all except Henry, Tabitha, and Tom, the Confederation Secret Service (the Wyverns) had in fact purchased the mountain in his name, and were hollowing it out, to create one of their communications centers. Tom and Lloyd were both working directly for the Wyverns.

Henry and Tabitha had been married as soon as they returned to North America. They, and Harry John Evans, moved into their new house on the second Saturday of December, 1981 (December 12).

Harry had been a bit confused these six weeks or so. By now, however, he was calling Tabitha 'Mom'. If he sometimes looked around for a different redhead called 'Mummy,' none of the good citizens of Carantouan ever noticed. With Tabitha, Henry, Tom, and Lloyd vouching for Harry's history (and changing his birthday to July 4), no one would ever make the connection between Harry Evans and Harry Potter.

That first Saturday night, as Harry slept in his crib with the two stuffed dogs he called 'Pa-foo' and 'Moony,' his adoptive parents smiled down at him, as their house elf, Petal, looked on. They loved Harry, and loved each other.

"Would you like some more good news?" Tabitha asked.

"Sure," Henry answered. His attention was starting to stray towards starting his job Monday.

"I missed my period, so I tested myself. I'm pregnant."

"Wow," was Henry could say. He hugged Tabitha, glad they could be together.

Chapter II

Saturday, August 28, 1982

"Harry! Get back here!" Henry demanded.

Harry, a normal two year old, didn't listen. His toy broomstick couldn't go fast, and only flew two feet above the ground, but Harry's concentration was totally on his flying.

Tom and Lloyd laughed, and Lloyd summonsed boy and broom together. Many children would have screamed, or at least protested, such treatment, but Harry was laughing the whole time.

"Again!" he demanded when his 'uncle' caught him and set him on the ground.

"Maybe later," Lloyd said.

"Didn't you hear me call you?" Henry demanded.

"No," Harry answered honestly.

Henry sighed.

"Didn't you have news?" Tom asked.

"What? Oh! Right! Come on, Harry," Henry said, holding out his hand. "You have to go meet your sister."

"Oh . . . all right."

Saturday, July 7, 1990
The Capitol

"My," Albus Dumbledore said as he came into the conference room, "this is quite a reception committee."

"Mister Dumbledore," a late middle-aged wizard in dark orange robes said, rising, "I am Jacob Trowbridge, a member of the Leadership Council. You believe you know Tudor Myrddin (our new chief hit wizard), Henry Dorff, Thomas Lawrence, and Lloyd Trowbridge. This is Mari Lloyd, a member of the Council of Druids, and Cadfael ap Tudur ap Mawrth ap Rhys of the Hidden."

Dumbledore greeted them in Welsh and then sat.

"You asked for this meeting. What is it you need to know, Mister Dumbledore?"

"First of all, the obvious. Have there been any Death Eater activities anywhere near Harry?"

Myrddin answered that. "No, sir, there has not been. There have been twelve attempts to locate Harry in North America over the last eight years. Six were intercepted at the borders. Two tried to investigate the area in and around the Capitol, while two others tried to investigate around Newton. We had to let them investigate the Capitol, but stopped them as soon as they tried to move outside the city, while the other two groups were stopped in Newton. A fifth tried to start in Florida, because they could get in through the Caribbean. The others were also stopped immediately."

"Those I knew of," Dumbledore said. "And the final attempt?"

"This was made last year," Cadfael said. "They attempted to come in via what they thought was empty territory, after a stop in Greenland. Our dragons caught them. We questioned them, and then . . . disposed of them."

Dumbledore repressed a slight shudder at the man's tone.

"The leader of that one had a fair amount of information, which we did not pass on to your Ministry, because no one quite knew how to word it," Cadfael went on with a chilling smile. He slid some parchment to Dumbledore. "There is a summary. In short, they are still primarily checking in Britain. They satisfied themselves that Harry was not with these Dursleys, but had them executed anyway. As two of the ones we captured were amongst the executioners, we took that into consideration in their executions."

Cadfael went on, "We did send the heads and a skin back to their patron in Britain. We told Lucius Malfoy that if he ever stepped foot on to our lands, we would skin him alive."

Dumbledore shuddered openly this time. American wizardry was such an odd combination of modern openness and ancient harshness.

"I really do not think you need worry about Harry while he is in North America," Trowbridge stated. "Why should he go back next year?"

"Because that is what his parents wanted, and that is what the Dorffs agreed to when they took him," Dumbledore answered. "Harry was prophesied to kill Voldemort -- in short, only one may live. Harry's mother prophesied that if Tabitha Dorff raised him, he would face and destroy the Dark Lord at the end of his First year. He can not do that in North America. He must come to Hogwarts. If he does not, then Voldemort will likely rise again."

Trowbridge looked at the grim-faced Myrddin and Dorff, and knew they agreed, but would never admit to it. He therefore turned to another pair for judgement. "Cadfael, Tom, I trust your knowledge and interpretive skills. Do you agree?"

"Yes," Cadfael said.

Before he could add more, Tom jumped in. "I also agree, but Harry does **not** go back alone. Are there any positions opening up at Hogwarts next year?"

"No," Dumbledore said. "We have a temporary Defense teacher this coming year, but our regular professor will be back next July."

"How about a competent, living History teacher?" Lloyd asked. "I understand that has been a problem this entire century."

"I find having a ghost on staff has a few advantages," Dumbledore temporized.

"Is he any good?" Tom demanded.

Dumbledore sighed. "No, not really. However, if I replace him, it should be with someone who intends staying longer than Harry's First year or so at the school, or even his career at school."

"We'll look into it," Trowbridge said.

"Perhaps you might be willing to entertain an experiment?" Mari Lloyd suggested.

"Such as?"

"Such as a druid, teaching an optional class to all interested students on the Belief. At no cost to you, other than their room and board, of course." The British wizarding culture was rather famed for its stinginess.

"That might work," Dumbledore conceded. While he knew he had legal right on his side, Dumbledore also knew that the Confederation would be unlikely to force the Dorffs to yield Harry if they wanted to fight badly enough.

"How good is the primary school in Hogsmeade?" Henry suddenly asked.

Dumbledore frowned. "Primary school?"

"Isn't there some sort of school for students under eleven?" Henry asked.

Lloyd smiled while Tom rolled his eyes. "The British barely believe in secondary education," Lloyd said. "Children are either home-schooled, tutored, or sent to Muggle schools before the age of eleven. Hogwarts is the only major school in Britain, although there are a couple of small state-operated schools in Britain that go through the Fifth year, and one in Ireland that goes on through the seventh."

"We thought Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley would be exceptions to that," Henry confessed.

"Unfortunately, they are not," Dumbledore said. "I take it you have other children?"

"Two, Sabrina who'll be eight next month, and Henry, who's five."

"There is a small group of parents who teach their children in a co-op," Dumbledore said. "I'll put you in contact with them."

"We also want information on each of Harry's teachers and yearmates," Henry went on.

"That is not usual," Dumbledore pointed out. "We also do not allow parents to interfere with their children's education or to harass the teachers. We must not allow Harry to be thought of as special."

"Really?" Myrddin said in mock surprise. He 'tsked' several times, and then gave Dumbledore a look which would have shaken the average wizard. "Harry is special, even if he doesn't realize it. And we are sworn to Harry on many levels."

"And the entire Community of Faith have joined in that commitment," Mari Lloyd added quietly.

"And she does mean the **entire** community," Cadfael added. "We will be with Harry."

"Now wait. . . ."

"**No**," Cadfael interrupted. "There is the remains of a circle near Hogwarts, in what you term the Forbidden Forest. We still have the agreement we made with your Founders. If we are forbidden access to it, or for the use of the area near it, we may reclaim the territory of the entire Forest, Hogwarts, the lake, and Hogsmeade."

"But. . . ."

"We have a fully binding magical contract. We would be able to drain the entire area of its wards and magic, which only exist because we have agreed that they should exist."

Dumbledore was speechless.

"We are willing to risk Harry for the greater good," Tudor said quietly. "That does **not** mean he will face the danger alone, with no resources. He may not know that we are there, ready to help, but we will be. Take our offer, or leave Harry here."

"How do you expect Harry to cope?" Dumbledore asked.

"How do you?" Henry asked in return. "Do whatever it is you're planning on. We'll help Harry and try not to directly interfere."

"We have studied the boy long," Cadfael said. "It is good that we have been able to do so. He will have reserve of power greater than any wizard we have studied since Merlin. He is intelligent, very athletic, very brave, and above all, he has a heart that is ready to encompass the world with his love. That love may have prevailed in the environment you prepared for him, Albus Dumbledore, but it would not have been powerful enough to destroy this Dark Lord of yours, who is powered by hate."

"Really?" Dumbledore asked, skeptically.

"Certainly not in his first year," Cadfael answered. "It would have needed until he found love. You would have sent him to a loveless home."

"If you hadn't taken him in, would I have had a better choice?"

"Perhaps not," Trowbridge said. "Growing up in the British magical world, he could easily have been spoiled, and perhaps even discovered and killed."

"Are you going to tell him before you come to Britain?" Dumbledore asked, deciding he should cut his losses before more conditions were thought of.

"Yes," Henry answered. "That was a condition, after all"

"Don't be surprised if you don't find a perfectly matched wand for Harry," Dumbledore said as he stood. "I believe his match is waiting for him at Ollivander's."

"We'll keep that in mind."

Wednesday, July 3, 1991

Harry stepped out of the fireplace on the porch of Lloyd Trowbridge's cabin on the mountain late in the morning. His mother followed him out.

"Why are we here?" Harry asked as Tabitha brushed off her robes. "You said you would explain."

"I will," Tabitha answered. "Come in to the cabin."

Harry went in and sat down, puzzled. Tabitha smiled at the boy who had been her son for almost ten years. He was slightly above average in height, and even though he played and exercised hard, he was lanky rather than very muscular. With their matching eyes, none had ever doubted he was her son by a previous marriage.

"It's time to tell you about your heritage, Harry. The first thing I need to say is how much I love you."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I know you do, Mom, you don't have to make a big fuss about it."

"I do, because you're going to hate me."

Harry looked puzzled. "Why would I hate you?"

Tabitha handed Harry a small photo album. Harry frowned, but opened it. He saw a man who looked a lot like him and a very pretty woman in each of the early photos, along with an infant, which he realized must be him. A number of other photos had him and the red-haired woman as well as the pair with his parents and other people he knew.

"Is that my real dad?" Harry asked. He wondered why his mother had told him she didn't have any photos of his father, when she obviously did.

"That's James, yes."

"Who's the woman? Your sister?" Harry frowned. He remembered that he knew his mother's life well enough to realize she had no full sisters. "Who is she?" Harry whispered, scared of the answer.

"That's your real mother, Lily."

"I . . . I'm totally adopted?" Tabitha nodded. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Think, Harry. Think about what you learned in school last term. James and Lily who?"

"James and Lily? You mean . . . I'm Harry . . . Potter?"

"Yes, dear. You're the Boy-Who-Lived, savior of the European, or at least British, wizarding world. I did fight in Britain, along with your fa . . . step-father, Tom, Lloyd, and Tudor. I worked with Lily and another woman named Alice Longbottom as an intelligence officer. Lily convinced James that if anything happened to them and you survived, that I could raise you as my son."

Harry sat there, stunned.

"Why me?" she went on. "Because I loved you, and because I look like I could have been your mother, and because I am a very powerful witch. I do love you, Harry. Lily, and James, also loved you."

"Tell me about them," Harry said quietly, tears running down his cheeks.

"Anything," Tabitha said. "Just never, ever doubt that we love you as much as we do Sabrina and Henry." Tabitha opened her arms, and Harry fell into them, crying more openly. No, he would never doubt that Tabitha and Henry loved him. He knew he would never survive without that love.

Even though days are fairly long along the Pennsylvania/New York border in early July, dusk wasn't far off by the time Tabitha had finished telling all the stories she felt she could tell Harry. They ranged from her own experiences, to stories of Harry's parents, to their deaths, to background information.

"This Sirius Black doesn't sound like the type of person to betray his friends," Harry was saying.

"No, he doesn't," Tabitha agreed. "He was never tried, so it's possible something else happened. Still, it's more likely his darker nature prevailed. He was raised in a very Purist household, from what I was told."

"Do I really have to go to Britain?"

"It was what your father wanted," Tabitha said reluctantly. "It was a condition we had to agree to in order to take you away. Britain will be a dangerous place for you, Harry. There are still Death Eaters and pro-Death Eaters and Purists who will hate you and try to hurt you, and no doubt their children will dislike you at school. Your life may lie either there or here, that's up to you, but your heritage is there. You must claim that first."

"I knew I'd have to go away to school," Harry said, "but I didn't think it would be so far away from you."

Tabitha laughed. "Silly boy! We've already sold the shop. We're moving near Hogsmeade, less than a mile from the grounds. Now, you probably won't be able to see us, except at

Quidditch games and such, but we'll be near by." It was still up in the air which druid or druids Dumbleodre would allow in the castle.

Harry was shocked. "I'm glad, but . . . why?"

Tabitha turned instantly serious. "Because like I said, Britain can be a dangerous place. Voldemort was not killed, Harry, he was disembodied. Our information is that he is still disembodied, but may have gathered enough strength to try to recreate himself sometime over the next few years. That may or may not be accurate. Now, you will be as safe in Hogwarts as you would be at the Ysgol, but we will be near by, just in case."

Harry frowned, "What will you do?"

"I'll be making potions for a commercial firm. I know your father will be keeping busy as well, plus we'll be keeping an eye on your brother and sister."

"Sabrina and Henry are going, too?" Harry slapped his head lightly. "I guess they'd have to."

"Exactly, and Tom and Lloyd are coming as well. Tudor has arranged to have himself assigned to Britain as an international operative along with your father, and even Cadfael . . . do you remember Cadfael ap Tudur ap Mawrth ap Rhys?"

"He's that Hidden druid that visits on the spring equinoxes right?"

"Exactly. He and some of his people won't be too far away, in the other direction."

"You think this Voldemort, or some his people, are going to try and hurt me, don't you?"

"It's very possible, Harry. It may even be likely."

Harry looked her straight in the eye. "If he tries, you'll get him, won't you, Mom?"

"We will get him, my darling."

"Then I want to go to Hogwarts. We'll get him, this time."

"We will."

The pair flooded back to their own porch. Harry had just stood up when Sabrina flung herself on Harry. "I don't care what **anyone** says. You're my big brother!"

"That's right," Harry said, hugging her back. "I am." Then Harry frowned. "I forgot to ask, when are we going?"

"We're leaving Sunday. Your father has been officially reinstated as an auror. Everyone in town will think we're on vacation until your father takes up his new duties. They'll only find out in September what the real story is. We'll be in London Monday."

"So I can still have my birthday party tomorrow?" Harry asked.

"Of course, although I should tell you your real birthday is the Thirty-first."

"So, do I get two parties?"

"I doubt it," Tabitha teased back. "If you're good, you'll get another cake, though."

"Okay."

"When isn't he good?" Sabrina demanded. She stuck her tongue out. "Goodie-goodie!"

"Sneaky-snitch!"

"Can't catch me!" And the two were off, playing a favorite game.

"Mom?"

Tabitha leaned over her son's bed that night. It had been a while since she had tucked him in.

"Yes, darling?"

"What's it going to be like?"

Tabitha sighed. "It's not going to be easy, dear. You're going to be famous for something you can't remember. Lots of people are going to gawk. Some people are going to expect too much from you. Others will dislike you or be jealous of you. In some ways, of course, that's true no matter who we are. People have opinions and prejudices. It's just going to hit you harder."

Harry frowned. "Why will they dislike me?"

"Some will dislike you because you're famous. Many people loved your parents, but not everyone did. Some people will dislike your heritage. . . ."

"What do you mean? My parents were both magical!"

"They were, and that's usually what matters here, when it matters at all, except in some of the Old Colonial families. But your birth mother was Muggle-born, and so some British Pure Bloods will look down on you as being a Half-blood."

"That's stupid."

"It is, but telling them so won't make things any better."

"I suppose not," Harry said a bit doubtfully.

"You also have money of your own, now. Some will want to be your friend because you're well off and famous, others will dislike you or be jealous for the same reasons. And. . . ."

"Yes?"

"As I said, there are some families that supported Voldemort. They all claimed to be under the Imperius Curse or something similar, but very few actually were. There are Dark families everywhere, of course, but there are more in Britain than there are in North America. Some will openly dislike you; others will try and pull you to them."

"How can I tell which is which?"

"You can't always. Most of the Dark families are usually sorted into Slytherin -- remember, there are only four Houses at Hogwarts."

"I don't like the sound of Slytherin," Harry said. "Gryffindor or Ravenclaw sound better."

"Well, we'll see what the Sorting Hat has to say."

Harry smiled. He was looking forward to the adventure.

Chapter III

Saturday, July 13, 1991

Harry tumbled out of the fireplace, and as usual managed to land upright. His two siblings tumbled out behind him, and he helped young Henry to his feet (he knew Sabrina would resent it). His step-father came next, while their mother apparated next to them.

Once Harry and Sabrina had made Henry presentable, their parents introduced them to their hosts.

"This is our hostess, Madam Longbottom," Tabitha said, presenting the stern middle-aged woman to her children. "And this is Neville Longbottom, whom I've spoken of. Madam Longbottom, Neville, this is our adopted son Harry Evans and our children Sabrina and Henry."

"Evans?" Madam Longbottom asked.

"Well," Harry said with a smile that to her surprise the stern old witch returned, "that's been my name for almost ten years, anyway."

"What was it before then?" Neville asked, curiously.

"Harry Potter," Harry said. He was surprised at how wide Neville's eyes went with the surprise.

"Really?" Neville asked, a little awe-struck. "You're **the** Harry Potter?"

"Is there more than one?" Harry joked.

"Well, Mister Potter, welcome back to Britain," Madam Longbottom said. "Neville, take Harry and his siblings outside to play or plant or something. Oh, do try not to forget this -- he is Harry Evans until you reach Hogwarts."

"Actually, make it Henry Evans," Tabitha said. "To be on the safe said.

"You heard that, Neville?"

"Yes, Gran." Neville turned to Harry. "Do you like gardens? We have quite a nice one. . . ."

The children left the reception hall.

"Does Neville have memory problems?" Tabitha asked sharply.

"He does," Madam Longbottom said. "That fool Fudge messed with the boy's mind at the age of two! Two! I'm surprised the boy can even access part of his magic!"

"Can't anything be done?" Henry asked.

"We don't know," she said. "If I tried to get treatment for him, Fudge would have the Ministry after us. The stupid . . . well, I can't really say what I think of him."

"Shall I try to help him?" Tabitha asked gently.

"Well, that's the reason Dumbledore suggested when he asked me to invite you to come," the formidable witch stated. "After all, Neville may become acquainted with the Potter boy at school in any event." Then she noticed the looks she was getting, especially from Tabitha, and quickly backpedaled. "Not that I'm not happy to host you! I'm just very concerned for Neville's well-being. . . ."

"I understand," Henry said, since Tabitha was still glaring.

"I shall need your permission to enter Neville's sub-conscious and memories through his dreams," Tabitha finally stated. "There is likely little I can do for him as a 'quick-fix' without stirring up a lot of pain, although I will try not to cause him any tonight."

"I understand. We shall see how things go tonight then."

Sunday, July 14, 1991

"I understand from the house elf that you have ordered Neville to sleep in?" Madam Longbottom stated with an air of authority. "Is that necessary? He is a very lazy boy, always late."

"It is," Tabitha responded. "He needed his rest after my examinations last night. I doubt if he will remember any of it, but he would be very disoriented this morning without some really deep, healing sleep. We may be able to give him some good news, so he won't feel too guilty about have slept in."

"I see. And that good news would be?"

"His mind is not physically damaged. The obliviation, however, has affected much of his short-term memory. It will take one night of terror, and perhaps two to three weeks of hard dream work, but I believe I can really help him. He will still be a bit more absent-minded than the average boy, but he will find school-work much easier, and I believe his magic will increase a great deal." Tabitha frowned. "There is one other thing that will help that."

"And that is?"

"He should have a properly-matched wand. While he is pleased you would trust him with his father's, Neville may fall a bit behind in classes like Charms and Transfiguration otherwise."

"I see."

"We're taking Harry to Ollivander's. We were planning on going soon, but I really need to work with Neville. Perhaps we can go on the boys' birthday?"

"Neville believes his birthday is the Thirtieth," Madam Longbottom said. Seeing the questioning look, she added, "I am not certain why Dumbledore suggested the slight deception."

"We believe there must have been some prophecy made, that could have applied to either Harry or Neville," Tabitha answered. "While it almost certainly applies to Harry. . . ."

"That could be the real reason why Frank and Alice were targeted," Madam Longbottom concluded. "Yes, you may be right. I saw no reason why those evil people might have thought they knew where that evil being might be hiding. If Frank had known, the aurors would have gone after that beast. They would not have held back."

"Exactly. Well, do I have your permission to talk to Neville? I really can't go forward without his conscious permission."

"Yes, I believe you must. Can the process hurt Neville in any way?"

"It cannot damage Neville in any way, but it will certainly contain much emotional hurt," Tabitha said honestly. "In a sense, we are tearing thick scar tissues to create smaller ones."

"Then go talk with him."

"Thank you, Madam Longbottom."

"You mean, I won't be forgetful? I won't be as clumsy?" Neville asked eagerly.

"You won't be **as** forgetful," Tabitha repeated. "I have no idea if it will help your physical coordination or not. It will certainly not be worse."

Neville squared his shoulders. "Then we'll do it."

"Good lad," Tabitha said. 'Here is another lad marked for Gryffindor,' Tabitha thought proudly. "Alice and Frank would be proud of you," she added aloud. Neville beamed.

Monday, July 15, 1991
The Ministry of Magic

"Please, sir. . . ."

"I have shown I am an auror of the North American Confederation, with authority from the International, the Warlocks, and the Old Believers," Henry stated. "I may **not** surrender my wand."

"What's your problem, Franklin?" a growled demanded.

"Oh, Mister Moody! This man won't surrender. . . ."

"Does he have the proper documentation?"

"Yes, sir. . . ."

"Then he's right," Moody growled, "and you know it."

"Very well, sir."

Henry turned to thank Moody, but the words stuck in his throat.

"What's the matter, lad? Look different, do I?"

"You do," Henry admitted. "What . . . how. . . ."

"Come along, unless you have an appointment soon?"

"No," Henry said as they walked away, "I came in early. I have an appointment with Fudge at Eleven."

"Two hours early, huh? Got other people to meet?"

"Yes, I do. Just to visit, of course."

"Of course," Moody agreed. They went in silence until they were in a small office. Moody waved a silencing spell into place.

"If you're wondering how I got so bloody banged up," Moody snarled, "it's because the series of idiots we've had since Voldemort's fall have cut the aurors down below the strength we had before the bastard got started. I was sent out on missions alone that should have had at least two, if not four, aurors. Lost my leg on the last one, but they allowed me to come in on limited desk duty until the First of August, when I'll have my seventy-five years in."

"I see." Moody was more than banged up. He had more scars than a werewolf and was missing an eye (replaced by a magical one that was difficult to look into), the lower part of a leg (replaced by a peg-leg that ended in a claw), and a chunk of his nose. "Where are you retiring to?" Henry asked casually.

Moody made a startling face. "I have a little cottage hidden in amongst the Muggles. Used it as a safe-house. I don't like it, but the area has become run-down and I can't get a decent price for it."

"Where would you have liked to retire to?"

Moody's good eye squinted at him. "Hogsmeade. Why?"

"We'll buy you a small place in Hogsmeade, since there's one suitable," Henry told the old auror.

"Why?" Moody asked again.

"Because Tabitha and I, and our children, are going to be living there for a while."

"You!" Moody said in an excited hiss as he made the connections. "You two are the ones who must have taken the Potter boy!"

"Exactly. And having an experienced local resource would certainly be helpful."

"So Harry Potter will be at Hogwarts. . . ."

"Unless my meeting with Fudge goes very badly, yes."

"Ah. Fudge is an idiot. Convince him it's in his best political interest and he'd bend over and offer his arse to a giant."

Henry winced at the image, but said, "If he gets on the wrong side of us, especially Tabitha, he'd prefer the giant."

Moody smiled another scarred smile. "May I know why else you're here?"

"Harry needs some people he knows in his year, especially those who will likely be in his House. He's met Neville Longbottom, and the next mostly likely boy we were told he should get to know would be a Ronald Weasley."

"One of Arthur Weasley's boys? Good man, Arthur." Moody smiled again. "Which House you think the boy will be in?"

"Probably Gryffindor, although I guess an argument could be made for any of the others," Henry admitted.

"Well, we'll see. Go on and meet Arthur. You'll like him, but don't be fooled by his enthusiasms and mild manner. There's a core of steel in that one."

"That's good to know. May I use your quill?"

Sure, go ahead. That one won't bite."

Henry looked at the quill warily, but wrote on the back of one of his Muggle-style business cards.

"That one can be trusted?" Moody asked. When Henry looked surprised, Moody just tapped his magical eye. Henry understood, and just nodded. Moody also understood the cryptic name was that of a Gringotts' goblin, who would arrange for the money needed for the cottage in Hogsmeade.

Wednesday, July 31, 1991

Harry and the four Dorffs flooded to the Leaky Cauldron at 9:00. Henry escorted Harry into the Alley proper, while Tabitha checked on the arrangements for lunch.

"Wow," Harry said, looking about in awe. "This is a lot different than Carantuan."

"It is," Henry agreed. "The magical districts in New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans are more like this, only the first two are even bigger. Come on, first stop, Gringotts."

"Then where to, Dad?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Well, you already have nearly everything you need. We do need the school uniforms, though, and we want to see if we can get you a better wand. Anything else you need, birthday boy?"

"How about an owl?" Harry suggested.

"Alright. Gringotts, Malkins, Ollivanders, Eeylops. I'll pick up your textbooks. Let's go."

Harry had quite liked his trip through Gringotts, although he had been truly astounded at the amount of money he had. His step-father had explain the Potter family's finances to him, but to actually see all that gold and silver in his 'current account' had been amazing.

He had also been introduced into someone who had to be a half giant. Hagrid, the grounds keeper at Hogwarts, had looked more than a bit wild and intimidating at first glance, but when Harry saw how glad his step-father was to see the being, Harry relaxed a little. In moments, Harry was glad he had met the friendly near-giant.

Hagrid had even ridden with them to the vaults, although he was very secretive about what he was getting from vault 713. Whatever it was, it was something small, Harry saw, and it had been the only thing in the large vault. It was curious, but not really important. Harry was just glad that the cart ride was such fun.

He was rather bored now, however, as he stood being measured for his school robes while his step-father picked up his pre-ordered school books for him.

As he was standing being measured by one assistant, a blond boy came in with another.

"Hello," the boy said. "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes, just starting."

"Me, too. My father is picking up my books while my mother is picking up my wand," the boy said in an exaggeratedly bored manner. "After we're done here, I want to look at the racing brooms! It's a shame we can't have our own until the Second year. Do you have a broom?"

"Oh, yes," Harry said. "A Golden Arrow."

"Never heard of it," the boy said with a sniff.

"It's an American racing broom," Harry told him.

"Oh. Do you play Quidditch?"

"No," Harry said in a frustrated tone. "They don't allow you to play Quidditch until you're thirteen on the town pitch. Quodpot is almost as much fun to play, although Quidditch is a lot more fun to watch."

"You're an American?"

"No, my parents were killed in the war, so I was sent to America with some of their colleagues. I'm Henry Evans."

"Draco Malfoy. Which House do you think you'll be in? I'm hoping for Slytherin."

'That's a good reason to hope not to get Sorted there,' Harry thought, but what he said was, "I guess each House has something good to be said for it. Everyone I've met has said I could be sorted into any of them."

'Well,' Draco thought, 'at least he's not a Mudblood.'

Henry came in at that point, and Harry was glad to make his escape. There was just something about Draco Malfoy that made Harry uncomfortable.

When he mentioned it to his step-father, Henry nodded. He gestured slightly towards an elegant wizard striding towards the clothiers. "That's Lucius Malfoy, the boy's father. He was probably the number two man in You-Know-Who's command structure according to some, the number three man according to others."

"How did he get off?" Harry asked. He wasn't surprised that his step-father had used a euphemism for Voldemort. He had been told to do the same in public.

"The British wizarding world is still a rather eighteenth-century place. Connections mean more than truth."

"You mean he was able to bribe his way out of trouble?"

"Because there was little direct evidence," Henry added.

"Who was the real number two? Sirius Black?"

"We don't know," Henry said. "Remember, we don't know the full story of what happened the night your parents were killed. If Black was indeed the Secret Keeper, as he was supposed to be, then the official Ministry story is likely correct, and he may have even been the number two man, if Malfoy wasn't."

"Is there any doubt Black betrayed my parents?" Harry asked.

"Not much," Henry said. "I didn't know Sirius well, but I thought I knew him well-enough to be surprised at the idea of his betraying James, even today. Still, the real reason I have some doubts is because of how fast the whole thing was tied up, without even a trial."

"That's not legal, is it?"

"It is in Britain," Henry said with a slight snarl. "Remember that, son. You're not in North America now. They copied an idea from the British Muggles called the Defense of the Realm Act. Under DORA, they can do a lot of things under the name of security that are not really legal."

Harry thought upon that, and then something white caught his eye. "Oh, Dad!" Harry exclaimed, grabbing his step-father's arm.

"What is it, son?"

"That is the prettiest owl I've ever seen!"

Henry looked across the Alley at Eeylops, and decided Harry was right. "You go on into Ollivander's, and I'll see if that owl would be a good one for you, alright?"

"Thanks, Dad!"

"Hello?"

"Just a moment!" A few seconds later, a man with white hair and strange silver eyes came in. "Ah. Harry Potter. I was told to expect you." The man gave Harry an absent, odd smile. "I remember every wand I have ever sold. It was only a few years ago, it feels like almost yesterday in fact, that I sold your father his wand. Mahogany and dragon heart string. Pliable, hinting at great powers in transfiguration. Your mother's first wand was a ten and a quarter inch willow and unicorn hair, very swishy. Excellent for charm work."

"What was her second?" Harry asked.

"Ah, willow again, and phoenix feather. She lost the first in a fire fight. Now, I had a note from Dumbledore. I was going to try something else first, do the standard measurements, but seeing you, I think I'll take his suggestion." The old man set a box on the counter and opened it. "Give this a swish."

Harry picked it up, and felt a warmth in his fingers. He swished it down, and a huge cascade of red and gold sparks filled the room.

"Excellent!" Ollivander cried out.

"What is it made from?" Harry asked.

"Holly and a phoenix tail feather," Ollivander replied. "Only two feathers from that phoenix have been used for a wand. I came across the first by accident. I put it in a yew wand. The very wand that gave you that scar you're trying to hide."

"Voldemort's wand?"

"We do **not** say the name," Ollivander said in a reproving tone. He gave Harry a chilling smile. "That is a very powerful wand you have, Mister Potter, so we must expect great things from you."

"Like You-Know-Who?"

"He did terrible things, but was still a very powerful wizard, and he was almost certainly the most powerful member of his generation," Ollivander corrected. "I hope you will be equally great, although far less terrible."

"Thank you . . . I think."

Ollivander gave Harry a warmer smile now. "Seven galleons, please. And I will not even mention your name until you are safely at Hogwarts."

Harry paid and hurried from the shop. He was happy to be out in the sunlight, and was happier to see his step-father bringing the great snowy owl in a cage.

So far, it had been a happy birthday.

As the pair walked away, a small gaudy beetle flew off of Henry's cloak and went into a nearby open window on a third storey. The beetle transformed into Rita Skeeter, and she sat down on her small sofa, her heart beating.

She had followed Lucius Malfoy out of Knockturn Alley largely on a whim that morning. She knew very well that even if she could prove Malfoy had been lying about being under the Imperius Curse, she wouldn't get anywhere under the current Minister, and might very well end up dead.

She loved her job, but not that much. She had just been curious.

She had therefore followed young Malfoy into Madam Malkins more for practice than for any reason. She had been surprised to see Henry Dorff come in. She had met the man just once, back in November, 1981, when he had been trying to interview Sirius Black after his capture. The auror had had no more success than the media had.

Still curious, she had followed the man and his son out of Malkins, and now she had a scoop indeed.

Harry Potter had returned to Britain. Few had known where the Boy-Who-Lived had been since his parents death, and those few had not said. Even the current Minister didn't know.

Now, she knew.

The boy seemed to be traveling under an alias of some kind. She needed to check that out. She had a scoop, and if she could keep it, it might be a good idea to do so. But at some point, when she could make the biggest splash, the world would know.

Chapter IV

"But Mum, **why** can't we go to Diagon Alley with you?" Fred demanded.

"More importantly, why is Percy the Prefect in charge?" George whined.

"Yeah!" Fred added, he hoped decisively.

"This is a treat for Ron," Mrs. Weasley stated yet again, but she decided it was time to remind the twins of a few home truths. "It will **not** be a treat for him if I have to be correcting the pair of you all day. Now, you may go out and fly your brooms, but I want that garden degnomed by the time we get back, which will be around Four. If it's not, I'll take it out of the pair of you, not Percy. Percy will feed you, and in fact, you're not to come in. . . ."

"But Mum!" George protested, "what if we have to. . . ."

"You won't have to do **that** together, too, will you?" That made the twins blush. "I really mean it, boys. Stay out of trouble. And I don't mean just don't get caught! You're both thirteen, so start having a bit of forethought. If I find I **can't** trust you today, it will be a year before you'll have a chance to show me again."

"Alright, Mum," George said. He surprised his twin even more than the others when he said, "I'll even swear my wizard's oath, if you'll just answer one more thing."

"And what's that?" Molly demanded, her eyes narrowing.

"Why does Ginny get to go?"

"Because I want one less target of temptation here for you," Molly said. Ginny stuck out her tongue at the twins.

"Alright, Mum. Come on, George," George said.

"Right, Fred," Fred said. They ignored their mother and siblings rolling their eyes.

"Mother. . . ." Percy started, but he stopped when his mother raised her hand.

"Try not to keep too close an eye on them when they're outside," Molly said.

"Alright," Percy said with a sigh.

"Is there anything you need, dear?" Molly asked.

"Some owl treats?" Percy suggested. He had just been given an owl as a reward for making prefect.

"Not a problem, dear," Molly said, kissing his cheek. "Try and get some sun while you study, if you can avoid the walking mayhem we call the twins."

"Yes, Mum," Percy said, smiling.

Molly smiled and herded the youngest two children to the fire place. "Shall I go through first, Mum?" Percy asked. "I can come right back."

Molly was about to assure him that wasn't necessary, but then she noticed how eager he looked. "That's very good of you Percy. Are you sure you can spare the time?"

"Yes, Mother, I'm ahead of schedule." Ron rolled his eyes at that. Who would study in the summer?

"The Leaky Cauldron, or the public exit on Diagon Alley?" Percy asked.

"The public exit, dear. Perhaps you can walk us to the Leaky Cauldron, if you have the time."

Percy smiled and took some floo powder. "Diagon Alley!"

After they had exited the floo, Mrs. Weasley handed Percy a Galleon. "Here, dear. Buy some floo powder and your owl treats and then floo back home."

"Thanks, Mum!" Percy hurried off. Ron shook his head. Only Percy would think running errands was a reward.

"Come along, dears."

"Mummy, can you tell us now why we're here?" Ginny asked.

"We want Ron to meet someone," Molly replied. "We thought you might like to get to know him and his family, too."

"Who?" Ron asked.

"A young man from America who will be in your year, Ron," she replied. "The family knows only one other member of your year, and we thought he could use another friend. You're all from Gryffindor families, so there's a fair chance you'll all be in the same House as well."

Ron accepted that at face value, but Ginny asked, "If he's American, how would he be from Gryffindor families?"

"Not everyone stayed after the last war," Molly explained. "A number of orphans were sent off to Australia, North America, and other such places."

"Oh."

Molly stopped in at the apothecary and picked up nearly a Galleon's worth of ingredients. She needed to brew more potions, especially pain and bruise potions, since the boys were always getting bruised. She let Ron carry the bag, and they moved off to the Leaky Cauldron. She made certain they avoided the Malfoys, who seemed to be heading towards Nockturn Alley.

Molly was greeted by Tom once they were inside the tavern. In his own way, Tom was as famous as Ollivander. He could meet you at age eleven, on your way to buy your wand or first set of books and not lay eyes on you for twenty years, and still greet you by name.

Tom directed the trio to a small private parlor. They saw a number of adults, two boys around Ron's age, and two younger children.

"Ah, this completes our party," Henry said with a smile. "Thank you, Tom. You may have the food sent in in ten minutes or so."

"Certainly, Mister Dorff."

Henry went over to the Weasleys. "Hi, nice you could come! I'm Henry Dorff, an auror with the North American Confederation. I'll be on detached duty for the International in Hogsmeade for at least this year." He shook hands with Molly and the wide-eyed children, who had never actually met an auror before.

"This is my wife, Tabitha Dorff, one of the top potion masters and alchemists there is, and our friends Tom Lawrence and Lloyd Trowbridge. These are our children, Sabrina and Henry. This is our adopted son, Henry Evans, and his friend, Neville Longbottom. Everyone, this is Molly Weasley and her children Ron and Ginny."

"No," Ginny said firmly.

"No what, dear?" Molly asked, confused.

"That's not Henry Evans, that's Harry Potter."

"Dear. . . ."

"No, Mrs. Weasley," Tabitha broke in, "that's alright. Once he gets to Hogwarts, he **will** be Harry Potter. If it wasn't for that bl . . . err, that scar, we might try to pass him off as Henry Evans then, too, but it wouldn't work for long."

Harry rolled his eyes and walked over to the two new children. "Hi. I'm Harry. It's nice to meet you." He shook hands with the two red-heads. "I don't know why it has to be some big secret, but it's easier to go along with them than argue."

Ron and Ginny had to smile at that. For an instant, both had felt intimidated, but now they were warming up to the legend they were meeting.

As Harry fell asleep that night, he reflected that having two birthdays was quite nice. While Harry had been friendly with a number of children in Carantuan, he hadn't had any close friends. Neville, who had seemed rather wishy-washy at first, now seemed like a good friend, and Ron Weasley seemed like he could be much the same. Harry was really looking forward to at least seeing Hogsmeade for the first time.

Thursday, August 1, 1991

The Dorffs moved to their new home the next morning. Things were made a bit difficult as Henry, along with most of the aurors and hit-wizards in and around Britain, had been called to Diagon Alley that morning to investigate a break-in at Gringotts, which had the goblins in an uproar.

The house technically wasn't in Hogsmeade, but rather just outside it. It, a smaller house, and a cottage abutted the Forest that ran back for miles away from the area. A path led from the castle to near the cottage, where Alastor Moody was moving. The small house on the other side of the main house belonged to Lloyd Trowbridge and Tom Lawrence (the group had hoped Dumbledore would appoint one of them as the history teacher, but he had stuck with Binns). There was also an old stone barn, where Tabitha would be setting up her potions lab. Harry, being eleven, never gave a thought as to how three houses next to each other might happen to open up at the same time, or exactly what his father or two adoptive uncles might be doing for a living.

The three houses and the outbuildings had some very powerful wards set on them. Harry was more interested in testing his broom out on the open spaces between and around the houses and the lab, although he would take time off to help his mother in the lab. Harry was quite a good potions maker for 11. Of course, he would also have to keep an eye on his two younger siblings.

Harry was also looking forward to having Neville and Ron visit. While not quite as studious as some, Harry took his studies fairly seriously, his parents even more so. He knew he would have to at least skim all the text books before Ron and Neville showed up on the 16th. Still, Harry was not a very introspective child, he preferred doing. As long as he was given something to do, he was generally quite happy to do it.

Friday, August 16, 1991

"What's wrong, Ron? Aren't you feeling well? Or don't you want to visit Henry?"

Ron grimaced at his mother, and then glanced around to make certain they were alone. "Why does Ginny have to go?" Ron complained. "This is the first chance I've had to make a friend on my own."

"I've made it clear to Ginny that she's going to visit Sabrina," Mrs. Weasley said firmly. "Treat your sister politely, but don't feel you have to entertain her."

"Yes, Mum." Ron looked up, hearing Ginny coming down the stairs.

"Now, you both have everything you need in your knapsacks? Good. Now Ron, you take charge of this basket of pies. Ginny, dear, you take this one of biscuits. Have a nice time with your friends."

"What's the floo address, Mummy?" Ginny asked.

"You're going by portkey," Mrs. Weasley announced. The two children looked impressed. Port-keys were difficult to make and arrange. They had never traveled by one before. "Hurry now! It's almost time."

"Honestly, Neville, it's perfectly safe," Harry said, encouraging his friend. "This one is Sabrina's. It's been charmed not to go above ten feet. If you can master this, we can play tag tomorrow."

"Alright, Harry," Neville answered, putting his trust in his new friend. Over the previous weeks, Neville had learned a lot about himself, and had gained a great deal of confidence. That hadn't extended to flying, however.

"No, grip it this way," Harry instructed, helping Neville. "You get the best control that way."

Neville nodded, adjusted his hands, and kicked off. Although he was only going at a walking pace some five feet off the ground, Neville was flying fairly smoothly. As he gained in confidence, Neville started doing larger and larger figure 8's around the field.

"Can you believe that? Never flown!" Ron shook his head. "It's not like he's Muggle-born."

"Some people like it more than others," Harry answered with a shrug. "My mom is fearless, she's even worked with the hit-wizards, like my dad has, but she hates flying. Neville hasn't been given the chance. His grandmother is too protective. He's growing out of it."

"I suppose." Ron thought a moment. "You know, Harry, you're a lot like Bill."

"Which brother is that again?"

"He's the oldest. He likes helping people, too." Ron decided that while it was rather boring to watch, Harry was awfully nice for teaching Neville what came naturally to Ron.

After watching Neville a few more minutes, Harry said, "Why don't we get Neville to help us with our flying."

"How can he do that?"

"Well, he seems to feel safe in these patterns. . . ."

"Seems to enjoy them, too," Ron admitted.

"Exactly. We have him fly these patterns nice and steady and we can fly around him. If we touch him or throw him off course, we did it wrong."

Ron thought about that and smiled. He knew the twins would play a game where they tried to nudge Neville or throw him off pattern. Here, the game would be to come as close as possible without upsetting the novice flyer. It would make Neville more confident and help them hone their own skills. Ron vowed to see if Harry liked chess.

The children stayed at the Dorffs from the 16th through the 25th. The three boys became good friends. Sabrina and Ginny became friendly as well, although not as close as the boys. They preferred tormenting the boys to just spending time together.

Sunday, September 1

"Come along you two!" Mrs. Weasley nearly shouted.

"But Mum!" Fred objected.

George completed the thought, "We've never been this early for the train before!"

"I should be early in any event," Percy said grandly. The twins both growled at him.

"We're meeting the Dorffs and the Longbottoms," Mrs. Weasley explained yet again. "If we're late because of either of you, Quidditch is out for the year!"

Fred and George blanched under the ultimate threat. They couldn't believe their mother, who loved Quidditch as much as they, would actually carry through such a horrible threat, but they decided it would be best not to push her on that score. They piled the luggage quickly and even correctly on the hand-carts. "Come on, Percy!" Fred called out.

"You don't want to make us late, do you?" George demanded.

"This **seems** correct," the well-dressed lady said nervously, "but whom could we ask?"

"Well," her bushy-haired daughter suggested, "that boy with the white owl is talking to a boy with a toad. Perhaps I could ask them?"

Dr. Granger looked where her daughter was gesturing, and saw she was correct. Moreover, the middle-aged woman who seemed to be accompanying the boy with the toad was wearing a very odd hat with a small vulture on it. If these weren't magical people, perhaps they would still be odd enough not to think **her** too odd for asking.

"Excuse me?" she asked the pretty young woman with red hair, "this will seem an odd question, but do you happen to know where, well the Hogwarts Express platform is?" She couldn't bring herself to ask after platform 9 3/4.

The woman smiled and answered in an American accent. "I take it your daughter here is starting this year, too?"

Dr. Granger nodded gratefully.

"If you step back, you'll see people heading behind that arch there, but not appearing on the far side. Your daughter can enter that way, but I'm afraid it's charmed against Muggles, non-magical people, that is. She can go any time, or she's welcome to come in with us. We're waiting for another group before we go in."

"Thank you. I'm Emma Granger, and this is my daughter, Hermione." Hermione smiled the closed-mouth smile she had taught herself to use to cover her teeth.

Tabitha introduced herself and then caught everyone's attention and introduced them. While Hermione normally would have stuck closely to her mother, she shyly went over to the boys when Harry smiled at her and gestured her over.

"Are you certain that Muggle stuff will work?" Rita muttered to her photographer.

"Look, I know my job. We'd get caught on the actual platform, and they'd see the flash we'd need here for a magical photo in any case. This Muggle high-speed film will get them in this light. Now, be quiet so I can get some good shots."

The Weasleys came up at that moment, and again everyone was introduced once around. Molly then quickly sent the twins and Percy onto the platform while Ron showed off the pet rat Percy had turned over to him a few days before. After a few more minutes, Tabitha started the rest of group on their way onto the platform, Hermione bidding her mother a nearly tearful farewell.

"Did you get at least one shot," Rita demanded.

"I got a whole roll of twenty-four with each camera," the photographer stated disdainfully.

"I never heard or saw a thing," Rita admitted. "I didn't even see you change cameras."

"Exactly. It will take about two hours to get this developed. I need to take it to a Muggle place. I'll meet you at the office at, say, One-thirty."

"Sounds reasonable."

The four first years got into one compartment. As the train filled over the next hour, a number of students looked in, but none joined them. The four kept talking about fairly general things, mostly telling Hermione about the magical world. She, in turn, tried showing off what she had

learned from her books, but Ron wasn't interested and really the three boys mostly knew them as well.

About half an hour after the train pulled out of the station, Harry happened to move just right and Hermione saw the scar. She squeaked.

The three boys stopped talking about brooms and stared at her.

"Harry . . . Harry are you really Harry Potter?"

Harry nodded. "I'm supposed to keep it secret for some reason until we reach Hogwarts."

"Alright." She frowned. "I guess this means you weren't raised somewhere in Muggle England, like the texts say."

Harry smiled and shook his head. "That was the cover story. We live between the school and Hogsmeade, now."

"It's a really nice place," Neville said.

The group went silent, and Neville decided that since he'd sort of ended the previous conversation he should get it started again. "I wonder how we're sorted."

"Fred said we have to wrestle a troll, but I don't believe him," Ron said.

"According to Hogwarts, A History, it's something of a secret," Hermione contributed. "Sort of a first test, I think."

"Really? Then I guess I shouldn't tell you," Harry said.

"Go on, you don't really know, do you?" Neville asked.

Harry nodded. "The Ysgol, where my parents, well, adoptive-parents, went to school sorts students the same way. It isn't such a big deal there, I guess." Harry frowned, and then said, "Could it interfere with the magic if you know, or know and tell?"

That made the other three think. "I suppose it might," Neville said. Hermione didn't want to say anything, since she wasn't totally sure how magic might work. She had tried a few spells, but wasn't sure how they had worked.

"I suppose," Ron agreed, frowning. "Could you give us a hint?"

Harry thought about that. "First, what House would you want to be in? I'd like Gryffindor first, and maybe Ravenclaw. Ron?"

"Gryffindor," Ron said. "There hasn't been a Weasley in any other House for hundreds of years, and the same is true of most of my other relatives."

"Gryffindor," Neville agreed. He hadn't thought it likely he'd make it into his parents' House until Mrs. Dorff had helped him overcome his memory problems. He felt a lot stronger and braver since then. "Hufflepuff wouldn't be bad, either."

Hermione had also given this lots of thought. Until that morning, she'd only really thought of Ravenclaw, but these boys were nice, especially Harry and Neville. She'd never had a friend before, and she rather hoped these boys might be, and of course Dumbledore, who was supposed to be the greatest living wizard, had been in Gryffindor. "Gryffindor or Ravenclaw," she finally said.

"Well, you'll probably find out first," Harry said. "They probably go in alphabetical order. Keep in mind why you think you'll fit into the House you want." He grimaced. "Anywhere but Slytherin." He had met the Hogwarts gamekeeper and several other people in the village in August. From what they said, Slytherin, with people like the Malfoys, seemed like a bad place to him.

"Why?" Hermione asked. "Isn't that for the hard-working and ambitious?"

"Ambitious maybe, but not the hardworking," Neville growled. "Most of the Death Eaters were Slytherins."

"I mean, I like thinking about my family's history, even if none of them were very important for like the last thousand years," Ron added, "but I don't want to base my life on my family."

"They value ambition, but also care about ancestry, and only magical ancestry at that," Harry added.

That gave Hermione something different to think about.

The train rolled on. Harry bought them a number of pasties and candy, although Hermione made the boys each eat a sandwich before tucking into the sweets. Ron introduced Harry and Hermione to the idea of collecting the wizard cards from the chocolate frogs, and Harry sought the trolley witch out and bought two boxes of the frogs to eat over the coming weeks.

At one point, Draco Malfoy was visible outside the door, looking in. He must have decided that matching himself against four students wasn't a good idea, and he disappeared, with two larger students trailing behind him.

Chapter V

"Firs' years! Firs years over here!" Hagrid called out. The four friends made their way through the crowd towards the huge man. Neville, Ron, and Hermione looked up at Hagrid with amazement.

Harry smiled, and introduced his friends to Hagrid as they passed by him. Harry had wondered about his parents' attitude towards Hogwarts, and Britain in general. His concerns had been partially laid to rest when Hagrid had first made his way past their house on the way to the pubs. Even the slightly disturbing Moody had greeted the huge being with an honest welcome, and both Henry and Tabitha treated him as a friend, confirming Harry's opinion of the man formed at Diagon Alley back on his birthday.

"Nice ta meet the three o' ya," Hagrid said with a warm smile. "Run along now, Harry. Firs' years get a special trip to the castle."

Harry smiled up at Hagrid and moved on, his wild hair parting over his forehead for a moment. Draco Malfoy frowned as he realized who 'Henry Evans' really was.

"No more than four to a boat!" Hagrid called out. The four friends made their way into one, Ron jumping in to it in a way that made Hermione roll her eyes. Harry and Neville helped her in, and then they helped Neville in, while Harry jumped in last.

"Right then Every one in? Forward!"

The boats glided over the smooth water, and all the students looked up as the castle came into view. Nearly all were struck by the power and beauty of the scene before them.

The First years were gathered near a set of huge doors, waiting for Professor McGonagall to come back and fetch them in for the Sorting. Draco took the opportunity to confront Harry.

"Henry Evans you said," he nearly spat. "You're Harry Potter, aren't you?" A murmur went through the group.

"What's it to you, who ever you are," Ron said, turning around and scowling at Malfoy. Neville immediately went to Harry's other side. Hermione glanced behind them, saw nobody threatening, and stood just behind Harry and Ron, keeping an eye on their backs.

"No need to even **ask** who you are," Draco sneered as Crabbe and Goyle came to back him up. "Red-hair, second-hand robes. You must be a Weasley." Draco's eyes flicked over at Neville. "I know who **you** are, too."

"And Ron and I know who and what you and your two goons are," Neville sneered back, "and aren't, for that matter." The Malfoys were rich, and had been a prominent Pure-Blood family for some 800 years, making them a few hundred years younger than the Longbottoms, Weasleys, and Potters. The Goyles were almost as old as the Malfoys, and the Crabbes younger.

Draco caught the implications, and so turned his attention to the Fourth member of the Quartet. "And what are you? Some Half-blood?"

"My parents are dentists," Hermione said from behind Harry, confused.

"Muggles!" Malfoy said with contempt. "Mud. . . ."

"Do **not** finish that statement, Mister Malfoy," Professor McGonagall commanded, coming up behind him, "unless you wish to be greeted by your new Housemates having to explain the loss of fifty points." Draco backed down, and McGonagall led them into the Great Hall.

Harry had heard of the Great Hall, but the ceiling of the outside sky was still quite amazing to see. He smiled to himself as he heard Hermione explaining it to Neville.

Harry was expecting the Sorting Hat of course, but he wasn't expecting its song. It made him all the more determined **not** to be sorted into Slytherin. Gryffindor sounded best, with Ravenclaw a nice second.

Harry watched with some interest as the students were Sorted. He noted that the two boys who had stood with Malfoy had been Sorted into Slytherin more quickly than most of the decisions had been made so far.

"Granger, Hermione."

Hermione went eagerly to the Hat, anxious to really experience some magic. She jammed the Hat down over her head.

"Watch it," a soft voice said in her ear, "I don't need any more tears in me."

"Sorry," Hermione whispered.

"Let's see. A fine, no, an extraordinary mind. I haven't seen one this fine in over fifty years. Bravery and dedication, drive and ambition. I could almost put you in any House."

"Not Slytherin," she whispered.

"No," the Hat agreed, "not Slytherin, although that's their loss, not yours. I rather think you might upset the balance in Hufflepuff. That leaves two equal choices. . . ." The Hat thought about this class. Only the Headmaster knew that the Hat was powerful enough to get an approximate reading on the entire group of First years by the time they stood in front of the dias. It usually knew where at least three quarters of the class would go before the first child put the Hat on. But where should Hermione Granger go? She would shine with honor in Ravenclaw, but if the other Sortings went as the Hat thought they would, she would be more useful in. . . .

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Hermione's thanks showed the Hat it had likely been right.

Three months before, Neville Longbottom had been slightly worried about being invited to attend Hogwarts at all. Now he walked with confidence to the Hat and placed it on his head.

The Hat was silent for a moment, amazed at the recent changes that had occurred in the boy. Had it been asked to Sort him before the changes, it would have been a close call. The boy was brave and powerful, but that had been overshadowed by the mis-cast Obliviation spell, which had left him weak, timid, and forgetful. He might have needed the support of Hufflepuff instead of the rough-and-tumble of Gryffindor. Now, however, it was clear.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

The Hat had sensed Draco Malfoy's arrogance long before the boy put the Hat on. Left totally to its own devices, the Hat would have assigned him to Gryffindor, just to have that arrogance knocked down a few pegs for the boy's own good. However, there were some choices pre-programmed into it, and the Hat had no choice. So, as soon as it could, it shouted, "SLYTHERIN!"

"Potter, Harry."

The Hat could 'hear' the echoes of the thoughts and murmurs that greeted that name. It thought this might be the hardest decision of the night. It settled around the boy's head and looked. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either, very well-trained and knowledgeable already. There's talent, oh, my, yes -- talent and power and a nice thirst to prove yourself. Now, I could put you anywhere, but. . . ."

"Not Slytherin," Harry whispered.

"Not Slytherin, eh? Are you sure? You could be great, you know, and Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness."

'**NOT SLYTHERIN,**' Harry thought, with such a burst of power that the Hat was almost singed.

"No," the Hat hurriedly said, anxious to appease this wizard, who was even more powerful than it had realized, "not Slytherin, or Ravenclaw for that matter. You need to have some edges smoothed. You need . . . GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry smiled and handed the Hat to Professor McGonagall and joined the cheering table. He sat down next to a ghost he had seen earlier and across from Hermione and Neville. He exchanged waves with Ron's twin older brothers and with Percy, and watched the rest of the Sorting with interest.

The Hat sighed. "Another Weasley, and the same batch of Weasleys at that! Let's see, just another one left, and at least this one will be a girl. Haven't had one of them for a long time. As for you, I hope you have no objections to GRYFFINDOR!"

After a few odd words from Dumbledore, they went straight to feast. There was just one thing that bothered Harry throughout the meal -- his scar was twinging, something that had never really happened before. At one point, it was so painful that it drew Percy's attention.

Harry had noticed one thing about the pains: they were worse when he was facing a pair of professors. "Percy, who are those two professors? The one with the greasy hair and the nervous one in the turban?"

"The one in the turban is Professor Quirrell. He teaches Defense, and he should be nervous. The other one is Professor Snape, who teaches Potions. He fancies the Defense position himself. He certainly has a reputation for Dark Arts, but that might just because he's the Head of Slytherin."

When the feast was over, Dumbledore rose and made some genuine announcements. Harry already had been told that entering the forest could be dangerous, and, like many of the students, he was confused by the threat of 'a painful death' should anyone enter a now-forbidden corridor. Along with more general announcement, Dumbledore also announced that study groups in the Old Belief would be available to Second years and above on Saturdays. Harry was unsurprised to learn that his parents (he still thought of Henry and Tabitha as his parents) and Tom Lawrence would be three of the six discussion leaders. After singing the school song and listening to such other announcements that there were, the school dispersed to their Houses.

Harry was glad to fall into the huge bed. It had been a tiring day.

That night, Harry had a dream -- he was wearing Professor Quirrell's turban, which kept telling him he should transfer to Slytherin. Harry had been well-coached by his adoptive mother, who was an expert Dreamwalker. She had awakened the same powers within Harry. When he turned his full mind on the dream, the turban turned into a snake and fled.

Harry let himself drift down into a deeper sleep.

"My goodness!" Hermione said the next morning, as a large flock of owls flew into the great hall.

"Mail," Ron said simply. He turned back to his large breakfast, while Neville and Harry went back to coaxing Hermione into trying pumpkin juice instead of complaining about the absence of orange or apple juice.

Harry had never experienced a regular meal at Hogwarts, of course, and therefore didn't realize that the murmurings were especially loud this morning.

"Err . . . Harry?" Percy interrupted Harry's last bite of sausage.

"Yes, Percy?"

"You might want to take a gander at today's Daily Prophet."

Harry looked, and his face lost color. "Oh, sh . . . drat."

The entire front page was devoted to Harry, as were two more of the twelve-page paper. There were eighteen photos of Harry, and his three friends and all their pets, spread over the three pages.

"Wonder why they used Muggle photos?" Neville asked.

"They shot all of these at the train station but not on the Platform," Ron said with a frown. "Could they take these without some sort of flash powder?" He turned to Hermione. "Magical photos need charmed film and usually some sort of flash to activate it."

"If they used the right type of film they could have," Hermione affirmed. Harry was still speechless with shock and a little anger.

"Hero of the Wizarding World Returns," Draco quoted from behind the group, a sneer in his voice. "Harry Potter, with Neville Longbottom, Ronald Weasley, and an unidentified witch. . . That's you, Mudbl. . . ." Malfoy didn't finish his sentence as Neville, who had been in the best position, elbowed the Slytherin right in the testicles.

Harry turned around sharply, as if to see what had happened. His elbow caught Malfoy right on the ear. Malfoy stumbled, and tripped over Ron's suddenly-extended right foot and crashed onto the floor. "Your friend isn't feeling very well," Harry told Goyle. "Maybe you should take him to the Infirmary."

Goyle sized up his chances and hauled the moaning Draco to his feet while Crabbe covered their retreat.

The three smiling boys turned and lost their smile as they saw the expressions on Percy and Hermione's faces. "Don't get into the habit of doing that," Percy warned, standing behind Hermione. "Do it again, and it will be points. I'm only letting you off this time because there were three of them, because you didn't escalate the confrontation, and because it was obvious what he was going to say. Understand?"

The three boys nodded. Ron was even a little surprised that Percy was being so reasonable.

"What was he going to say?" Hermione asked. "It was what he was trying to say last night, wasn't it?"

"We **don't** use that word," Parvati Patil said primly.

"It shows that Malfoy isn't nearly as well-bred as he likes to think he is," Lavender Brown agreed.

"But what **is** it?" Hermione insisted.

"He was going to say Mudblood," Ron said, bringing a small gasp from the students around them.

"What does that mean?"

"It means dirty blood," Seamus said with a snarl.

"Heritage means a lot to some of the older families, and families that wish they were old," George Weasley said, leaning over and nearly crushing two Second year girls. "Most of the oldest families left for America, the Old Believers and druids and such that Dumbledore was talking about last night."

"Like my mother's, adoptive mother's, family," Harry added.

"A few of the really old families are still around. Some don't even associate with these Pure-Bloods like the Malfoys," George went on. "The rest, well, they like to claim they're Pure-Bloods, but I doubt there are many who don't have a Muggle in the family tree somewhere."

"Malfoys are like the old Muggle aristocracy a hundred years ago," Seamus added for Hermione and Dean's benefit. "They have money and ancestry and not much else."

"The Malfoys are only some eight or nine hundred years old," George continued. "The Weasleys, Longbottoms, and Potters are a few hundred years older."

"My father's estate has been in our family since 811," Neville said proudly.

"Most of us don't care about such things," Fred joined in. "The ones who do are mostly in Slytherin, but even they're not all Pure-Bloods."

"And again, even most Pure-Bloods aren't," George reminded them. "Muggle-born are, well, what Malfoy tried to say. Seamus here, and even Harry, would be considered Half-Bloods. If all four of your grandparents were magical, then you're a Full Blood. If you can go back six generations, then you're supposed to be 'pure.'"

"And again, most of us consider it all nonsense," Fred stated firmly.

"I should certainly hope so," McGonagall stated firmly. "I shall have **none** of that nonsense in my House." She frowned at the First years, and paused from handing out their schedules. "Is there a problem?"

"No, Professor," Fred said quickly.

"We were just explaining the attitudes found in a very different House," George said with a nod towards the Slytherin table.

"Very well. Here are the First year schedules."

The first week of classes kept Harry very busy. There wasn't much homework yet, but all the First years had to learn how to navigate the castle. The Gryffindor and Ravenclaw first years had some trouble with Peeves, while the Hufflepuffs seemed to have the greatest trouble with the moving (and disappearing) stairs. Few of the students, other than the prefects, would help the Slytherins (neither would most of the portraits). Fred and George managed to direct all the First year Slytherins into a girls' toilet haunted by a very mournful ghost. The Ravenclaws had the least trouble, as their older House members gave them the most honest and complete directions. Some of the Gryffindors (especially Fred and George) and nearly all the Slytherins enjoyed misdirecting their own First years nearly as much as the others'.

Ron and Neville were very happy to be friends with Harry and Hermione. One or the other, if not both, usually could be counted on for having the answer in class. Ron did find Hermione's superior tone slightly grating at times, but simply dealt with it by keeping Harry or Neville, if not both of them, between himself and the girl. Hermione tried to keep herself between the boys and the walls of the corridor, as Malfoy, his friends, and now some of the Second and Third year Slytherins had started teasing her about her rather prominent front teeth whenever they could whisper it at her.

Friday, the First year Gryffindors came to the class that Harry and Hermione were most looking forward to: Potions. The twins had warned them, however, that although Professor Snape certainly knew his subject, he was the most partisan teacher on the staff. He especially had it in for Gryffindors, and most especially Weasleys.

When Percy was appealed to, even he acknowledged that Snape was certainly overly-strict, especially towards Gryffindors. He hadn't detected any anti-Weasley bias, at least not towards himself. The First years understood by now why any teacher might have a bias against the twins.

Right off the start, Snape showed his colors, as he said, when calling Harry's name on the roll, "Ah, yes. Harry Potter, our new -- **celebrity**." When he finished the roll, he said to the class in general, "You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses. . . . I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Harry frowned. He had been enthralled by the speech until that last comment.

"Potter!" Snape called out, having seen the frown. "What would I get if I added the powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"In the right proportions, that could either make the Potion of Living Death, or a mild hallucinogenic," Harry answered.

Snape look startled, as did the rest of the class, even Hermione. Finally, Snape said, "That's the Draught of the Living Death, and I never heard of such an alternative use. . . ."

"It's quite common in African and Caribbean shamanistic. . . ."

"SILENCE! That's two points for your smart mouth, Potter! Open it again and that will be ten more!"

Harry kept silent.

Although he knew quite well he did everything perfectly, Snape did not comment on Harry's simple potion for boils. Hermione also did everything correctly, but Snape barely glanced at her technique. Instead, he praised Draco Malfoy, whom Harry thought was only slightly above average.

"What is it, Potter?" Snape snarled as he marked Harry and Ron's perfect potion an 8 out of 10. He had given Malfoy's watery potion a 9.

"Nothing, sir," Harry managed through clenched teeth.

Snape nodded at Harry's discomfort and turned to the class. Harry and Ron's had been the last one graded. "Well, at least you all managed not to melt any cauldrons. Congratulations." Snape had vanished any potion marked less than an 8. Another wave of his wand bottled the remaining contents of the cauldrons, three bottles per cauldron. "None of the potions were quite up to the level we would need in the Infirmary. You may, however, keep the remaining bottles yourselves. While hexes are severely punished if done in class, and in the corridors for that matter, they are not unheard of elsewhere. Boils seem to be a popular and easily-learned hex, so you may wish to keep these handy. Class dismissed."

"Why are you so angry?" Ron asked Harry as he strode in seething, though quiet, fury through the halls. Ron, Neville, and especially Hermione were hard-pressed to keep up. Harry stopped and turned on them. "There was **nothing** wrong with my technique or our potion," Harry said in an angry hiss. "Eight of ten. I've made harder potions than this. I mean, this wasn't even a very good potion for boils!"

"Harry," Hermione said, trying to a voice of reason, "even if it's not the best potion for boils, it probably is the easiest, and we needed to start off with something easy."

"That's true," Harry admitted calming down, "but then why give us all eight of ten when ours turned out correctly, and then give Malfoy a nine of ten for one that was too runny?"

"I suggest you keep your comments to yourself, Potter," Snape spat from over their shoulders, "or at least keep them inside your common area. That's five more points from Gryffindor." Snape gave the quartet a smirk and left them.

Chapter VI

Harry and his friends enjoyed the second week of classes as much as the first, although again, Snape gave Harry an exceedingly hard time, and again marked his perfect potion an 8 out of 10.

Saturday, September 14, 1991

"Ah, Professor Snape. I was hoping to run into you."

Snape barely gave the druid witch a glance. "I assure you, madam, I have no desire in learning **anything** about your superstitions, and no, I shall **not** encourage those students under my care to do so, either."

"Well, I hadn't intended to talk to you about either," Tabitha continued in the same sweet voice, one that her husband and children had learned actually meant she was mad as hell. "I understand you are a Potions Master?"

"There are a number of establishments which will make whatever nostrum you need, madam. Please let me pass."

"First, a few simple questions." Tabitha continued blocking the professor's path. Although thin, she was actually about Snape's height, and to his surprise, he wasn't intimidating her at all. "You British follow the standard potions hierarchy, correct? Apprentice Brewer, Master Brewer, Potions Master, Apprentice Alchemist, Alchemist, Master Alchemist, correct?"

"Yes," Snape said with an exaggerated sigh.

"And you passed your Potion Master exam on your third try, slightly better than average, correct?"

That startled Snape a bit. "How did you know that?"

"All those taking the exams are noted in The International Alchemists' Journal," Tabitha reminded him. "In other words, it's on the public record."

The smile left Tabitha's face and the green eyes bore into his. Even with his powers of Occlumency, Snape felt the terror she was projecting into him, and he knew how much power and skill that signified. He realized then that this was a witch who out-stripped him in power, which was not something he had to deal with very often at his own high level.

And those eyes -- Lily Evans' eyes, Harry Potter's eyes, eyes that could project compassion or contempt but always projected power. Snape backed up a step.

"I am a Master Alchemist," Tabitha stated coldly, proud that she had just achieved that honor a few months before, "and what's more, I passed every level on my first try. I overheard a group of your students chortling last week and did a little investigation, so let me warn you, you slimy piece of Death-eating trash, if you don't grade my son's work fairly, you will live to regret it, but not for long."

"And who is your . . . it's Potter, isn't it?" A snarl entered Snape's voice. "I will treat that exhibitionist twerp in any way I see fit! He is. . . . **EEP!**"

Snape had stopped insulting Harry and his eyes had crossed, since Tabitha had merely reached through his robes and taken hold of him in a very sensitive area. "I've killed more powerful Death Eaters than you ever were, Snape," Tabitha said in a cold, soft voice. "Get this through your head. Dumbledore can't protect you from us. I have no doubt you will be nasty, snide, bigoted, and stupid when it comes to my son. You will **not** make his life unbearable, and you **will** grade him and his classmates fairly, or, if you are extraordinarily lucky, I'll just take over your job and you can go off and make love philters for pimply teenagers."

Snape tried to growl, but squeaked again when she gave his privates a twist. "Don't think we don't have the leverage to do it. Don't think Lucius Malfoy can help you any more than Dumbledore can. Don't think I won't twist your balls off and use them to make a potion that I will use to torture you for a century. And remember, I can out-duel my husband about half the time, and he's an international auror who had been accepted as a hit-wizard. He loves Harry as much as I do. Harry has a protector who **is** a hit-wizard who is about as powerful as Dumbledore, and three unofficial uncles, one of whom knows more ritual magic than nearly anyone else on earth, who easily deflected a killing curse from your other Master. . . ."

Snape's wide, watering eyes grew even wider, as he remembered the incident.

"I see you know what I'm talking about. Good. And he has another very powerful uncle who is high among the Hidden who is closer to Hogwarts than you think, and they would love to spill your blood as a sacrifice. Tread carefully, Severus Snape, or your balls will be the least-precious things that you lose. Have no doubts, your life is in your hands, and ours."

Tabitha released her hold, and Snape sank to the floor, moaning softly from the pain. "Speaking of hands, you'll excuse me while I go wash mine." Tabitha stalked away. Snape was very glad the druids were only in the castle on Saturdays.

While Snape kept up his needling of Harry and his friends, their marks did reflect their actual accomplishments from then on.

Later that same day, the notice went up about the start of flying classes. Harry and his friends were dismayed to see that they would be flying with the Slytherins, starting the next Thursday.

Harry was looking forward to flying, as was Ron. Neville had gotten over his basic fear of flying, but wasn't thrilled by the idea of flying class, and Hermione looked worried. Ron teasing her about it didn't help.

The Gryffindors arrived to the flying area that Thursday in a group. The Slytherins were already there. "Bet they took the best brooms already," Harry said.

"According to Fred and George, there aren't any decent school brooms to begin with," Ron replied.

Madam Hooch was coming up towards them a few minutes later, but stopped as she watched her class. The Slytherins were sneering and jeering, but she understood what was going on and hushed them, curious. The Gryffindors paid her no attention, and stayed watching Harry. Harry had questioned each of the students and was now matching them with the brooms.

Hooch did little maintenance on the brooms, other than checking the charms and protection spells on them. Her rationale was that if you could fly a beat-up broom like these, you could fly almost anything. It took time for most expert flyers to adjust the broom bristles, especially on an unknown broom, but she saw Potter arrange them with a casual flick of his fingers that she felt was right. She saw him constantly eyeing the one broom that she had meant to go over herself and hadn't had time for -- a Hufflepuff had crashed it Tuesday. Hooch smiled when she saw him take that one for his own.

"All ready then?" she demanded. The Gryffindors nodded sheepishly, while the Slytherins snickered. "Right. Stand to the left of your broom and give the command, 'up!'"

Only a few brooms leapt into the flyers' hands. Hooch saw Potter, one of the few whose broom had done as it was commanded, giving his broom the eye.

"Come now! Be in command!" she ordered as she moved to Harry's side. "What's the problem now, Potter?" she asked quietly while most of the class shouted at their broomsticks instead of commanding them. She saw that Granger's broom looked like it had hiccoughs.

"The broom bucked into my hand, Madam Hooch. It felt like the vertical stabilizing charms were off, or even unstable."

She cast a diagnostic spell, and saw the boy was wrong. She nearly growled. Turning to the group, she saw they all had their brooms now. She faced the Slytherins. "Alright, who put the bouncing hex on this broom stick! It certainly wasn't there twenty minutes ago!" If anyone had climbed aboard that broom, they would have been taken for a real ride, and may easily have been seriously hurt.

The Slytherins all denied having dared to tamper with the broom, although from his smirk and the looks directed his way by the other Slytherins, she knew it was likely the Malfoy boy who had done it. She took the hex off the Potter boy's broom, and got the class started.

That night at dinner, Hooch turned to her friend. "Any prospects for seeker, Minne?"

"No," McGonagall said with a sigh. She had been trying to break her cousin of the habit of calling her 'Minnie' since she had been Head Girl and Hooch a First year. "I could probably field a half dozen beaters almost as good as the Weasleys, but not a seeker in the bunch."

"Would you consider having a secret tryout Saturday morning? Just you, me, and Wood?"

McGonagall frowned. "Why secret?"

"Because it's a First year."

"Really? If this weren't about Quidditch, I'd think you were having me on."

"The boy's a natural. Not just a natural flyer, he understands brooms as well as any professional. I just looked at him, distributing the brooms, changing the angles of the bent and broken bristles while talking to his Housemates, and knew it. That Granger girl . . . she's a very nervous flyer. Might have a touch of vertigo. He seemed to know just by handling them which broom was the most stable, and gave it to her. The second worst broom he gave to the Weasley boy, who knows how to fly a bit, and warned him, correctly, that the broom would dip to starboard on a turn."

"He took the worst one for himself, and a good thing he did. Someone had put a bouncing jinx on it, probably young Malfoy. He felt it as it jumped into his hand! He thought it was the vertical stabilization charms, but I don't think most non-professional flyers would have come even that close."

"How did he fly?"

"Perfectly, on the worst school broom I had out there. The Longbottom boy started to tip over, and he was there in an instant, adjusted him, and was off, all in less than five seconds. He coached Thomas and Granger at each step. I think he's more than a decent enough flyer and we can test him to see if he has any seeker abilities at all."

"Alright. I shall talk with Wood."

Saturday, September 21, 1991

Oliver Wood simply stood there, mouth open. Professor McGonagall was much more dignified, but equally surprised.

"I told you," Hooch said smugly.

"And that's on a school broom!" Wood said. "How good would he be on something decent?"

"Care to find out?" a strange voice said behind them.

"Who are you?" McGonagall turned and demanded of the stranger.

"My name is Thomas Lawrence. I'm part of the team of druids that is here this year. We were informed about Harry's trial, and no, not by Harry. If you told him to keep this quiet, he did."

"We did," McGonagall said. "I didn't see you there."

"Professor Dumbledore is not the only person who can be easily over-looked when he wants to be," Tom said easily. He waved at Harry, who flew over and greeted one of his surrogate uncles.

"May I?" Tom asked Hooch and McGonagall, holding out what was obviously a broomstick case. They looked at each other, and Hooch nodded. Harry's eyes brightened.

Harry gasped. This wasn't the Golden Arrow his step-father had flown on patrol for three years before giving it Harry the previous spring. "Wow! A Nimbus Two Thousand!"

"You'll have to fly a regular school broom in class, Potter," Hooch warned. Harry merely nodded his head. "Go and give it a try," Hooch added kindly.

Harry smiled and took off on a running start that took McGonagall and Wood's breath away.

"I've **never** seen a student flying like that," McGonagall said.

"Neither have I," Hooch agreed.

"He's been like that since he turned two, and got his first Apple Trainer," Tom said a little wistfully. He had more than a touch of vertigo, and was a very bad flyer.

"It looks like we've found ourselves a seeker," McGonagall told Wood five minutes later. They were watching Hooch throw Muggle golf balls into the air and Harry was catching them easily.

Wood didn't answer. He was smiling too much.

Sunday, September 22, 1991

Harry looked up from his eggs, frowning. There was a lot of whispering going on, more so than any morning since the first morning of the school year. Had more students been there for an early breakfast, the whisperings would have been louder.

"What's going on?" Harry asked Percy, who as usual was the first Gryffindor prefect at the table. There were a few Seventh years with their heads buried in books, Wood (looking at a notebook of Quidditch plays), Percy, Neville, Harry, a yawning Ron, and Hermione. Harry was taking his friends to visit Hagrid.

"I'm not certain," Percy admitted. He opened up his Daily Prophet and gasped.

"What is it?" Ron demanded.

A Sixth year wordlessly handed Harry her copy of the paper.

SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPES FROM AZKABAN

"Who's Sirius Black?" Hermione demanded.

"He was James Potter's best friend," Harry said, still not used to calling anyone but Henry his father. "He was supposedly their secret keeper."

"What does that mean?" Ron asked, still yawning.

"We were under something called a Fidelius Charm," Harry explained. "A household under the Charm is invisible and unfindable from anyone not told the location, and only the secret keeper can reveal it. Even someone who had lived in a house their entire life wouldn't be able to find it. In fact, most people wouldn't even remember more than a very vague location, if they didn't forget about the place at all."

"Supposed to be?" Percy cut in. "He was convicted of it! The Ministry doesn't make mistakes like that!"

"No, he wasn't really convicted of anything," Harry said. "He showed up after the house was destroyed and my parents were, well, you know. Then he left. The next day, he duelled with another friend of my parents in Muggle London, killing him. Something like a dozen Muggles were killed during the fight. He was sent to prison for being involved with their death, and even then he wasn't tried. He was just declared guilty and shipped off to Azkaban. He never pled guilty and he was apparently never even asked any questions."

"Are you sure, Harry?" Percy demanded.

"My adoptive parents were there, Percy. I mean, they were involved with the fight and were actually at the house within something like ten minutes of the, well, the final explosion. They also said the International and the Confederation both asked to see the transcripts of the trial and interrogations, and there were none, except that he was found sum . . . summer. . . ."

"Summarily guilty?" Hermione supplied.

"That's it." Percy frowned at that information.

"Do you mean Black wasn't guilty?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, he was almost certainly guilty of killing some of the Muggles," Harry answered, "although that might have been as result of the duel. Still, he was supposed to have been James', my father's, best friend, a close as a twin brother. When my parents, the Dorffs, told me about it, it seemed like they think the evidence is over-whelming, but that they still have a hard time believing it. My step-father said that he really wished there had been a thorough investigation, and that Dumbledore's request for one had also been turned down at the same time."

"I wonder why," Neville put in.

"Vol . . . err, You-Know-Who was gone. . . ."

"Killed, you mean," Percy put in.

Harry shook his head. "They all told me he wasn't fully killed, but disembodied. Something between fully alive and a ghost. He can be reanimated. That's one reason why the International still has him listed as a fugitive, and the British Ministry is supposed to keep an eye on suspected Death Eaters, to make certain they don't bring him back."

"Well," Percy said, "I guess that's possible, if pretty unlikely."

"They did say that if he wasn't brought back within somewhere between thirty and fifty years, he would start to fade away. Certainly by fifty years, he would be more ghost than revivable spirit."

Percy nodded his understanding. "Well, Harry, ten years down."

"Did they say anything else about it?" Hermione asked.

Harry gave her a crooked smile. "Tom said that it would take at least seven years for the spirit to stabilize enough to start planning."

Percy frowned at them, and left the table. He didn't want to hear any more.

After breakfast, the three boys were waiting near a girls' toilet while Hermione brushed her teeth and flossed. "We went over the mouth cleaning spell already," Ron complained. "Why does she have to mess about with Muggle things like that?"

"Her parents are dentists," Harry said with a shrug. "She's used to doing things this way."

"That's what you get when you hang about with a Mu . . . Muggle-born," Malfoy said, coming up to them. As usual, Goyle and Crabbe were behind them.

"What do you want, nancy-boy?" Ron sneered back.

Malfoy visibly held his temper and kept his eyes on Harry. "Think you're special, don't you, Potter? Convincing the staff to let you fly just because of that scar."

"No, I'm flying because they asked me to." Harry didn't want to brag, but it was clear to nearly everyone but Malfoy that Harry really was a superior flyer.

"Going to go hunting for your godfather, Potter?"

Harry looked puzzled.

"Oh, you didn't know Black was your godfather?"

"Gee, I wonder how you came by inside information like that," Neville said with contempt. "The mere fact that Malfoy here knows anything about Black argues for his father having been a Death Eater," he said to Harry and Ron.

"Are you saying. . . ."

"That all three of your fathers were Death Eaters? Yes."

"Longbottom, you know they were under the Imperius!"

"Oh," Harry said innocently, "so they weren't evil, just weak-minded?"

Malfoy reached for his wand, but by the time he had it partially out Harry's was a quarter-inch from Malfoy's nose. Neville and Ron had theirs out well-before Crabbe and Goyle had more than touched theirs.

"We'd challenge you to a duel, if you had any guts," Malfoy managed to sneer despite heavy sweat that had broken out.

"We might accept, if you had any honor," Harry retorted.

"Three on three, tonight at midnight. At the trophy room?" Malfoy dared.

Harry glanced at Ron and Neville, and said, "Fine. See you then. Seconds?"

Malfoy hesitated, and then smiled nastily. "We'll bring one for all of us."

"Fine." The three Slytherins walked backwards until they could disappear around a corner.

Hermione opened the door to the toilet and stormed out. "What were you three thinking of! No way! You three mustn't go wandering around the school at night, think of the points you might lose if you're caught!"

"It's none of your business," Ron said in a nasty tone.

"We're in the same House, of course it's my business!"

"It's not!" Why can't you keep your nose. . . ."

"Of course it's her business," Harry said firmly, stepping into the argument. "Hermione is our second."

"What!" Hermione and Ron exclaimed.

"She's our second," Harry said.

"Good idea," Neville added.

"But. . . ." both Ron and Hermione objected. They glared at each other.

"Please, Hermione?" Harry asked. Hermione chewed nervously on her lower lip with her over-sized teeth. Ron was about to point out that if she didn't want to hear rodent references, that was a habit she should stop. Harry glared at Ron, who closed his mouth and kept his peace.

Finally, Hermione said, "I don't want us to lose the House Cup, especially because of our getting caught. Don't you think we should tell Percy or someone?"

"Anyone but Percy!" Ron protested.

Harry assured Hermione, "Hermione, we can't do much more than shoot sparks at one another. What else **could** we do? Clean each other's teeth?"

"Well. . . ."

"Please, Hermione? With Ron and Neville involved anyway, who else could we trust to watch our backs? Please?"

"Alright," Hermione said, resigned. She really liked having Neville and especially Harry as her friends She glared at Ron. "I'll do it for you and Neville, Harry."

Ron glared back.

"Come on," Harry said. "Let's go see Hagrid."

Chapter VII

"I really don't think we should be doing this."

"Shhh" Ron hissed.

"Don't shush me, Ron Weasley!"

"Hush both of you," Neville whispered. "We don't want to get caught!"

The quartet had snuck out of their rooms a little after 11:30. They were lucky that there were no upper years still down in the common room. They sometimes lingered until midnight.

Hermione had been nervous from the start. When they had left the common room, she had been startled to see that the Fat Lady wasn't in her frame. This meant that if they had to make a quick retreat, they could still be caught outside their own common room.

The group walked as quickly and as quietly as they could, taking turns peeking around corners to see if Filch or a teacher was near by. They finally got to the trophy room around 11:55.

"I don't see any of them," Hermione said unnecessarily. Ron rolled his eyes. Neville eyed the trophy cases, since the various trophies, cups, shields, plates, and statues were sending off light at odd angles, catching the eye and disturbing all their peace of mind.

"They're late," Ron whispered. "Maybe they chickened out."

Harry shrugged. He pulled his wand out and made a move towards the next room, in case they were hiding there. Then they heard a voice coming from the room, which made them jump. The quartet looked at each other in horror when they realized who it was.

"Sniff around, my sweet," Filch said to Mrs. Norris, "they must be lurking around here somewhere." The quartet quickly left the room. "They must be here somewhere," Filch said again. "Maybe they're already heading back."

The quartet instantly veered off in a different direction, heading towards a set of moving side stairs just past the Charms classroom, instead of the back stairs. That should take them to the Third Floor, near the main stairs leading from the entrance hall.

They paused for breath before entering the area where the main stairs were. "**I told** you," Hermione panted. "Malfoy tricked you. You realize that, don't you? They were never going to meet us -- Filch knew someone was going to be in the trophy room. Malfoy must have tipped him off."

"Probably," Harry agreed.

"That doesn't matter right now," Ron snapped at Hermione.

Neville peeked out. "This isn't the place the stairs usually lets us out. We're across from the usual door."

"Are you sure?" Ron demanded.

"Shhh," Neville whispered. "Someone is coming down the main stairs. I think it's Snape."

"Snape to the front us, Filch behind us, and here I am, stuck in the middle with you," Hermione nearly growled at Ron.

"Shhh," Harry said. "What about that door there?"

"Locked," Ron said, giving it a try.

"Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She tapped the lock and said, "Alohomora." The door clicked and swung open. "Standard Book of Spells," she said simply. "Third year."

The quartet heard a noise coming at them, so they hurried in and shut the door. Listening, they heard Peeves laughing as he flew by, followed by an irate Filch. As they heard Filch run through the door leading to the main stairs, they all breathed a sigh of relief.

A second later, Ron said, "Oh, shit."

"Ron!" Hermione scolded, "language!" turning as she did so. "Oh," she said in a small voice. "Shit."

This caused Harry and Neville to turn around as well. As he did so, the thought went through Harry's head that they were on the wrong side of the third floor -- exactly where Dumbledore had warned students not to go.

They were in a very large, high chamber, looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling mad eyes that were all turning in their direction; three noses, twitching and quivering as they picked up their scent; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from the large yellowish fangs.

Harry quickly opened the door and pulled his three friends out, just as the three throats started to growl. Hearing the growls coming close to the closed door, Hermione led their escape back in the direction they had come from. It was a little longer route, but finally, they managed to make it to the Gryffindor entrance on the seventh floor.

"Where on earth have you four been?" the Fat Lady demanded.

"Never mind that," said Harry, since he was the least out of breath. "Pig snout." The four went into the common room and collapsed on the large sofas that were usually the territory of the Seventh years.

"What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?" Ron demanded.

"You don't use your eyes, do you?" Hermione snapped. "Didn't you see what it was standing on?"

"Just the floor," Harry said. "I was worried about the heads, not the feet."

"No, not just the floor. It was standing on a trap door. It's obviously guarding something." She stood up. "I hope you three are pleased with yourselves. We could have all been killed, or worse, expelled. I'm going to bed."

As the three boys did the same, Harry realized something. Hagrid had taken something small from the otherwise empty vault back on his birthday. He had said something . . . that the only place safer than Gringotts was Hogwarts.

Something else niggled at the back of Harry's mind. Just before he fell asleep, he remembered. In early August, there had been that report that a Gringotts vault had been broken into sometime the night of July 31 or the morning of August 1.

Harry thought it almost certain that whatever Hagrid had fetched, it was now being guarded by a three-headed giant dog.

Unknown to anyone at Hogwarts, as the sun rose the next morning, the ancient circle of power near Hogwarts was reactivated with a blood sacrifice. The Hidden had hoped to use Lucius Malfoy, but he was moderately well protected. While monitoring Malfoy, they had uncovered a web of connections, however. The person they had finally chosen, a rather brutal and solitary worker at the Ministry named Macnair, proved to be a Death Eater with a very bloody past.

The ancient powers were revived.

Malfoy was scowling at the quartet later that morning, as they came to breakfast tired but happy, instead of depressed and punished, perhaps even expelled, from getting caught. A glance at the tokens which measured House points confirmed that the quartet had not been caught. All four waved happily at Malfoy, which made him even angrier.

Harry's three friends were interested in the story of Hagrid, the small package, and the Gringotts robbery. There was, however, a problem.

Ron and Hermione had been sniping at each other for weeks. For what ever reason, they had both taken the events of the night before as primarily the fault of the other. The pair now refused to talk directly to each other, although each was muttering insults about the other all morning.

By lunch, the two had declared war.

Over the next five weeks, Hermione and Ron kept up their fight, growling and sniping at each other half the time, and coldly ignoring each other most of the rest of the time. Harry and

Neville tried to talk the pair of them into declaring a truce, but neither seemed willing to make the first move, especially Ron.

Whenever possible, Harry and Neville took turns sitting with the other two. Both boys liked both of their warring friends, and wanted to keep them as friends.

In class and at meal times, this wasn't terribly difficult. Ron took to sitting at the very end of the Gryffindor table at meal times and whenever they were eating or studying in the great hall, Hermione would sit three seats up. Harry and Neville would sit in between, again taking turns as to who sat next to whom. The other First years filled in around them and across from them.

Things were tenser in the common room, especially by mid-October. The quartet had claimed a table in the furthest corner of the room from their first day. Ron and Hermione had to sit across from each other, since they refused to sit next to each other. Things were tense, because Harry was sometimes at Quidditch practice, leaving Neville alone to keep the peace.

Things were also tense because Percy had caught on to what was going on after the first week. Percy loved his youngest brother, but was very worried Ron might be following in the twin's paths of mayhem and frivolity rather than his own example. While he was a little leery of Harry Potter's influence on Ron, he approved of Ron's friendship with Neville, who seemed to be a very steady fellow. He had especially approved of Ron's friendship with Hermione, whom he saw (somewhat incorrectly) as a feminine version of himself.

Percy therefore started to nag at Ron to mend his fences with Hermione. This, of course, was exactly the wrong way to go about getting Ron to do anything. Fred and George had tried pointing that out, and had been well-snubbed by everyone except Harry and Neville in the process. They had also tried a few pranks on Hermione, but quickly found that once she was on her guard she was a very hard target.

Worse, after the third attempted prank, Harry had very skillfully embarrassed them very thoroughly at a practice. Wood had worked them to a frazzle over the next three days. Harry told them that he was sorry, but he thought Ron and Hermione needed to work things out on their own.

The twins got the message, and left Hermione, and Harry, alone.

Ron wasn't certain why Neville and Harry put up with Hermione. He knew they were his friends, and therefore they must dislike the bossy, buck-toothed know-it-all as much as he did. Ron figured the two other boys must just have a lot more patience and tolerance than he did. Granted, she did help them a bit in class. Perhaps that's why they could tolerate Hermione; they had adopted her, partly as a surrogate sister and partly as a pet and note-taker.

"A pet hamster," Ron muttered one afternoon to his rat, Scabbers.

Ron was a little worried about the rat. It seemed very intelligent, but had exhibited no magical tendencies other than a long life. Since the end of September, however, the fat rat had lost weight, and had started to shred Ron's sheets as the result of what could only be nightmares of some kind. The only time Hermione had spoken to him politely in weeks was when she

suggested he ask Hagrid if he had any medicines that might work on rats. The grounds keeper was always doctoring strays.

Ron had grudgingly agreed it might be a good idea, but was waiting until he could see Hagrid alone. That way, he wouldn't have to hear the Hamster brag about what a good idea it had been if Hagrid could help.

Hermione wasn't sure why Harry and Neville put up with Ron. The red-head was the most childish First year in Gryffindor as far as she was concerned. She didn't know much about actually having friends, as she had really had none in the Muggle primary school she had attended. It was nice having Harry and Neville as friends now.

Perhaps the pair put up with Ron because he was in their dorm and could talk about Quidditch. That was the only explanation she could think of that sounded even remotely reasonable. Granted, the two boys weren't nearly as keen on doing extra research and homework as she was, but she accepted that.

Harry and Neville just wished the two would go back to being friends and hoped there wouldn't be a big blow-up.

Unfortunately, there was a blow-up. It was Halloween, and therefore many of the students were on edge, anticipating the feast that evening. Ron seemed the most anxious of the First years.

Harry was a bit off that day, in part because there had been very tiring practices both the evening before and that morning before breakfast. Harry disliked Thursdays on principle, since he had to deal with Snape early in the morning. On the way to Charms, Harry had been half-listening to Neville go on and on about some semi-magical cactus that he hoped to grow some summer, and the two accidentally sat next to each other for the first time in over a month. As everyone else was paired up by Professor Flitwick as usual, that left Ron and Hermione paired towards the back of the classroom.

Hermione hated being in the back almost as much as she hated being paired with Ron. Ron liked sitting in the back, but felt even more strongly about pairing with Hermione.

The First years had spent most of the first month learning about wands in general, learning about wand movements and safety, and then learning the basic movements and why they were used when they were used so far during the second month. They had only learned a few basic hygiene charms. Today, they were going to learn their first active charm -- levitation.

The class was very eager to finally learn something that was basic, necessary, and fun. After a lecture on proper movement and pronunciation, Professor Flitwick stood well-back and let them at it.

Neither Harry nor Neville were having any success. Swish and flick as they might, the feather they were supposed to be levitating just lay on their desktop. Of course, after Seamus prodded his feather, which sent it up in smoke at the table to their right, it was perhaps understandable they were having some difficulty concentrating. Having Ron, to their left, waving his long arms like a windmill while shouting the incantation ("Wingarium Leviosa!") repeatedly was also distracting.

Hermione finally got Ron to stop shouting by snapping, "You're saying it wrong! It's **Win-gar**-dium Levi-**o**-sa. Make the 'gar' nice and long, not the 'win'!"

"YOU do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled. Harry and Neville looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

Hermione rolled up her sleeves, flicked her wand, and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!" The feather rose off the desk, and Hermione made it hover about four feet above their heads.

"Oh, well done!" cried Professor Flitwick, clapping. "Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it!"

Ron was in a very bad mood for the rest of the class. At the end of class, Ron grabbed his books and tried to rush for the doorway. He found himself stuck there for a second with Harry. "It's no wonder no one can stand her," Ron said loudly, "that hamster is a nightmare, honestly."

Before Harry could tick Ron off for saying such a thing, Hermione pushed past them, and Harry could see she was in tears.

"Why did you say that?" Harry hissed angrily.

"It was really uncalled for," Neville agreed from behind. The other Gryffindor girls each went past Ron with a sniff.

"But the Hampster is. . . ."

"Don't you **ever** call her that again!" Harry told Ron. "I know you don't like her. Fine. You don't have to. And you're our friend. That doesn't mean we can't be her friend, too!"

"So don't **ever** call her that," Neville stated forcefully. "We like her. We aren't going to choose between you."

"Alright," Ron grumbled.

"We're sorry we sat together," Harry said. "We'll try to keep that from happening again."

Hermione didn't show up to lunch or the final class of the day, flying, which made Ron feel a little guilty. Later that afternoon, when Harry was at Quidditch practice, Parvati Patil made certain Ron and Neville heard her tell Lavender Brown that Hermione had been crying in one of the girls' lavatories all afternoon, and was still crying.

Ron felt awful. He had teased his sister almost as often as she had teased him. Never once had he made Ginny cry like this. Ron felt awkward walking with Neville towards the great hall a

while later. He felt worse when Harry joined them and Neville told Harry what they had overheard.

That night, the school gathered in the great hall not just for dinner but for a feast. A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins sputter. The feast appeared, and the students applauded.

Harry was just reaching for the only potato Ron had left on one of the serving dishes when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll -- in the dungeons -- thought you ought to know."

Quirrell then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was an uproar even as Quirrell collapsed. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence. "Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!" He then organized the teachers to go to the dungeons.

Percy was in his element, taking charge even though he was just a junior prefect. "Follow me!" The other prefects rolled their eyes and left the First years in Percy's eager hands. "Stick together, First years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders. Stay close behind me, now. Make way, First years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a prefect!" He never noticed Hermione was missing.

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked Ron. They had somehow ended up at the end of the line, while Neville was stuck walking next to Percy.

"Don't ask me. You know they're supposed to be really stupid," Ron answered. "Maybe Peeves let one in for a Halloween joke."

As Percy and a Hufflepuff prefect led their two groups into each other at an intersection, Harry grabbed Ron's arm. "I've just thought -- Hermione!"

"What about her?"

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Ron bit his lip, and then saw Percy hurrying off. "Oh, all right," he snapped. "Let's go."

They slipped around the Hufflepuffs, down a deserted corridor, and hurried towards the girls' lav. They had just turned the corner of an intersection when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

Fearing it was Percy, the boys hid behind a large stone griffin. To their surprise, it wasn't Percy, but Snape, who headed down the corridor that led to the lavatory.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered. "Why isn't he with the other teachers down in the dungeons?"

"Search me. Let's get this over with."

They followed Snape, who quickly veered off up a usually-locked staircase. "He's going to the third floor," Harry whispered.

"Never mind that. Can you smell something?"

Harry frowned and sniffed. He wrinkled his nose. It smelled awful, like very old, very dirty socks and stopped-up plumbing.

The two took another step each, and then stopped, hearing something approach. They backed into the shadows. Ron pointed to where a low grunting and loud shuffling was coming from. Harry saw something large was slowly moving towards them.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray. Its large lumpy body was like a boulder with a small bald head perched on top. It had short thick legs and flat, horny feet, and the smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a large wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

The troll stopped in front of the first doorway and peered inside. It wagged its long ears, as if hearing something, and made up its tiny mind. It slouched into the room.

"There's a key in the lock," Harry muttered. "We could lock it in."

"Good idea."

The boys edged towards the open door, then Harry leapt towards it, slammed it shut and locked the door.

"Yes!" Ron cried out.

Happily, the boys turned to run and get help. After a just a few steps, however, they heard the high scream of a petrified girl coming from the room they'd just locked up.

"Oh, no!"

"It must have been the girls' lav!" Harry said.

"What idiot would put a key in the door of a girls' loo?" Ron asked.

"Never mind that! Hermione!" Harry turned and ran back as Hermione screamed again. Ron followed.

Harry fumbled with the key and pulled the door open. Hermione was standing at the far wall, while the troll was bashing the last of the sinks on the way towards her.

Harry grabbed a few pieces of rubble and went to the left side of the chamber. "Confuse it!" he told Ron, throwing a tap at the troll.

The tap hit the troll right on the back of the head. It stopped, and spent a few seconds trying to figure out what had happened. The troll turned and saw Harry. It made an angry noise and took a step towards him.

"Oy! Pea-brain!" Ron shouted from near the remains of the sinks. He also threw a piece of pipe, which hit the troll's shoulder. It didn't seem to notice the pipe hitting it, but it now turned towards Ron.

Harry seized the chance and ran behind the troll and grabbed Hermione's hand. "Come on, run, run!" Harry yelled. Hermione was stiff with terror, however, and couldn't move.

The troll was getting confused from the yelling and the echoes in the large lavatory. It roared in anger, and took another step towards Ron, cutting off his escape.

Harry, not being able to think of anything else to do, ran and jumped on the troll's back. Another step brought his arms around the troll's neck, and he tried to choke the troll.

The troll was far too strong for this to work, but as he struggled, Harry's wand got shoved up the troll's nose. It roared with anger and started stumbling around, dropping its club.

Ron took a deep breath and hoped. "Wingardium Leviosa!" The club flew into the air, and Ron dropped it on the troll's head. The troll blinked, and then collapsed.

Harry stood up, shaking and out of breath. Ron was as stunned as Hermione. The three looked at each other.

"Is it . . . dead?" Hermione finally asked.

"I don't think so," Harry said. "I think it's just knocked out." He bent over and pulled his wand from the troll's nose. "Urgh!" He wiped the snot off.

At that moment, the door slammed open. Looking up, they saw Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Quirrell staring at them. Quirrell started to hyperventilate and sat on one of the toilet seats. Snape stood there, seemingly favoring one leg.

"What were the three of you thinking of!" McGonagall shouted. "you . . . you . . ."

"Please Professor McGonagall, they were looking for me," Hermione said.

"Miss Granger?"

Harry jumped in. "We knew she hadn't been feeling well, and was likely still in here. She was here all evening," Harry said, then realized that he really should have told someone rather than going off to get her.

Ron realized that, too, and added, "We tried to get Percy's attention, but when we couldn't, well, someone had to come, right?"

"If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. Harry distracted it by sticking his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They really didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Snape gave Harry a penetrating look. Harry frowned and batted away what he knew was an attempt at subtle Legilimency. He glared at the startled Snape, who averted his eyes.

"The fourth member of the little group is missing, I see," Snape said, to cover up his surprise.

"True. If they had planned this, no doubt Mister Longbottom would be with them," McGonagall said. She glared at Hermione. "Next time you feel unwell, go to the Infirmary. You are very lucky, Miss Granger. That's a point from Gryffindor."

She turned to Harry and Ron. "Not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win five points. Now, hurry back to Gryffindor. The feast is being concluded there."

"No," a new voice said, "it is not." Professor Dumbledore strode in. "The guardian of the Gryffindor entrance was attacked during the feast. Please escort the students back to the great hall, Professor Quirrell. Professor Snape, dispose of this troll. After that, search your areas of the castle for the perpetrator."

"Who was it, sir?" Snape asked, eyeing Quirrell.

"Peeves said it was Sirius Black."

Quirrell fell off the toilet from the shock.

Chapter VIII

If the troll attack accomplished nothing else, it brought a new understanding between Hermione and Ron. From what Harry could see, before the quartet settled down on the thick, squishy, purple sleeping bags that Dumbledore had materialized in the great hall, Ron had sincerely apologized to Hermione for the insult and Hermione had thanked Ron for helping to save her from the troll.

The castle and grounds had been searched, and no sign of Sirius Black was found. Nor was there any clear way for Black to have made his way into the castle in the first place. It seemed obvious that Black had let the troll in as a distraction, but the purpose of Black's attack on Gryffindor was obscure to almost everyone.

The next morning was still a class day, so the students were awakened early. After their early breakfast, they were allowed back to their dorm rooms to change. Harry, however, was held back and sent to the Headmaster's office. At the base of a guardian gargoyle, Harry ran into an unexpected figure. He ran and embraced his step-father.

"You alright, Harry? I've been told you had an exciting night."

"It was," Harry agreed. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you alright?" Henry repeated.

Harry sighed. "I'm fine, Dad."

"Great." Henry looked at the gargoyle. "Tomboy Toffee." The gargoyle moved aside, revealing a spiral staircase moving upwards. "Come on," Henry told his fascinated boy.

Dumbledore was not back in his office yet, and both Henry and Harry spent some time looking around. Even Henry couldn't explain all the objects that were sitting around the office. He was amazed by some of the ones he was able to identify.

Finally, Dumbledore came into the office and gesture the two to sit. "Apparently, the Ministry has been sitting on some important information," he started off after greeting the pair.

"That's hardly surprising," Henry commented. "What was it this time?"

"It seems that Minister Fudge inspected Azkaban during the late morning of the Second of September. He was quite surprised to see Sirius Black acting almost normally."

Henry frowned. "Almost normally? You mean as in, well, normal, or normal for someone stuck around dementors for nearly the last ten years?"

"He seemed subdued, but otherwise as normal as anyone," Dumbledore said. He obviously been equally surprised by this information. "He even asked the Minister if he might have the copy of the newspaper he had, as Sirius rather missed doing the crosswords."

"And that was the edition with all those damned photos of Harry, right?"

"Correct. From that night onwards until his escape, the dementors report that Black would call out at night, 'he's at Hogwarts.'"

"'He' meaning me?" Harry asked.

"That does seem the most likely explanation," Dumbledore agreed. "The troll would have sent the staff off the scent, so to speak, while Black must not have realized that the guardians to the common rooms are not there merely for show. The students would have come back, the First years would have been sent to bed early, and he could capture or kill the other First years, and either kill or kidnap Harry."

"That does seem to fit," Henry agreed.

"Now, Harry, I don't want you spreading this around," Dumbledore said.

"Don't you think someone will make the connections and spread it anyway, sir?" Harry asked.

"Possibly, but there is no need to confirm it," Dumbledore pointed out. "Your three friends may be trusted, but let them suggest the scenario first."

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore turned to Henry. "I am certain you and your wife are concerned. I have therefore reluctantly agreed that Cadfael's group may patrol the grounds at night. If Black tries again, hopefully they will catch him."

"If that's how he's getting in, they will catch him," Henry said.

"Good." Dumbledore turned to Harry. "One more thing. You may inform your classmates that since Mister Lawrence knows all the spells, he and Mister Filch will have your regular guardian back tomorrow night."

"Yes, sir."

Harry quickly forgot about Sirius Black. The next Saturday was the first Quidditch match, and to make it more interesting, it was against Slytherin.

While few outside the Gryffindor team had seen Harry practice, news that he was the seeker had of course leaked out within hours of Harry's tryout. Wood made certain that everyone on the team played down exactly how good a flyer Harry really was. Therefore, most of the Gryffindors had taken to giving Harry what they hoped was encouragement, while he had to endure the jeers from the Slytherins. Many of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs merely gave him looks of pity as the game drew closer.

After all, the Slytherins were usually had the roughest (and dirtiest) players of the four teams.

Harry's supposed weakness gave Wood an excuse to call even more practices than usual the week before the game. Had he not been friends with Hermione, who had taken to reading and correcting all their home work, Harry would have fallen behind.

The afternoon before the game, Harry was free (much to Wood's fury) because the Slytherins had finally managed to book the pitch. To get away from the people trying to give Harry advice and wish him luck, the four friends had retreated to a small courtyard, despite the fact that the weather had turned very chilly. Hermione had become very adept at conjuring bluebell flames, which weren't very hot but which gave some warmth to the group as Hermione read over the boys' homework and the boys talked about the upcoming game and went over the copy of Quidditch Through the Ages Hermione had checked out of the library for them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Neville spotted Snape limping into the far side of the courtyard. While Hermione's flame might not be technically illegal, the quartet had learned that probably wouldn't matter much to Snape. The boys shifted to hide the flame until Hermione could close the spell. Unfortunately, their movement attracted Snape's attention.

"What are you four doing here?" he growled as he made his way slowly towards them. "What do you have there, Potter?"

Harry mutely held up the library book.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the castle," Snape barked. He took the book from Harry. "Five points from Gryffindor." He sneered and limped away, Hermione and Harry staring after him in shock.

"His leg seems worse now than it was in the girls' loo," Ron remarked.

"Good," Neville said. "I hope it gets even worse than it is."

Hermione finally recovered her voice. "There's no such rule!"

"Good thing you didn't remind him of that while he was out here," Harry told her. "He would have docked us more than five points."

The missing book weighed heavily on Harry's mind the rest of the afternoon, as well as during dinner and afterwards. He finally decided to at least try and get it back.

"Better you than me," Ron said.

"Just remember, he's nastiest in the dungeons," Neville added.

"Harry, I'll tell Madam Pince that Snape took the book," Hermione put in. "I won't get into trouble, honestly! You don't have to do this."

"No, I want it back," Harry stated. "But you are right," he said to Neville. "I'd never get it back if I asked him in the dungeons." Harry thought a moment. "I'll go see if he's in the staff room. Maybe he will only be his usual nasty self there."

"Maybe, if some other teacher is there," Ron muttered.

Harry made his way to the staff room, and found that the door was ajar. Hearing Snape's voice, Harry pushed the door open slightly.

Harry saw Snape holding his robes up high, showing his limp was caused by some really serious, and bloody, injuries. Filch had obviously just finished cleaning them and was handing Snape some clean bandages.

"Blasted thing!" Snape said. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once!"

Harry managed to slip away without attracting Snape's attention.

"Did you get the book back?" Ron asked when Harry came back to the common room.

Harry gathered his friends over at their usual table and told them what he had seen. "So that means when he got injured Halloween night, he had been trying to get past that three-headed dog."

"Then that's where he was going! He's after whatever that thing is guarding," Neville agreed.

Eyes wide, Hermione protested, "No, he wouldn't! I know he's not very nice, but he wouldn't try and steal something Dumbledore was trying to keep safe. Besides, Sirius Black must have let the troll inside the castle."

"Honestly, Hermione, you seem to think all teachers are saints or something," Ron snapped. "I'm with them. I wouldn't put it past Snape to have let in the troll **and** Black. But what could that thing be guarding?"

"I know they aren't saints, but Dumbledore isn't a fool," Hermione retorted. "Snape probably went to check on the dog during the alarm, and the dog managed to catch him."

"Maybe," Harry said, "but we need to keep an eye on him. If he was just checking things out, why not go to the Infirmary?"

Even Hermione reluctantly agreed to that, after pointing out, "If he was up to something, why trust Filch?"

The morning of the game, Harry was surprised at how nervous he was. He knew he was an excellent flyer, but he still had to be the winning seeker, which needed lots of luck and other skills besides good flying. Harry had a difficult time choking down some toast and a little milk.

"Nothing more?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"Harry, you need your strength," Seamus said. "Seekers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team."

"Oh, thank you for that," Harry growled.

All of Gryffindor and Slytherin were in the stands, as were most of the other students and staff. There were even dozens of visitors. Dean Thomas, another of the First year Gryffindors, was a good artist, and had made a banner cheering Harry out of a sheet that Ron's pet rat had ruined. Hermione had then enchanted it to flash in brilliant colors. As Harry waited for the captains to meet with Madam Hooch, he caught sight of the banner high above him, and smiled. His nerves started to settle down.

The two captains sneered at each other and shook hands. Harry thought the Slytherin captain, Marcus Flint, looked like he might be part troll. "Mount your brooms, please!" Madam Hooch's whistle set the players off.

Harry hovered high above the other flyers, following the game plan that Wood had insisted he follow. From there, he could see that the Gryffindor chasers had the Slytherins slightly outclassed, and was unsurprised that Gryffindor scored first. He managed to ignore the game below after that, only keeping an eye out for the Snitch and any Bludgers that might come his way.

After the game had gone on for some time, only one Bludger had come in his general direction and Gryffindor had scored again, when the Snitch appeared for the first time, zipping past the Slytherin seeker before he had any time to react. Harry was in a curving dive after the Snitch even before the Slytherin seeker had managed to get turned around to give chase.

Harry was just a few seconds from catching the Snitch when Marcus Flint dropped between Harry and the Snitch, fouling Harry and sending him spinning off. Gryffindor made the resulting penalty shot.

As Harry started to climb back overhead after the penalty shot, his broom suddenly jerked. Before he could stabilize it, the broom was bucking in a way that not even the bouncing hex he had detected the first day of flying class could have caused, and it was also zigzagging on a very erratic course. Harry was just barely hanging on.

At first, no one noticed, as Slytherin was making its first successful scoring run. It was Hagrid, who had come and sat in front of the Gryffindor First years, who noticed it first. His shouts started attracting attention of the other people around him, and soon the entire stadium was watching.

"Did something happen to Harry's broom when Flint blocked him?" Seamus asked.

"Can't have," Hagrid answered. "Can't nothing interfere with a broomstick except Dark magic, and on a new professional racing broom? No, no kid could do that to a Nimbus Two Thousand."

At those words, the pale Hermione turned paler. She borrowed Hagrid's binoculars and scanned the crowd. "What are you doing?" Ron demanded.

"Look at Snape! Right across from us, in front of Professor Quirrell!"

Ron and Neville fought over the binoculars. Ron won and said, "What is Snape doing?" He was clearly staring up at Harry (most people were by now), but seemed to be muttering.

"He must be jinxing the broom," Hermione said, standing up.

"What can we do?" Neville asked.

"Leave it to me."

"She'd better hurry," Ron said. Harry's broom was now doing barrel rolls.

By now all the players, even the Slytherins, were circling under Harry, ready to catch him, except for Flint, who had seized the Quaffle and was throwing it through the hoops, hoping someone would notice and add to Slytherins' score (five of Flint's scores were counted). A number of staff and spectators had their wands drawn, and were ready to help as well.

Hermione finally arrived in the proper section. Rushing down the steps towards Snape, Hermione nudged against Professor Quirrell, who tripped over his neighbors and hid what Hermione was about to do. A touch of her wand, and Snape's robes were on fire. Hermione was gone before the entire section was in an uproar.

Meanwhile, Harry had recovered control of his broom and was coming in to land. As he did so, he clasped his hand to his mouth. Landing, he fell to his knees and to everyone's amazement, he coughed up the Snitch. "I've got the Snitch!" Harry announced.

Despite Flint's howls of protest, Gryffindor had won.

After being congratulated by a large number of people, including his adoptive parents, Harry was carried off to Hagrid's hut for tea, along with his three friends.

"It was Snape," Ron explained to Harry. "We all saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, and he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid, who hadn't heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands.

"It's true," Neville stated.

"Why would Snape do somethin' like that?" Hagrid demanded. The four friends looked at each other. Harry decided he ought to tell someone in any event. He looked at the others, who knew what Harry was thinking. Each nodded their head in agreement.

"We found out something about him," Harry said. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog that's guarding something in that forbidden corridor. He tried it Halloween. The dog bit him, and we think he tried to steal whatever the dog is guarding while Black tried to get into Gryffindor. The troll was a diversion for both of them."

Hagrid had been staring at Harry, and now he dropped the teapot. "How do you four know about Fluffy?"

"Fluffy!" all four exclaimed.

"Yeah, he's mine. Bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub last year. I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the. . . ." Hagrid trailed off.

"Yes?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Now don't ask me any more," Hagrid said gruffly. "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher, he'd do nothing of the sort."

"So why did he just try and kill Harry?" Hermione cried out. The afternoon's events certainly seemed to have changed her mind about Snape. "I **know** a jinx when I see one, Hagrid. I've read all about them! You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong," said Hagrid hotly. "I don' know why Harry's broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn' try an' kill a student! And I know for certain, whatever his faults, he sure wouldn' help Sirius Black do nothin'! Those two never had nothin' but bad feelins agains' each other! It would easier to get young Malfoy to help the four o' you than to get Professor Snape to give Sirius Black the time o' day."

Hagrid took a deep breath and went on. "Now, listen to me, the four of yeah. Yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog an' you forget what it's guardin'! That's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel. . . ."

"Ah!" Harry said, "so there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

To Harry's slight surprise, things quieted down after that for the rest of the term. His classes progressed nicely, and he and Hermione had fun challenging each other in the practical parts of Charms and Transfiguration (Hermione was clearly superior in theory). Ravenclaw beat Hufflepuff in a close game, and Hermione managed to take her school broom to over ten feet, to the other Gryffindors' applause and Slytherin jeers. Malfoy had tried to tease Harry about catching the Snitch in his mouth, but except for his two friends, no one else, even in Slytherin, thought it was amusing. Malfoy reverted to teasing Ron about his family and Hermione about

her teeth and her lackluster flying. Since that was the only course Hermione wasn't the top student in, even that didn't have much effect on Hermione.

The four friends tried researching Nicolas Flamel, but came up empty. Ron had suggested keeping an eye out on the various ways to the forbidden corridor, but they soon discovered that there were at least six ways to get there and of course there was no way they could keep an eye on any of them for very long. If any thought about trying to access the corridor, or Fluffy's room, none gave voice to it.

Chapter IX

Harry was looking forward to the approaching holidays. He had always loved Yule, and their Old Believer household had made much of the entire season.

Harry had thought he would be spending the time at the house between Hogsmeade and the Castle. However, since Sirius Black was thought to be around somewhere, and had only managed to penetrate the castle that once, the feeling was that Harry might be safer in the castle than at the house. With the four Weasley brothers staying at school (their parents and little sister were visiting Charlie Weasley in Romania, where he worked with dragons), and the Dorffs having easy access to the castle, Harry was happy with the idea.

Snow came a week before the holidays, and Harry signed up to stay and then went out to join in the annual snowball fight between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. This ended in a draw, as the entire group of combatants fell down laughing when the Weasley twins hexed a set of snowballs, which chased Professor Quirrell around the castle, bouncing off the back of his turban. Harry left the scene early, as his scar was hurting a bit, perhaps, he thought, from the cold.

All during the last Potions class of the term, Malfoy kept up a whispering of insults, mostly directed against Ron. While Snape could clearly hear what was going on, he said nothing and contented himself with making certain there was no retaliation in his class.

As they were cleaning up, Malfoy leaned his desk and hissed, "I do feel so sorry for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home." Crabbe and Goyle chuckled.

"I feel sorry for those who will never understand the true meaning of the solstice holidays," Harry said back, seeing Snape was out of hearing. "Most Muggles understand the season better than certain so-called 'real magical families'."

Draco turned red and stumbled over Crabbe, trying to get at Harry. That attracted Snape's attention, but even he couldn't see a way to blame Harry or Ron. "Is there a problem, Mister Malfoy?"

Draco couldn't repeat the insult, and so said, "No sir. Just a slip."

"Very good. Class is dismissed."

As they left the dungeons after Potions, the quartet found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead. Two enormous feet sticking out at the bottom and a loud puffing sound told them that Hagrid was behind it.

"Hi, Hagrid! Want any help?" Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

"Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron."

"Would you mind moving out of the way?" the still angry Malfoy demanded from behind them. "Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be a gamekeeper or

something when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose. That hut of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what your family's used to."

Ron dove at Malfoy just as Snape came up the stairs, before Crabbe or Goyle could attack Ron or Harry or Neville, could pull them apart.

"WEASLEY!" Ron let go of Draco's robes.

"He was provoked, Professor Snape," said Hagrid, sticking his huge hairy face out from behind the tree. "Malfoy was insultin' his family."

"Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid," said Snape silkily. "Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be glad it isn't more. Move along, all of you!" Draco and his two friends shoved roughly past the tree, causing needles to fall, while Snape moved off in a different direction.

"I'll get him," Ron said, looking in Draco's retreating direction.

"Now, none of that," Hagrid said before Harry could agree. "Come on, cheer up, it's nearly Christmas! Tell yeh what, come with me an' see the great hall, looks a treat."

The four friends agreed and followed Hagrid and his tree off to the great hall, where Professors McGonagall and Flitwick were busy with the decorations.

Flitwick smiled as he saw them. "Ah, Hagrid, the last tree -- put it in the far corner, would you?"

The students thought the hall looked spectacular as they followed Hagrid. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, and no less than twelve towering Christmas trees now stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles.

"All ready to leave tomorrow are yer?" Hagrid asked Hermione and Neville as he set the tree up.

"Yes," Hermione said. "And that reminds me. We've got half an hour free, we should be in the library."

"Oh, yeah, right," Ron said, tearing his eyes away from Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming out of his wand and was trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

"The library?" Hagrid asked, following them out of the hall. "Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren't yeh?"

"Oh, we're not doing school work," Neville said.

"Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel, we've been trying to find out who he is," Harry put in.

"You **what**?" Hagrid demanded, looking shocked. "Listen here, I've told yeh, drop it! It's nothin' to you what that dog's guardin'"

"We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that's all," Hermione assured Hagrid.

"Unless you'd like to tell us and save us the trouble," Harry added. "We must've been through hundreds of books already and we can't find him anywhere -- just give us a hint. I know I've read his name somewhere."

"I'm saying nothing'," Hagrid declared.

"Well, we'll just have to keep looking," Ron said.

As they were leaving, Neville grinned and said, "Look! We're under the mistletoe."

Ron leapt forward to get out of the way, making the other three laugh. Hermione turned and gave Harry a light kiss and then kissed Neville on the cheek. The three walked hand-in-hand to the library, Ron grumbling along behind.

Alas, their efforts that day were as unrewarding as their previous ones had been. While looking for any random title that might catch his eye, Harry edged a bit too close to the forbidden section, and was chased away by Madam Pince. Harry wondered if Flamel might be mentioned in one of those books.

Ron and Harry saw Hermione and Neville off for the vacation the next morning. A light snow had fallen the night before, and after leaving their friends at the train station, the twins took Ron and Harry to a place where they could do some magical sledding.

Ron and Harry were soon having too good a time to think much about Flamel. They had the dormitory to themselves and there were only Harry and Weasleys in the common room (the only two girls staying usually kept to themselves), so they could get the good armchairs by the fire. They sat there by the hour, eating anything they could spear on a toasting fork (some supplied by Fred and George, other supplied by Tabitha). The only thing Harry had to do before Christmas was to go to the sunrise service on the morning of the solstice and join his family at foot of the Gryffindor table each night at dinner.

The boys also spent hours playing wizard chess. Both Harry and Hermione had thought they played rather well, until Ron had slaughtered them. Ron was trying to teach Harry some of the basic strategies.

Harry went to bed Christmas Eve glad he was with Ron, but a bit sorry he wouldn't see Sabrina and Henry opening their presents. Still, they would all be at Hogwarts before and during the feast.

When Harry woke up, he was surprised to see a pile of presents at the foot of his bed.

"'Bout time you're awake," Ron said sleepily.

"Shall we?" Harry asked, pointing at the presents.

"Yes, I think so," Ron replied with a grin.

Harry was quite happy with his haul of presents. His honorary uncles (Cadsfael, Tudor, Tom, and Lloyd) and his step-father's family had all sent him books, food, and candy. Hermione had given him a box of Chocolate Frogs, and Neville some toffee. Harry was glad he'd remembered to send them small presents, too. Harry admired the rough beauty of a hand-carved flute from Hagrid. Harry was nearing the end of the pile when he came across a package that was both squishy and heavy.

Ron saw Harry eyeing it. "I think it's from Mum. Your folks gave me this really great Chuddley Cannon bath robe, so I'm afraid Mum sent you something, too."

"Why afraid?"

Ron grimaced and held up a maroon jumper. "We always get these, and mine are always maroon."

Harry opened his, which indeed was an emerald green jumper and a small box of fudge. "That's really nice of her," Harry said. "Be glad my mom didn't crochet you an afghan." He pointed at his new one, in Gryffindor colors.

Ron grinned, and then said, "Aren't you done yet?"

"Just this last one." Harry picked up the very light, squishy package and frowned. "No name," Harry said. He unwrapped it, and something fluid and silvery gray went slithering from the package to the bed to the floor, where it lay in gleaming folds.

Ron gasped, dropping the box of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans he had gotten from Hermione. "If that's what I think it is, they're really rare, and really valuable."

"Do you think it could be a real invisibility cloak?" Harry said, equally stunned.

"Well, one way to find out," Ron said. "Try it on!"

Harry slipped it on. It was many times too large, but Ron gasped as everything of Harry disappeared except his head. As Harry moved to look at himself in the mirror, Ron exclaimed, "Harry! A note fell on the floor."

Harry seized the letter and read it. There was no name and Harry had never seen any handwriting like it before. "*Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well. A Very Happy Christmas to you,*" Harry read off.

"I'd give **anything** for one of those," Ron said, admiring the cloak. "**Anything!** What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Harry said. It was still odd for him to be reminded of his 'real' family. Hearing footsteps, Harry quickly hid the cloak. Fred and George burst in a few seconds later.

"Happy Christmas!"

"Hey, look, Harry's got a Weasley jumper, too!"

Fred and George were wearing blue jumpers, one with a large yellow F, the other with a G, although Fred was wearing the G.

"Harry's is better than ours," Fred teased. "She obviously makes more of an effort if you're not family."

"Why aren't you wearing yours, Ron?" George demanded sternly. "Come on, get it on! They're lovely and warm."

"I hate maroon," Ron complained, pulling it on.

"You haven't got a letter on yours," George observed. "I suppose she thinks you don't forget your name. But we're not stupid. We know we're called Gred and Forge."

"What's all this noise?" Percy demanded, sticking his head through the door. Fred and George seized him, and Ron grabbed the half-opened jumper out of Percy's hands.

"P for prefect," George stated. "Put it on, Percy, come on! We're all wearing ours. Even Harry got one."

"And he's even wearing it!" Fred pointed out, wrestling with Percy.

"I don't. . . ." Percy tried to protest as the twins forced the jumper over his head (including his glasses).

"And you're not sitting with the other prefects or anything," George stated. "Christmas is for family."

Harry had thought he had seen large holiday dinners in Carantuan, but they paled before the dinner at Hogwarts. While he and the Weasleys were the only Gryffindor boys who had stayed over, there were a pair of Seventh year girls and about a quarter of the other Houses had stayed. About half the staff was there as well, plus Harry's extended family and even Cadfael and a few of the Hidden who were active in explaining the Old Faith were present. The Christmas trees and the greens decorating the hall made it look cheery.

While Harry had spent some joyous time with his family, he chose to sit with the Weasleys, while his family was sitting with their friends and the staff that afternoon as they had for dinner a few times that week. Dumbledore graciously suggested that the Dorffs and the druids join the mostly-empty Gryffindor table, and Harry and Percy both enjoyed playing the host.

"So Harry," Cadfael asked, "what are these things?"

"I'm not certain," Harry admitted.

"These?" George asked with an evil grin.

"These are Christmas Crackers," Fred continued.

After Tom Lawrence gave a brief explanation of the Muggle origin of the Christmas cracker, Percy launched into a five minute history of the magical version. The North Americans smiled at his enthusiasm, and the adults, at least, welcomed the information.

Dumbledore beamed brightly at the head table, and offered his cracker for McGonagall to pull, after which he helped McGonagall pop her cracker. Seeing this, the rest of the people in the great hall followed suit. Harry ended up with a set of chess pieces, a pack of non-exploding luminous balloons, and a Grow-Your-Own Warts kit, while he wore a lion's-head hat that actually roared. Once everyone had finished with their crackers, the hall was filled with the savory smells of roasted turkeys and geese, as the food piled onto the tables.

After stuffing himself, Harry turned to his family, but his parents shooed him off. Harry took Sabrina and Henry outside, where they happily joined in a general snowball fight. After his siblings were gone, Harry went up to the common room and warmed by the fire. Then he broke in his chess set against Ron. As usual, he lost, but he did give Ron a good run for his money, nearly forcing a draw in the endgame.

Perhaps it was the excitement of the day. Perhaps it was the turkey sandwich eating contest he had joined in late that evening (Ron won). For whatever reason, Harry was unable to fall asleep.

The longer Harry laid in bed, the more his mind kept coming back to his invisibility cloak. His father's invisibility cloak.

For the first time since he had learned his real name, Harry thought of his biological father as his father. The cloak had made a connection.

Harry decided to try it out.

Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. He could go anywhere in this, and Filch would never know. Harry decided to go alone and let Ron sleep.

Harry crept out of the dormitory, down the stairs, across the common room, and climbed through the entrance.

"Who's there?" squawked the Fat Lady. Harry said nothing, and walked quickly down the corridor.

Where should he go? Harry decided to try the restricted section of the library.

When Harry arrived at the library, however, he was confronted by two teachers. Harry had forgotten that the teachers were still patrolling, in case Sirius Black should try again to gain entrance. Harry stopped to listen.

At first, because of the shadows, Harry wasn't certain who was there. In addition, both were wearing hooded cloaks. Then Snape spoke in a louder voice. "I would advise you to keep to your own patrol routes. The Headmaster may trust you, but I no longer do."

"Perhaps you should decide where your loyalties lay, Snape," came the voice of the other professor. Harry wasn't certain who it was.

"My loyalties at the moment are where yours should be, unless you can give me a good reason to change them," Snape hissed.

"Not at the moment," the other replied. "We shall continue to work for ourselves. Do not take me lightly, Severus."

"Believe me, I no longer do. I suppose you wouldn't care to trade information?"

"I would not," the other said. He turned to leave, and the hood fell back, showing Quirrell's turban. "Why don't you head towards Gryffindor and see if you can catch a Weasley or two."

"Good idea," Snape said. "Filch should be done checking the library soon."

That left Harry with one direction to go in, which would take him into territory he was unfamiliar with. Still, it was better than getting caught.

Harry was soon lost. As he wandered around unfamiliar territory, he suddenly heard footsteps approaching. Harry darted into what looked like an unused classroom and hoped for the best.

The footsteps paused for a moment, then continued on. Harry breathed a small sigh of relief, and decided to stay put. He glanced around the room. There were desks and chairs piled against the walls, and there was even an upturned wastepaper basket. Propped against the far wall, however, was something that certainly didn't look as if it belonged there. It was something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. Harry saw there was an inscription carved around the top of the frame: **Ersed stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.**

Harry smiled, and whispered, "'I show not your face but your heart's desire'. I wonder what my heart's desire is?"

Harry took off the cloak and stepped in front of the mirror. He smiled. On the one side of his reflection was his adoptive family and closest friends: the Dorffs, Sabrina, Henry, Tom Lawrence, Lloyd Trowbridge, Tudor Myrddin, Hermione, Ron, Neville, the Weasley twins, and a few others. On the other side were Harry's birth parents and a large number of other people, most of whom, Harry guessed, seemed to be Potters. Both his families, and his friends, together.

"Yes," Harry satisfied. "That would be nice, but it can't happen, can it?" He looked at the inscription again. "No, we don't usually get our heart's desires, do we?" He looked into the mirror again. "Still, it is nice to know where one comes from."

Harry went and listened at the door. Hearing nothing, he donned the cloak again and cautiously went out, hoping to find his way back to Gryffindor without further incident.

When the door shut behind him, Dumbledore and Cadfael materialized to the side of the mirror. "A very wise young man," Cadfael said proudly.

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "Would you care to try it?"

"Would you?" Cadfael retorted.

"When I placed the mirror here last night, I saw my self with a number of warm socks," Dumbledore stated. Seeing the look on the Hidden druid's face, he explained, "People will insist on giving me books for Christmas, even though I have so many, and have access to so many more."

"What do you think you'd see on other days of the year?"

"I would imagine I would see a young lady I loved and lost over a century ago," Dumbledore said sadly.

"And I would imagine something similar. She chose another, and although I love my wife very much, a small part of me wishes things could have been different."

Dumbledore covered the mirror. "I don't believe Harry will be back, do you?"

"No," Cadfael agreed, "and if he tries, you can prevent him from finding this room, just as you made certain he found it tonight, right?"

"Correct. Shall we move it back together?"

"Happy to. I hope your plan continues to work."

Harry quickly found his way back to Gryffindor. When he softly said the password, however, he was unaware that a pair of keen ears were listening in the shadows.

Chapter X

"I wonder what I would have seen in the mirror?" Ron commented to Harry at breakfast. Harry had gotten up late, and had just made it to breakfast before service ended. Ron had happily joined his friend for a second breakfast while Harry described his adventure.

"What's your heart's desire?" Harry asked.

Ron frowned. "I'm not sure. No matter what I do, some brother will have already done it, and probably done it pretty well. Bill was Head Boy, Charlie was Quidditch captain." He shrugged.

"Maybe you'll end up as both," Harry suggested.

"I doubt it, but it would have to be something like that to outdo my brothers."

"What should we do today?"

Ron looked up and gauged the weather from the ceiling. He grimaced. "Sleet, yech. Something indoors, that's for sure."

"Why don't we spend the morning in the library," Harry suggested. Seeing Ron's frown, Harry reminded him, "You still have those assignments on ghouls and banshees to do for Quirrell, and we both have that one on poison safety for Snape. We can do those now in case we get nicer weather later, and check out ways to get into the restricted section at the same time."

Put in those terms, even Ron was willing to consider homework. "Alright," Ron agreed, glad that Harry didn't nag like Hermione did.

The two boys easily finished off their homework before lunch, and considered ways of getting into the restricted sections of the library.

After lunch, Ron suggested that they could simply explore the castle. It was so large that they had been to only a few parts of it. Harry agreed, and they spent the entire afternoon and then again that evening after dinner, exploring and chatting with some of the paintings.

The boys returned to the common room a little before their 9:00 curfew, quietly debating the merits of making a foray to the library under Harry's invisibility cloak.

"I wonder where everyone is?" Harry remarked, looking around. The common room was empty. Usually the two Seventh year girls were on one of the sofas near the fire and Percy would be reading in his usual armchair near the window.

"They don't have curfew until Ten," Ron pointed out. "They could be anywhere." He paused, sniffing. "I don't smell anything burning or worse, so the twins might not be around, either."

"Seems strange not to have anyone this time of night," Harry said. The pair looked at each other and shrugged. Any evening without older students was a bonus. "Do we have any of those marshmallows left?" Harry asked.

"I think so, why?"

"Mom gave me a package of graham crackers and some American chocolate. Wait til you've have some s'mores."

"S'mores?"

"You'll like them, they've got melted toasted marshmallows and chocolate," Harry assured his friend. "You'll want some more. Get it?"

Ron rolled his eyes, and the two went up to their dorm to get the supplies.

Ron went through the door first. "Oh, no!" he wailed, stopping at the entrance. "The twins are going to be in **so** much trouble!"

Harry came in and stared, shocked. The two Seventh year girls and Percy were all petrified, tied, gagged and leaning against the foot of Harry's bed. A very large black dog was laying on Ron's bed, panting. "Why'd they have to drop them here?" Harry demanded. "No one will think we did it."

The dog wagged his tail and cautiously approached Harry. Harry held his fist down so that the dog could sniff him.

"Harry. . . ."

The dog licked Harry's hand, and Harry petted his head. "Good boy."

"Harry!"

Detecting a strange note in Ron's voice, Harry turned and looked over his shoulder. The petrified twins, also tied and gagged, were leaning against the wall behind the door.

"If the twins didn't do this, who did?" Harry wondered.

"I did," a hoarse voice said behind him.

Swirling back around, Harry saw a tall, gaunt man with sallow skin, dressed in rags where the dog had been. The man quickly grabbed Harry and Ron's wands. "Over by the bed, boys," the man croaked, retreating a few steps back.

"You're Sirius Black, aren't you?" Harry demanded, not moving.

"I am, Harry. Now, move over by your bed, slowly. I haven't hurt anyone yet, and I would really prefer not to hurt any student."

Harry eyed the scarecrow of a wizard, and he slowly backed up, along with Ron.

"So, what do you know about me, boy?"

"I know you were supposed to be my father's best friend, and my parents' secret keeper," Harry answered.

"I was your father's best friend, his brother in everything but blood," Sirius agreed. "I'm also your godfather. I should have raised you, but I made a series of mistakes that certainly made my life a mess, and maybe yours, too. First of all, I and three friends shared this very room when we were students. We were friends. By the end of our First year, we discovered one of our friends had a dark secret. He was a werewolf."

The two boys were shocked.

"Yes, we were shocked, too. But Re . . . I'd best not use names, in case he's somehow managed to blend in over the years. Moony was . . . sweet, nice, smart, polite, and a very good friend. But he was a werewolf. We decided, or at least James and I decided, he was our friend first, and a werewolf second. We tried to figure out if there was any way we could help him. Finally, we decided there was. It took us years of research and experimentation, but we managed to become animagi our Fifth year."

"You weren't just transfigured into that dog, you **were** the dog," Harry said, eyeing the wand Sirius had clutched in his hand and the others on one of the dressers.

"Exactly. And please don't make a move towards those wands, Harry. Like I said, I don't want to hurt a student."

"Who do you want to hurt?"

"In time, Harry, in time. Now where was I? Oh, yes, we became animagi. Your father was a stag."

"And Pettigrew?" Harry asked.

"Very good, Harry," Sirius acknowledged. "Peter was, appropriately as it turned out, a rat. In fact, unless I'm very much mistaken, the rat I have petrified over there in that cage."

"What? You mean Scabbers?" Ron demanded, incredulous. "You must be joshing!"

"No, I am not," Sirius said in a sad voice. "Was it a mature rat when you got it? And when was that?"

"Percy found him in my dad's office, right before Christmas . . . when was that? He must have been . . . five or so. . . ." he trailed off.

"Christmas, 1981," Sirius agreed with a smile. "And your father works at the Ministry, correct? Now, how could a rat get into the Ministry? They have charms against that sort of thing, you know."

Sirius turned back to Harry. "Your parents needed a secret keeper. I was the logical choice, but I was also a very obvious choice. I swear to you, Harry, I wish now I had taken the job. Instead, your father and I were talking in over, and I suggested Wormtail, Peter, would be a great bluff. Just a few weeks later, your parents were dead."

Sirius' face turned waxy. "An American wizard and witch -- your foster mother, in fact -- gave me an alarm, just in case anything went wrong at Godric's Hollow. It went off, and when I arrived, Hagrid had just rescued you from the rubble. Then I made my second mistake. I went after Peter myself. I should have stayed and told Dumbledore what had happened."

"I chased Peter down the next day, and he did something so shocking, I just stood there like an idiot. He knew he couldn't take me in a duel, so he set me up! The lunatic chopped off a finger on his left hand, yelled at me, and then threw a curse right into this open trench in the street, where it hit a gas main. When I woke up, I was under arrest, and the only thing left of Peter was supposed to be that finger and his wand."

"And you think you recognized Pettigrew from the photo of Ron's rat in The Daily Prophet?" Harry asked, doubtful.

"Simply, yes," Sirius answered. "It was missing the toe on the left front paw, and it looked exactly like Pettigrew. To you, most rats look alike, but I assure you, I know Pettigrew's form."

"Then prove it," Harry snapped.

"Forgive me, Weasley," Sirius said, and then he wrapped Ron with ropes. He then moved the others around so they could see, and unpetrified them. He left them all bound and gagged, however. "Stop struggling," Sirius ordered. "You all heard what I told Harry here. Now, let me show you that that part of my story at least was true."

Sirius pulled Scabber's stiff body out from the cage, set it on the floor between Ron and Harry's beds, and muttered an incantation. The body changed from that of a rat to that of a small, balding man with whiskers, who looked like he was lost a fair amount of weight recently. The change had also freed the man from being petrified, but Sirius petrified him again.

Sirius looked at Harry. "Well?"

"That looks a bit like Pettigrew," Harry admitted. "I mean, I've only seen a few photos of him, but I guess it could be him." Harry looked at Sirius. "How did you get here? Out of Azkaban? In this room? I mean, just . . . how?"

Sirius nodded. "Most people are driven mad in Azkaban. Do you know what a dementor is? What it does?"

"It sucks the good feelings out of people, or magnifies the bad," Harry said.

"A bit of both, I think," Sirius said. "Well, the fact that I was innocent wasn't a happy thought, so they couldn't steal that. Dementors can hear, but they can't really see. I quickly found that they affected me less when I was in my dog form. The first two years were horrible, but after that, I worked things out. Then I got that newspaper."

"They heard you dreaming, talking in your sleep," Harry said. "You kept saying, 'he's at Hogwarts'."

"Did I? And they thought I meant you, of course. No, I meant dear Peter here."

"That's why you tried to break in at Halloween? To get Peter?"

"Exactly. I knew no one would be here."

Harry frowned. "Then why let the troll in?"

Sirius frowned. "Troll? I didn't let in any troll." Seeing the look on Harry face, Sirius swore, "I didn't, Harry! I came in through a secret passage."

"Through the dungeons?"

Sirius shook his head, "No. I don't know any secret route in through the dungeons."

Harry grimaced. He wanted to believe Black, but, "It's a pretty big coincidence that there were two break-ins at the same time."

"It is," Sirius agreed.

Harry took another tack. "How did you get in tonight?"

"Oh, well, Harry, I overheard you give the password last night."

Harry stared at Black. Sirius explained. "I was in my animagus form. Very good hearing and all that. I snuck in again tonight during dinner, and found Peter trying to pick the lock of his cage. If you look at it, you can see he's been doing it some damage."

"Ron said Scabbers has been gnawing away at the cage a lot since Halloween," Harry admitted. "He got out once, tore through a set of sheets, and was burrowing into the bed when we caught him."

Sirius grinned nastily at that news. Seeing Harry look at him expectantly, he went on. "Well, I stunned Peter. I could have just gotten revenge and killed him, but that wouldn't do me much good, would it? I decided to wait for you and show you I wasn't directly responsible for James and Lily's deaths."

"Directly responsible?"

Sirius sighed. "I did suggest making the change," he admitted.

"Go on."

"The red-haired prefect. . . ."

"Percy Weasley," Harry supplied.

"Percy did a room check for some reason before I expected anyone back. So, I disarmed him and used his wand to stun Peter." He looked at the very angry Percy. "Sorry about that."

Percy nearly growled.

Sirius grinned in a more friendly way and jabbed his thumb at the twins. "Those two came in a bit later, jabbering away about jinxing Ron's bed and debating the possibilities of breaking into the girls' area." He grinned at the twins directly. "Sorry, boys, that can't be done. Wiser and wiler wizards than you have tried."

For some reason, the twins seemed to be looking at Black with admiration.

He faced Harry again. "I gathered from what they said, from what I observed last night, and from what I had smelled in the common room, that there were only two girls here for the break. I stunned the twins and managed to grab the two girls here, too. I didn't want anyone getting suspicious, you know."

"Well," Harry demanded, "now what?"

"Well, now, that's a reasonable question," Sirius conceded. "I shall repetrify your friends, make extra certain Peter is immobilized, and then we shall leave. I'll leave all the wands but one down in the common room. We'll head off towards Dumbledore's office. Unless he's changed his password in the last few days, it's 'strawberry delight.' He always uses a Muggle or magical sweet of some kind."

"We're going to see the Headmaster?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Well," Sirius prevaricated, "you are, at any rate. At some point along the way, I'll slip away. I'll be in animagus form after that, of course. While I don't think Dumbledore would hex first and ask questions later, I think it's better to be safe than sorry."

Sirius suddenly collapsed on the floor.

Harry dove, grabbed his wand, and rolled to a kneeling position, his wand at the ready. "Well done," Henry Dorff said, "although I'm not certain what hex you thought would be useful."

Harry was surprised at who all were in the room. Dumbledore, his parents, Cadfael, Tom Lawrence, and a tired and slightly shabby stranger were all holding wands on Sirius Black. Professor McGonagall was already releasing the students, whispering to them to stay quiet.

"I think you can lower your wand, Harry," Tabitha said gently.

"How much did you hear?" Harry asked.

"All of it," Henry said.

"Several alarms go off should a boy try to sneak into a girls' area," Dumbledore explained. "A few also notify us when a girl goes into a boys' area, although they do not usually sound in the dorm. When these two were brought here and did not leave in a few minutes, I decided to investigate. I do not need an invisibility cloak to hide, and there are even ways to avoid the sharp nose of a hound. I then summoned the rest of this group. They got here just a few minutes before you and Ronald Weasley came in." A few of them nodded.

"Had Sirius made any moves to actively harm anyone, I would have intervened," Dumbledore went on. "Since he did not, I thought we should hear him out."

Harry finally lowered his wand. "So that really is Sirius Black?" Every one of the adults nodded. "And that really is Peter Pettigrew?"

Most of the adults looked a bit more uncertain about that, except for the stranger, who said, "That's Peter, alright."

"Remus Lupin, I presume?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I am. Hello, Harry, it's been quite some time since I last saw you."

Harry nodded, and then frowned. "You visited us once, it must have been five years ago?"

Lupin smiled, nodded, and turned to Dumbledore. "That's Peter. God help us all, Sirius must have been innocent."

"Well, that is not certain, but it is certainly more than possible." Dumbledore flicked his wand, and Sirius was bound.

Dumbledore went on while Tabitha went to help McGonagall check the students out. "I must ask all of you to stay in your rooms or the common room until someone comes and talks to you in the morning. We will be doing a preliminary investigation tonight, and conferring with the Ministry in the morning."

All the students agreed to that, although Percy didn't look very happy about it. "Is there a problem, Mister Weasley?" Dumbledore asked him.

"Could the Ministry really have been that . . . mistaken, sir?"

"The Ministry is merely composed of people, Mister Weasley. In those desperate times, it is perfectly possible that the innocent suffered and the guilty escaped. That may have happened here. However, we shall know for certain soon."

"Thank you, sir," Percy said.

"I suggest you all try and get some rest," Dumbledore concluded as the other men moved the two stunned wizards out of the room.

Friday, December 27, 1991

The Weasleys and Harry were sitting in the common room late the next morning. The two Seventh year girls had collected their breakfasts from the platters supplied in the common room and then fled back to their dorms. They hadn't come down since. Harry really couldn't fault them.

"Fred and I have a problem," George told Ron.

"What's that?"

"We're not sure if we should be insulted or complimented that you thought we had caught and tied up Percy and those two girls last night," Fred explained.

"Percy we can understand, but two Seventh year girls?" George exclaimed.

"I guess we should be complimented," Fred decided.

Harry was ignoring the byplay, and was looking at Percy. Finally, Percy couldn't take any more. "What is it, Harry?" he snapped.

"Calm down, Percy," George said.

"Are you upset because the rat was originally yours?" Harry asked.

Percy frowned. "We knew it had to be some sort of magical rat," he finally said. "Black was right about that. Normal rats couldn't get into the Ministry. Someone brought him into Father's office while I was waiting for Mother."

Percy glared at the twins. "You two had dragon pox and had deliberately exposed Ron and Ginny. Mother had to take all of you to St. Mungo's."

The twins looked a little embarrassed.

"Bill was a First year. Charlie was already interested in animals of all sorts. He examined the rat after Father had tested it for diseases. He said it seemed smart, and needed a few good meals. It was already missing the toe, of course. It had an old scab on it."

"Hence the name," George pointed out.

"Exactly," Percy agreed. He sighed. "I asked Father if we could keep it. I already knew we didn't have much, so I said that could be my Christmas present. Father said he'd have to put up a notice to see if anyone claimed him, but naturally no one did."

"If it hadn't been you, it would have likely been some other family," Harry said. "Maybe no one would ever have learned the truth if you hadn't taken him in."

"That's true, I guess," Percy agreed. "Still, it means we took care of your parents', well, betrayer I guess would be the proper term."

Harry gave Percy a grim smile. "Just think, he's been a rat for ten years. Sounds like a harsh prison sentence to me."

"That's true," Fred pointed out. "I know you want to join the Ministry. Maybe this means you should consider the prison service."

"Not an ignoble profession, although I believe Percy will have a greater number of options than that." Professor Dumbledore was standing by the entrance. The five boys all stood up.

"I have just returned from the Ministry. Mister Pettigrew has confessed. There will be a great deal of paperwork to go through, but with luck, the complete story will be out in a day or two, or perhaps a week."

"How bad will it be?" Percy asked, squaring his shoulders.

"We should be able to keep your family's connection out of the papers," Dumbledore said. Percy sagged slightly in relief. "The wizard who had been head of the MLES back in 1981 tried to make a fuss, mostly to avoid his own embarrassment, but Sirius has agreed to settle the matter out of court."

"Will I see him, or Mister Lupin, anytime soon?" Harry asked.

"Do you wish to?" Dumbledore asked, slightly surprised.

"Yes, I would," Harry said. His real parents were unknown to him. Those two could be the only close links.

"I am certain that can be arranged. I am certain Sirius would wish to visit you, and Remus has only stayed away because, well you heard why last night."

"You can't be too friendly with a werewolf," Percy pointed out. "I mean, that . . . that was obviously the werewolf Black was talking about."

"My father thought enough of him to be his friend," Harry retorted. "I would at least like to know a little about them through him."

"That's true," Percy admitted.

"Professor McGonagall will be here to talk with Miss Johnson and Miss Kirkland," Dumbledore said. "You four may go to lunch if you wish."

Chapter XI

Monday, December 30, 1991

The news about Sirius Black's return came out in The Daily Prophet that morning. To say that it had made a stir in the British wizarding world was a major understatement. Barty Crouch Sr., the official who had sent Sirius to Azkaban without a thorough investigation let alone any trial, had been hanging on to his current position in the immediate aftermath of Sirius' reappearance. The afternoon of the 28th, an unexpected Ministry visit to his home had revealed his son, a convicted Death Eater believed to have died in Azkaban, was living under semi-imprisonment conditions in the Crouch home. It was that discovery which had delayed the news of Sirius Black's innocence.

Barty Crouch Jr. had been quickly taken back to Azkaban prison. His father's trial had been scheduled to start in early January at first. Crouch managed to make a plea bargain, forcing him not just out of the Ministry but which also striped him of his political rights and a third of his fortune.

It was difficult to tell from that Monday's Daily Prophet which of the two stories was considered to be the more shocking. The paper was very much an establishment organ, and as the only magical daily in the British islands it was also the most influential. The weekly periodicals had much less influence.

Because the Prophet was so tied to the establishment, it took a little reading between the lines to see that there was a third major scandal brewing. The Minister of Magic was also under heavy fire from within the Ministry and from the semi-autonomous wizarding court system. Cornelius Fudge had been the senior Ministry official at the scene of the confrontation between Black and Pettigrew, and it had been his evidence that had partially convinced Crouch that a trial was unnecessary. To make matters worse for Fudge, investigation into the affair of Barty Crouch Jr. had revealed Fudge's misuse of the memory charm on Neville Longbottom, not just by Fudge, but by his then assistant, Dolores Umbridge.

A cursory investigation into that then had led to the discovery, which would be announced that very afternoon, that Fudge and Umbridge had been carrying on a long term affair, and that Umbridge had been accepting direct bribes while both Fudge and Umbridge had been using large contributions by many wizards long suspected of Dark activities, especially Lucius Malfoy. This last would not have counted heavily, except that all Fudge's 'charity contributors' (as they were called) fell into that suspect category, and worst of all, they had all made their first contributions before Fudge had helped them arrange pardons.

The Daily Prophet reported Tuesday that Umbridge had already resigned, and that Fudge might have to. Peter Pettigrew had already been sent to the dementors. As for Sirius Black, he was declared innocent of the charges against him, although the paper noted Monday that he had been convicted of numerous (unspecified) minor offenses and announced on Tuesday that he had been let off with time served. Fudge would actually resign on the Wednesday, being replaced by the head of the MLES, Amelia Bones.

Percy Weasley was very confused by all this news. He had idealized the Ministry before this, believing it to consist of people like himself. He had imagined their rules and regulations were well-thought out, and evenly and honestly applied.

To his shock, he suddenly realized what he had done. He had populated the Ministry of his imagination with people who had all the positive qualities of himself, and even more surprisingly to him, his father.

He spent the rest of the holiday thinking about his priorities.

Before all that played out, Harry had some unexpected visitors that Monday afternoon. Professor McGonagall had found Harry in the library with Ron. They were pretending to study their history text while actually casing the restricted section again, thinking about making an assault while pretending to work on assignments they had already finished.

McGonagall eyed them warily. Decades of experience warned her that the pair were up to something, but she had no idea what they might be after. She contented herself with ordering Harry to follow her.

Harry decided that he wasn't in trouble, and so merely packed up and followed his Head of House to the great hall. McGonagall merely told him to try and stay out of trouble and then directed Harry to the door next to the dias where the faculty table was.

Harry shrugged and went on alone. He knew there was someone waiting for him, and therefore wasn't overly surprised to see that it was Black and Lupin.

"Hello, Harry," Remus said gently. Sirius Black seemed too nervous to do much more than smile at that point.

"Hi," Harry said.

An awkward silence fell. Remus sighed and elbowed Sirius sharply. "Ow!" He growled at Remus while rubbing his arm, "Why'd you do that, Moony?" The werewolf had forgotten how strong he was, and that elbow would leave a bruise.

"Because you're being an idiot," Remus responded. He turned to Harry and smiled a little. "Since you knew who I was, I guess there's no need to introduce myself."

"No," Harry said. "That's my godfather, Sirius Black, my father's best friend, and you're another close friend. I take it you're the werewolf my father, and the others, became an animagus to help out?"

"I am," Lupin admitted. "I hope that doesn't make you too nervous."

Harry thought a moment. "The last full moon was over a week ago . . . the morning of the twenty-first?" he asked. Lupin nodded.

Harry shrugged. "Then there's nothing to be nervous about, is there?"

"No," Sirius stated, "there isn't. I guess I should start off by apologizing again for the other night. That wasn't the best way for us to meet."

"Actually, it probably was, considering the circumstances," Harry pointed out.

"You probably have been told this before, but you look almost exactly like your father," Sirius blurted. Harry frowned slightly.

"He does," Remus agreed, "but if he sounds like anyone, he sounds more like Lily."

"True," Sirius admitted. "Anyway, since you know who we are, we thought we should drop by and become a little more acquainted, if you're interested."

Remus added, "Tabitha and Henry agreed we could, by the way."

"So, even though Tabby knew your mum fairly well, we probably knew her a bit better," Sirius said while scowling at Remus. He turned to Harry. "We also knew your father very well. Tabitha said you don't know much about them. What can we tell you about them?"

Harry smiled. "Everything!"

For the rest of the holiday, Harry spent a lot of time every day with Sirius and Remus. Ron spent the afternoons with them as well, and the twins always joined in after dinner.

Harry really enjoyed both of his father's friends. Sirius was more obviously fun-loving, and he spent a great deal of time exchanging pranking ideas with Fred and George, who seemed to very nearly worship Sirius. Remus was much more laid-back and quiet, but obviously had the same mischievous streak in him -- it was merely better controlled.

While Remus appeared poor and somewhat tired, Sirius still looked awful, even though he ate more than Harry and Ron put together. When school restarted, the pair of friends would be leaving for a vacation that would last until school was out. Both promised that they would be moving near Hogsmeade the following July.

That Thursday evening, Sirius and Remus took Harry and George aside, sending Ron and Fred on ahead with arm loads of extra food and drink to eat in front of the fire later that night.

"Did you bring it?" Sirius asked George.

"Of course!" George said. He pulled out a slightly tattered piece of parchment.

Sirius grabbed it, making George look hurt and drawing a scolding from Remus. Sirius apologized, pulled his new wand out and touched the parchment, saying, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good!"

Harry watched, amazed as the parchment sprang to life. "What's that?" Harry asked.

"The Marauder's Map," George said, slightly in awe.

"How did you get it, anyway?" Remus asked.

"And what is it?" Harry asked again.

"We diverted Filch's attention one time in his office last year and grabbed a bunch of stuff," George said. "This was the most interesting."

"And it shows nearly all of Hogwarts and all the people and sentients in the castle and some of the grounds," Remus explained. "We started on it in our Third year, and kept making improvements until Filch managed to grab it from us."

"Nearly all?" George asked.

"There are some areas open only to the staff," Remus explained. "I doubt if we found all of it."

"We also found a number of secret passages," Sirius added. "There must be at least one that we missed."

"Which. . . ?" Remus started to ask.

"There must be one in the dungeons we missed," Sirius answered. "Remember, there was that troll over Halloween."

"That's right," Remus agreed.

"Why didn't it ever show you or Pettigrew?" George asked Sirius.

"It only shows Marauders to another Marauder," Remus explained.

"May we have this?" Sirius asked.

George's face dropped, but he said, "Well, it is yours."

Sirius and Remus asked. "We'll give it back," Remus said. "We're going to add Harry as a Marauder and teach him some things. We'll give it back to you, and you can share it with him until you leave or decide to give it to him."

George smiled. "Thank you."

"Hey, I can't imagine anyone more deserving of our help than you two," Sirius said. He ruffled Harry's hair. "It takes a year or two to get ready to cause trouble."

Harry stuck his tongue out at his godfather.

The next Saturday night, Sirius and Remus took their leave right after dinner. Harry was sad to see them go. He thought he understood himself, and his heritage, a bit better. He also understood why Snape seemed to hate him so much.

Sirius still loathed Snape. Harry had been horrified to learn that Sirius had tricked Snape into approaching the transformed Remus Lupin during a full moon. Even now, more than fifteen years later, Sirius was sorry only for nearly getting Remus charged with murder. That Snape might have been killed, or at least made a werewolf, didn't even seem to matter. In fact, the idea of Snape as a werewolf seemed to be a real joke to Sirius and to the three youngest Weasley brothers ("Imagine, a great greasy werewolf," Fred had said. "It would look nasty, but would probably have to spend all its time licking the grease off its fur." Sirius and Ron had howled with laughter.)

Although Harry really liked Sirius, he felt more drawn to the more scholarly Remus. Most nights, after Sirius had regaled the group with some outrageous stories in the common room (the two Seventh year girls watching on from a distance, one looking longingly at Sirius, the other at Remus, while Percy pretended to ignore everything), Sirius would wind up talking with Fred and Ron while Remus would be talking to George and Harry.

Harry made certain to introduce both men to Hedwig. Harry loved his owl, but had had little use for her. She seemed very happy with the idea of flying messages to Sirius and Remus, starting in two weeks or so.

The holidaying students returned late the next afternoon. Harry was waiting near the stairs in the entrance hall when they started pouring in.

He was waiting for two particular students, and so didn't notice the glances he was getting from many of the students. Harry did take time off to exchange sneers with Draco Malfoy.

Finally, Neville and Hermione came through the huge doors. Neville smiled and pointed Harry out to Hermione (she had been searching for him in the other direction) and the two hurried over.

"Sounds like you had an interesting holiday," Neville said with a grin.

"Nah, I'm sure it wasn't anything out of the ordinary," Harry retorted, finally breaking into a return grin of his own.

"Boys," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. To his surprise, Hermione then gave Harry a brief but very tight hug. "I'm just glad things turned out so well."

"So am I," Harry agreed.

"What's he like?" Neville asked.

Harry frowned in thought. It was obvious who Neville was asking about. "It's hard to say. In some ways, he's more like a school boy than some of the Seventh years. Maybe spending almost ten years in that place means he never really grew up." Harry shrugged. "In most other ways, he's great, but you have to imagine him as Fred and George Weasley wrapped into one person." Hermione wrinkled her nose at that.

"Is the story of how he and his friends became animagi true?" Neville asked.

"I think so. Which part?"

"The part that they did it because one of their dorm mates was a werewolf." Neville shook his head. "Did the Headmaster really allow a werewolf into school?"

"It does sound dangerous," Hermione agreed.

"Yes, he did, and they did," Harry responded, a bit nettled. "I met him, the werewolf I mean."

"What!"

"He was there, that night when Sirius broke in and captured Pettigrew."

"You mean he was in league with Black all along?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, no, he was there to help bring Sirius down," Harry answered. "He probably would have had the best idea of how Sirius thought. He was also able to confirm most of Sirius' story and identify Pettigrew. They're good friends again, and are leaving on vacation together after the next full moon." Harry smiled. "They're supposed to come stay with us in July."

"Wasn't he . . . awful?" Neville asked.

Harry shook his head. "Neville, he's a person, a very nice and smart person at that, not a monster. Well, except during the hours between the full moon and daylight, anyway."

"Really?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide.

"Really," Harry said firmly.

That night, the four friends sat at their usual table. Neville was scribbling in a record book he kept on some plants he kept on the window sill while Hermione was glancing over the boys' holiday assignments. Harry and Ron were going over their wizard cards from the chocolate frogs they'd been given at Christmas.

"Here's another Dumbledore," Ron said. He frowned. "I must have eight of these by now," Ron said. "You have one, don't you, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry answered. "That was the first card. . . ." Harry trailed off.

Ron looked at Harry, who was sitting there with a stunned expression on his face. "What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione and Neville looked up as well.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, worried. "Harry, are you alright?"

"I'm an idiot," Harry declared.

"Yeah, well, we knew THAT," Ron retorted. "What made you realize it?" Neville and Hermione glared at him. "What?"

"I knew I knew Flamel's name, but I couldn't place it," Harry muttered.

"Who is he?" Hermione asked.

"He's a famous alchemist. My mother must have mentioned him a few times as the greatest alchemist of the last thousand years or so."

"That's great," Neville said, which made Hermione and Ron nod in agreement, "but why did you remember now?"

"Read the last line of Dumbledore's card, Ron," Harry directed.

Ron shrugged and turned the card over. "Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling?" Ron quoted, puzzled.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Before that, then!"

"Oh! Here it is. Flamel is Dumbledore's alchemy partner!"

"Exactly. I can't believe I didn't remember."

"Wait here," Hermione said, and dashed towards her room. She came back a few minutes later with a huge book. "I took this out after dinner, for a little light reading."

"Light?" Ron demanded, in shock.

"Be quiet," Hermione hissed. "I'm sure he must be in here, then."

After leafing through the book, she paused, and then read aloud:

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's, or Sorcerer's, Stone, a legendary substance the astonishing powers. The Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

"Immortal!" Ron exclaimed.

"Hush!" Hermione warned. "It means you never die."

"I know what it means!" Ron frowned. "Is that all alchemy is?"

"No," Harry answered, "that's how it got started. These days, it sort of combines potion making, research, and philosophy as well. They still research ideas behind the Stone, though. Making a full Philosopher's Stone is dangerous. I think everyone has failed or died trying."

"Not everyone," Hermione said. She finished reading the entry.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently known to exist belongs to Mr. Nicholas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who recently celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"Understand?" Hermione said. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Philosopher's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it. That's why they wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A Stone that makes gold and stops you from dying," Neville said, "no wonder someone wants it!"

"Snape," Ron stated.

"Probably," Hermione hedged.

Ron frowned, but said, "Well, it's no wonder we didn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry. He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five!"

"True," Hermione agreed. She looked at Harry, who was looking very thoughtful. "What's wrong?"

"Something just doesn't add up about all this," Harry said. "Snape must have something to do with this, but why would it be easier for him to get into Gringotts than anyplace in Hogwarts?"

"True," Neville agreed. "Gringotts is a very secure place."

"And Snape is here, he doesn't have to break through all the security, like he would have had to at Gringotts," Ron added.

"Voldemort," Harry whispered. Neville and Ron still jumped.

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Well, maybe not V. . . ."

"Stop saying the name!" Ron hissed.

"Alright, it may be Lord Whoseits, or it could be some sort of gang or conspiracy," Harry said.

"That's true," Hermione agreed. "Snape could be part of the gang or working for Vo, err, You-Know-Who. They tried to steal it from Gringotts, and now he's going to try here. Unless Dumbledore and Flamel moved it here to keep it from someone else and Snape is acting on his own."

"You still think You-Know-Who is around, right Harry?" Neville asked.

"Remember what I told Percy," Harry answered. "He's disembodied. There must be followers willing to help him get it back."

Hermione thought a moment, then asked, "Did Black have anything to do with that troll?"

"No," Harry said.

"Then either Snape was totally responsible for that, or he's working with a gang, I suppose."

"I wish we could keep an eye on him," Harry said. "He's either directly involved, or knows what's going on." He knew that even if the twins gave him the map, they couldn't watch it all that often.

"Well, he hates you," Neville pointed out. "He's always looking for you to get you into trouble."

Harry blushed. "Oh. About that. Imagine if Malfoy keeps after the four of us. Hermione marries one of us, and one day, our son comes to Hogwarts, where Malfoy is a teacher. How is Malfoy likely to treat the kid?"

"Like Snape treats you, you mean," Hermione said, slightly pink.

"Exactly. Remus said that Sirius and Snape had hated each other from the time they were toddlers, and that Snape and my dad had a run-in on their first ride on the Hogwarts Express. They fought constantly, and Snape, since he was usually outnumbered, usually came out on the losing side."

"So, he might be after you because of who you are, because he's a follower of You-Know-Who trying to get the Stone and revenge, or both," Neville summed up.

"Exactly."

The four sat glumly for a few moments, then Ron stood up. "Come on, Neville. These two might want to start planning their wedding."

The two boys left the blushing Harry and Hermione, snickering all the way.

Chapter XII

Harry was glad he had solved the minor puzzle of Nicolas Flamel, although he and his friends quickly realized that it really had not sent their 'investigation' much further ahead. Still, while every year would make them look back longingly at the ease of their First year, while they were experiencing it they were tremendously busy. As January followed February into early March, the four friends stayed busy, with only minor distractions like Valentine's Day and Ron's birthday taking them briefly away from their studies. Harry was even busier than the more-studious Hermione, who was already studying ahead in many areas far afield of her regular classes. This was because Oliver Wood had restarted Quidditch practice.

Normally, Quidditch practices restarted in mid-February, then there would be two games in April and two games in late May and early June. However, it had been six years since Gryffindor had last won the Quidditch Cup, in one of Charlie Weasley's last years at Hogwarts. Wood was determined to bring the Cup back to Gryffindor in each of his three years as captain, and the rest of the team wanted it almost as much as Wood (and McGonagall) did. Added to that was the fact that Slytherin had won most of the championships, and as much as the Gryffindors wanted to beat Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, they wanted to defeat Slytherin for the Cup as much as they had wanted to beat them on the field.

Even the endless rain of late February and March that had replaced the snow and sleet of January and early February didn't dampen Wood's spirits. By mid-March, the Weasley twins were complaining that Wood was becoming a fanatic, although Harry was on Wood's side. Harry didn't mention to anyone that, starting in January, he had started having nightmares about his birth parents dying in a flash of green light. So, apart from wanting to win, Harry found that he had fewer nightmares when he was tired out after training. Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team a bit of bad news. He'd just gotten very angry with the Weasleys, who had been dive-bombing each other and pretending to fall off their brooms rather than practicing with the Bludgers.

"Will you stop messing around!" he yelled. "That's exactly the sort of thing that'll lose us the match! Snape's refereeing this time, and he'll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor! Not to mention the penalty shots he'll invent if you. . . ."

George really did fall off his broom at those first, dreaded words. "**Snape's** refereeing?" he sputtered through a mouthful of dirt. "When's he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He's not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin!"

"It's not **my** fault," Wood retorted. "We've just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn't got an excuse to pick on us."

'Pick on us?' Harry thought. 'I have more to worry about than Snape just **picking** on me!'

Usually the players hung around talking a bit after practice, but that night Harry headed straight back to the common room, where he found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Despite

their best attempts, Ron still won nearly every game of chess he played against Harry and Hermione. Ron thought this was very good for building the character of his two friends.

Harry looked around, looking for Neville, but he wasn't around.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Don't talk for a moment," Ron said, studying the chess board. "I need to concen. . . . What's wrong? You look terrible."

"It's Snape," Harry said quietly. "He's going to be the referee at our next Quidditch game."

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked.

"Wood told us tonight," Harry said with a fatalistic shrug as he sat down.

"Don't play," Hermione suggested. "You can say you're ill."

"Not play Quidditch?" Ron asked in a puzzled tone, and then seemed to be weighing the choices and quickly understanding why Harry wouldn't want to fly anywhere near Snape.

"You could pretend to break your leg," Hermione suggested.

Ron jumped in with, "Really break your leg."

"I can't," said Harry regretfully. "There isn't a reserve Seeker. If I back out, Gryffindor can't play at all."

At that moment, Neville limped into the room.

"What happened to you?" a Seventh year prefect demanded.

"Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle all caught me with Leg-Locker Curses," he complained. "They got me outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice it on."

"All three?" the prefect demanded.

"Well, Malfoy got me first," Neville said. "I did the counter-spell, and then they all hit me with it. My counter-curse must not have been strong enough to get rid of all the effects."

Hermione quickly performed the counter-curse, and Neville's limp went away.

"Did you get them at all?" the prefect demanded.

Neville smiled. "We'll see if Harry was right about Malfoy's boil-removing solution being too runny to be effective."

"All three?" Ron asked.

"All three," Neville answered proudly.

"Well done," the prefect said.

"Aren't you going to take points?" Hermione demanded.

"If you mean from Neville for defending himself, no," the prefect said coldly. "If you mean from Malfoy, I could only do that if I had seen it, which I didn't." He walked away.

"Go to Professor McGonagall," Hermione urged Neville. "Report him!"

"I don't want more trouble," Neville replied, shaking his head. "If McGonagall got involved, it would get Snape involved and we don't need him glowering at us in potions more than he does."

"Neville stood up to Malfoy," Ron pointed out. "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason any of us have to lie down in front of him and make it easier."

"I suppose," Hermione said, dissatisfied.

Harry clapped his hand to Neville shoulder. "You're worth twelve of Malfoy," he said proudly.

"Just twelve?" Neville said with a grin.

"Sit down," Harry added more quietly. "I need to fill you in on what Snape is up to."

As the match drew nearer, Harry became more and more nervous, despite what he told his friends and team mates. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either, despite what they claimed to each other and their friends. The idea of winning the Quidditch Cup and perhaps the House Cup, especially ahead of Slytherin, was wonderful, but would they have a fair chance to with such a biased referee?

Harry didn't know if he was imagining it or not, but he seemed to be running into Snape wherever he went. At times, he even wondered if Snape was following him, trying to catch him on his own. Potions lessons were nearly as bad as they had been at the beginning of the year, although Snape was still grading them fairly.

Could Snape possibly know they had found out about the Philosopher's Stone? Harry remembered that slight mental intrusion earlier in the year, and wondered if Snape had picked up something from himself or one of his friends.

Harry knew, when his three friends wished him good luck the afternoon of the Quidditch match, that they were wondering if they'd ever see him alive, or at least in one piece, ever again. Harry did not find this comforting. Harry hardly heard a word of Wood's pep talk as the team pulled on their robes and picked up their brooms.

The other three friends had found a place in the stands, and looked very grim and worried. All three had brought their wands, although none of them, not even Hermione, really knew many spells which might be helpful if Snape hexed Harry or his broom again. The best they had come up with was the Leg-Locker curse.

"Now remember," Hermione muttered to Ron, "it's **Locomotor Mortis**."

"I know, I know, don't nag," Ron snarled, pushing his wand up his sleeve.

Back in the players' area, Wood was telling Harry to try and catch the Snitch as soon as possible while Fred was peeking out at the crowd.

"Wow, it looks like the whole school is out there!" Fred exclaimed. "Even -- blimey -- Dumbledore's come to watch!"

Harry's heart leapt for joy. "Dumbledore?" He went over and looked out. Fred was right, and Harry smiled in relief. There was no chance Snape would try anything too blatant, or magical, while Dumbledore was there. Snape, on the other hand, looked even nastier than usual.

"I've never seen Snape look so mean," Ron observed from the stands. "Ouch!" Someone had poked Ron in the back of the head.

Ron turned and glared, which intensified when he saw it was Malfoy and his two goons.

"Oh, sorry Weasley, didn't see you there." Malfoy grinned. "Wonder how long Potter's going to stay on his broom this time. Anyone want to bet? What about you, Weasley? Or don't you have Knut?"

The Gryffindors ignored him. Snape had just awarded Hufflepuff a penalty shot because Fred had aimed a Bludger at him. While Ron and Neville watched the Hufflepuff captain miss the shot, Hermione kept her eye on Harry, who was circling the game like a hawk.

When play was stopped again a few minutes later -- Snape had awarded Hufflepuff another penalty shot for no apparent reason -- Malfoy leaned forward and spoke again. "They must put people on the Gryffindor team because they feel sorry for them. Potter has no parents, the Weasleys have no money, and I don't think the others have much ancestry. Maybe you can be on next year, Longbottom. Your parents. . . ."

He stopped when Neville turned around and glared. "My family is worth more than yours in terms of blood and nearly as much as your in terms of money, Malfoy, which puts me ahead of any other Slytherin in our year. In everything else, I'm worth at least twelve of you, even by your stupid values."

The Slytherin trio glared.

"Look!" Hermione cried. "Harry!" Everyone looked where she was pointing. Harry had gone into a spectacular dive, which had brought Hermione's crossed fingers to her mouth in a mix of horror and admiration. Harry's dive streaked across the ground, leaving the other Seeker way behind.

"Maybe you've in luck, Weasley," Malfoy said. "If Potter's spotted some money, maybe he'll share. If it's a Knut, he can double your family's fortune."

"Come on, Harry!" Hermione screamed, ignoring what was going on around her. Harry was chasing the Snitch, which was now flying towards Snape.

Ron turned and jumped Malfoy. When Crabbe and Goyle turned to help their leader, Neville tackled them from behind.

Harry zipped past Snape before he even realized what was happening. The next second, Harry caught the Snitch and raised his hand in triumph, before Snape could find his whistle to blow for another arbitrary penalty shot.

The stands erupted in applause. Even counting the two penalty shots, the game had barely lasted five minutes. When Hermione had stopped screaming and cheering and dancing with Parvati Patil, she noticed the fight going on behind her. She leg-locked the three Slytherins, and forced her rather bruised friends to move on. Before leaving, Neville checked to see if they had their wands (they hadn't brought them).

There were no other Slytherins in that part of the stands, and someone put muting charms on the three Slytherins, who were not discovered into after dinner by their annoyed prefects.

Meanwhile, Harry was being congratulated by Dumbledore, while Snape spat in anger and marched away.

There had been such cheering that the congratulations on the field lasted longer than most Quidditch games. Harry was the last person to go put his robes and broom away (he had to keep his broom stored near the pitch rather than in the castle since he was a First year).

Harry was content. His first catch may have been luck, but this time it had been pure skill. Dumbledore had congratulated him, his adoptive parents and siblings had congratulated him, and members of his House that he barely knew by sight had congratulated him. Even some Ravenclaws had.

Hermione had given him a warm hug and had kissed his cheek. Ron and Neville had shaken his hand and then hugged him as well -- although they had bled a little on his robes, Ron from a bloody nose and Neville from a split lip and a cut over his eye. When Percy had asked about it, Hermione had explained they had gotten elbowed in the excitement. Percy had clucked and taken them to the Infirmary.

Harry had spent the last hour just feeling good about himself and about the world. Still, he was thinking, it was almost time for dinner.

He paused when he saw a hooded figure coming down the steps of the castle. Even at this distance, Harry knew it was Snape. Harry jumped back on his broom and then glided to follow the figure around the castle.

Harry saw the figure duck into the Forbidden Forest. Harry followed, over the trees rather than through them. When he lost Snape, he flew slow, quiet circles, until he heard voices, and then he dropped lower.

". . . d-don't know why you wanted to t-t-to meet here of all, p-places, Severus. . . ."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," Snape said icily. "After all, the students aren't supposed to know about the Philosopher's

Stone."

Harry leaned forward, but missed what Quirrell was mumbling. Whatever confidence Quirrell had had over Christmas seemed gone.

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus!"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," Snape said in a threatening manner.

"I-I don't know what you mean. . . ."

"You know perfectly well what I mean!"

An owl hooted nearby, and Harry nearly fell off his broom into the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape continue, ". . . your little bit of hocus-pocus. I'm waiting."

"B-but. . . ."

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another of these little chats soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie." Snape pulled the hood of his robe over his head and strode out of the clearing. Harry silently rose through the tree, watching Quirrell, who was standing quite still. Harry decided he'd best clear off as well.

Had Harry stayed, he would have heard Quirrell say, in a very different tone, "You should be more worried about your loyalties than mine, Snape."

Another voice replied, "He shall be taught his place when the time comes, as will many others." Quirrell quirked a small smile, and left the clearing as well.

Three minutes later, two figures emerged from inside the rowan tree Harry had been perched in.

"That was interesting," the Dragon (a member of both the Druid and Hidden security forces) said.

"Very," Cadfael agreed. "I rather think young Harry will have gathered the substance but will reach the wrong conclusions."

"Probably," the Dragon agreed. "I would have, if I didn't know the players and their roles all ready. That Snape belongs as Head of Slytherin; he's as twisty as any snake."

"True."

"Do we let this play out?"

"We have to. Both prophecies say the boy has to be the one, and the second one says it will happen at the end of this academic year. We must do what we can to help him without upsetting the prophecies. To do more would likely spell disaster for the boy and then for the rest of us."

"Harry, where have you been?" Hermione said in a worried squeak.

"We won, and you've been gone all afternoon!" Ron shouted. "And I gave Malfoy a black eye, and then Neville and I took on Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. We fought 'em to a draw, then Hermione leg-locked 'em! Well, Neville was kind of battered and is in the Infirmary for observation, but so is Crabbe. Talk about showing Slytherin! Come on! Everyone's waiting for you in the common room. We're having a party. Fred and George took some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."

"Never mind that now," Harry told his friend. "Let's find an empty room. Wait 'til you hear what I overheard!"

Hermione looked at him, and quickly led them to an empty classroom. They made certain Peeves wasn't inside, and then Harry shut the door behind them and told them everything he had seen and heard.

Harry said it all in a long rush of words, concluding, "So we were right, it **is** the Philosopher's Stone, and Snape is trying to force Quirrell to help him get it. He asked if he had found out how to get past Fluffy yet, and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus-pocus.' I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably. Quirrell must have done at least one of them, some anti-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through or something."

"So you mean the Stone might be safe only as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" Hermione asked in alarm.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday," Ron stated.

The Stone was not gone by the following Tuesday. Quirrell looked paler than usual, and Snape acted as ornery and nasty as usual, so the students gathered that either Quirrell hadn't given in or there were many more enchantments in Snape's way.

Harry started to smile encouragingly at Quirrell whenever they passed each other, which rather seemed to disconcert the man rather than cheer him along as Harry intended. Harry, Neville, and especially Ron took to defending Quirrell from the many off-hand snide comments directed against him.

Hermione, however, was making up color-coded charts for herself and her three friends. To their horror, especially Ron's, they learned these were study schedules.

"But Hermione," Ron protested, "the exams are ages away."

"Just ten weeks, which is hardly ages. That's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"We're not six hundred years old yet! Anyway, why are you worried about studying? You already know it all."

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy! We need to pass these to get into Second year. They're very important, and I should have started at least a month ago!"

"You know more than any three of us! You'll drive us. . . ."

Harry stood up and went between them, holding his hands for quiet. They had attracted a lot of attention from the rest of the room, but they all averted their eyes when Harry glared at them. Somehow, when Harry did that, he seemed a great deal more powerful than a little First year.

Harry turned back to his friends. "Hermione, I know being first in the class means a lot to you. You feel you have to prove you belong here like the rest of us, and you love studying. We want to do well, but we aren't as studious as you are. You want to know all the theory behind what we're doing, but we really don't."

Hermione started to speak, but kept quiet under Harry's stern eye. "Ron, Neville, we might not take this as seriously as Hermione, but we do have to make an effort. Hermione, could you please make those schedules for the three of us? Just give us half the out-of-class study time you plan for yourself, and don't forget to leave time for you to have fun with us."

Hermione and Ron both glared at Harry, while Neville grinned. Finally, Hermione said, "Three-quarters."

"Two-thirds."

Hermione chewed her lower lip, and said, "Alright. But don't complain if the teachers pile things on."

"We won't."

Chapter XIII

"I can't believe how much work they've given us," Ron complained a few weeks after the three boys had agreed to try and follow Hermione's schedules.

Hermione smiled a very superior smile from her seat in the library. The teachers had given them so much homework that the Easter holidays had been more work than fun. This day was even worse, as it was the first warm, clear day of the late Scottish spring, and a warm, sweet breeze came in through the window, open for the first time since September.

"I'll never remember all this," Ron complained, throwing down his quill.

Harry didn't look up from his Herbology homework, while Neville scratched away on a Potions essay. Hermione totally ignored the outburst, since it was far from the first one. However, when the three heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?" the other three members of the quartet did look up, equally surprised. None had ever seen Hagrid in the library before.

Hagrid seemed to be trying to hide something, and he looked very out of place.

"Jus' lookin'," he said in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An what're you lot up ter? Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," Ron said in a voice that rather reminded Harry of Percy. "And we know that the dog's guarding the Phil. . . ."

"Shhhh!" Hagrid scowled and glanced about. "Don' go shoutin' about it! What's the matter with yeh?"

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," Harry said. "You know, about what's guarding, well, it, apart from Fluffy. . . ."

"Shhh I said!" Hagrid said in an angry hiss. "Listen, come and see me later. I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but **don'** go rabbitin' about it here. Students aren' s'posed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh!"

"Alright," Harry said placating his friend, "we'll see you later."

Hagrid glanced around and tried to sneak off.

"What was that behind his back?" Hermione asked thoughtfully.

"Do you think it had anything to do with the, well, with it?" Neville asked.

"Let me go see what section he was in," Ron said, glad for the excuse to get up. He came back a few minutes later with a puzzled look and a few books.

"Look at these!" he said, surprised but quietly. "**Dragons! Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland. From Egg to Inferno. A Dragon Keeper's Guide.**"

"Hagrid told me once he always wanted a dragon," Harry said simply.

"But it's against our laws," Neville pointed out.

Hermione and Harry had to agree, but Ron wasn't done. "Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that."

"True," Neville and Harry muttered.

"It's hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden, which you can't, because you can't tame a dragon."

"We know," Neville said.

"You should see the burns Charlie gets off the wild ones." Ron's brother worked with wild dragons in Romania. "Only government agencies can work with them."

"Government agencies and licensed ranches and reserves. Yes, we know, Ron," Harry pointed out. "Still, Hagrid likes dragons. If he wants to read about them, why not?"

"Now that's odd," Hermione said an hour later, as the four friends approached Hagrid's cabin.

"What is?" Neville asked.

"All his curtains are closed," she pointed out. "They've never even been half shut before. Ron and Neville shrugged, taking her word for it.

"Well," Harry said, "we knew he was up to something." He stepped up and knocked.

"Who is it? Hagrid demanded from behind the door.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville. Remember?"

"Oh," Hagrid said, opening the door a crack. "Right. Come on in." He opened the door just wide enough for the four children to come in single file, and shut the door quickly. It was dark, and very hot. The only light came from the roaring fireplace, which was odd since it was a fairly warm day.

Hagrid started making them tea, which they accepted, and offered them stoat sandwiches, which even Ron refused.

"So, yeh wanted to ask me somethin'?" Hagrid asked as he fussed with the tea.

"Yes," Harry replied. He had decided to get right to the point. "We were wondering if you could tell us what's guarding the Stone. Apart from Fluffy, we mean."

Hagrid frowned and said, "O' course I can't. Number one, I don't know meself. Number two, yeh four know too much already, so I wouldn't tell yeh if I could. That Stone's there fer a good

reason. It was almost stolen out of Gringotts." He looked at Harry. "I suppose yeh've worked that out an' all?"

Harry nodded. "Remember, my dad," Hagrid frowned, "Henry Dorff that is, is an auror. He and Mister Moody were called in by the goblins, along with every other active and retired auror in Britain. I heard them mention the vault number, but I didn't think to put it together until after we . . . learned about Fluffy."

"Beats me how yeh even know abou' Fluffy," Hagrid complained.

"Oh, come on, Hagrid! You might not want to tell us, but you do know! You know everything that goes on around here," Hermione said. Ron and Neville looked confused, but Harry smiled. He recognized this as the cajoling, flattering voice Hermione used to get her way. "We were only wondering who had **done** the guarding, really," Hermione went on. "We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help out, apart from you."

Hagrid's chest swelled with praise, and he was smiling. Ron and Neville caught on at last, and joined Hermione and Harry in beaming proudly at their friend.

"Well . . . I don' suppose it could hurt to tell you that. Let's see . . . he borrowed Fluffy from me, o' course, and then some of the teachers did enchantments. Professor Sprout, Professor Flitwick, Professor McGonagall, Professor Quirrell, and o' course Dumbledore did somethin' hisself." Hagrid stared at his hands, as he had been ticking off the names as he said them. "Hang on, I've forgotten someone." He thought. "Oh, yeah! Professor Snape?"

"SNAPE?" the students chorused.

"Yeah, Professor Snape! Yer not still goin' on abou' that, are yeh? Look, Snape is helpin' protect the Stone. He's not about ter steal it!"

The four friends looked at each other. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, he would have been as likely as Hagrid to know who else was helping. It was possible that he had at least some idea of how to get past all or most of them, except apparently for whatever Quirrell had done, and Fluffy.

"You're the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy, aren't you Hagrid?" Harry asked anxiously. "And you wouldn't tell any one, would you? Not even a teacher?"

"Not a soul knows except me and Dumbledore," Hagrid said proudly.

"That's good," Harry said. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Hagrid, can't we have some windows open? I'm boiling."

"Can't today, Harry, sorry," Hagrid said, stealing a glance at the fire. All four students looked, and saw the same thing.

"Hagrid!" Harry exclaimed, "what's that?" He saw what it was, but didn't believe it. In the middle of the fire was a large, black egg.

"Ah, well, tha's . . . well. . . ."

Ron got up and looked at it. "Where did you get it, Hagrid? It must have cost you a fortune!"

"No, I won it," Hagrid replied. "Jus' las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks. Got in a game o' cards with a stranger. He was quite glad to rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it hatches?" Hermione demanded. She couldn't be certain, but she, along with the others, had a good idea what kind of egg it was.

"Well, I've been doin' some readin'," Hagrid admitted. He pulled a large volume out from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library. Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit. It's a bit outta date, of course, bu' it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mother's breathe on 'em, see. When it hatches,, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An see here? How ter recognize diff'rent eggs? Wot tha is is a Norwegian Ridgeback. Rare, they are."

"But Hagrid," Hermione protested, "you live in a wooden house!"

Hagrid ignored them. Instead, he sat, looking at the egg and humming happily. As they left a while later, all four realized they had yet another problem.

A little less than a week later, Hedwig brought Harry an unsigned note. Still, it was clearly from Hagrid. It only had two words: **It's hatching**.

Ron wanted to hurry down and watch, but Hermione insisted that they wait until after classes.

"Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?"

"We've got lessons," Hermione repeated. "We'll get into trouble, and that's nothing compared to what Hagrid will be in when someone finds out what he's. . . ."

"Shush!" Neville hissed.

Harry looked up and saw Draco Malfoy glaring at them, glaring and listening. How much had he heard? Draco said nothing, and slinked away.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way to Herbology, and Hermione finally agreed they could down after class and before lunch. When the bell sounded, the quartet took off.

Hagrid had been expecting them, and ushered them in quickly, saying only, "It's almost out!"

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside, and a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

All five drew up chairs and watched. All at once there was a scraping noise, and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table.

The four students wrinkled their noses. It wasn't very attractive; Harry thought it looked rather like a crumpled black umbrella. Still, its wings were huge compared to the tiny body, and all five watched with a little awe as the tiny creature spread them fully for the first time.

Then it sneezed, blowing sparks from its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid muttered. He stroked the dragon, which tried to bite him with its very sharp fangs. "Look! He knows his mummy!"

Neville and Ron rolled their eyes, while Harry shook his head.

"Hagrid, don't dragons grow, well, fast over their first few weeks?" Hermione asked.

Hagrid was about to answer when the color drained from his face. He leapt up.

"What's wrong?" Hermione and Harry each demanded.

"Someone was lookin' in, some student."

"Malfoy!" Harry said, looking at the retreating form.

Hagrid looked shocked, then he shook his head and went to feed the dragon. "Come along, Norbert," he said. "Time fer nummies."

"Norbert?" Ron and Neville demanded.

"Nummies?" Harry asked.

"Got to call him somethin'," Hagrid pointed out. "Don' he look like a Norbert?"

"Hagrid, you're going to have to let him go," Hermione stated firmly. "Let him go soon!"

"Hermione! He's just hatched! He'd die!"

"Hagrid! In three weeks, he'll be about as big as your house! In less than two, you'll have to be feeding him so much meat everyone will notice!" Ron pointed out.

Hagrid shrugged. "I know I can't keep him forever, but I need to keep him at least a few weeks," Hagrid pled with them.

"Malfoy could go to Dumbledore, or worse, Snape, at any time," Neville said. "You know Snape will want to turn Norbert into potions supplies."

Hagrid glared at that.

The knees of all five then turned to water as there was a knocking on the hut's door. Hagrid looked around, desperately looking for a way to hide the dragon, busy with its brandy and chicken blood.

Before anyone could actually move, the locked door seemed to swing open on its own, although no one heard any incantation, revealing four forms. The smallest started shouting, "Let go of me! Just who do you think you are? Wait until my father hears of this!"

A wand swished, and Malfoy was stunned. Hermione, Ron, and Neville gasped in shock. They had never seen that major a hex used, especially not on a student. Harry was in shock, but for a different set of reasons.

"Uncle Tom? Master Cadfael?"

"Ah, young Harry," Cadfael said, walking in. "Students," he said, with a slight bow. "Mister Hagrid. Now, we saw Mister Hagrid acting rather suspiciously this past week, and saw you four students sneaking in, and this one being even more . . . suspicious. Who is he, by the way?"

"Draco Malfoy, sir," Harry whispered, a bit in awe of the power radiating from the trio.

"Really?" the third man said with a really cheerful sneer. "How . . . delicious."

"Padrig!" Cadfael scolded. He turned his attention to the table. "A baby dragon?"

"Jus' hatched!" Hagrid said proudly.

"A Ridgeback, isn't it?" Tom Lawrence asked.

"Yeah!" Hagrid started to enthuse, but then he remembered that having a private dragon was illegal.

"Certainly an event to draw the curious," Cadfael acknowledged. "Padrig here will take Malfoy to an associate of ours who has a truly remarkable facility in memory charms. He shall be a bit . . . oblivious for the rest of the day, but otherwise unharmed. Take the boy away."

Padrig grinned and dragged the stunned Malfoy from the hut.

"The question arises, what should we do about this dragon?"

Harry turned to Ron. "Charlie!"

"I'm Ron," Ron said. "You haven't met Charlie."

"No, you git! Your brother Charlie works with dragons in Romania. Could he take err, Norbert?"

"Norbert?" Tom and Cadfael asked.

"Norbert," Hagrid stated. "Everthin' needs a proper name."

"I could write him, I suppose," Ron said, a bit doubtfully.

"Norbert is too young to travel!" Hagrid protested.

"We could fireproof everything," Tom suggested quietly. "The dragon could travel in a week or two. Harry, I mean Henry, has some experience with dragons. We couldn't transport . . . Norbert to America, but there might be a way to get him to Romania."

"We'll fireproof the cabin," Cadfael agreed, "and then send Henry Dorff over. You four, get to lunch, and write to this Charlie. Try not to snicker at young Malfoy if he appears intoxicated, and don't tell **anyone** about **any** of this."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. "Sir?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Why are you here?"

"Dark forces are gathering, Harry. Whatever anyone may think of us, we try and represent the forces of Light." Cadfael looked at the others. "I am known as Cadfael. I am a leader of those who are commonly called the Hidden of the Old Faith, or the Hidden Druids. You are Harry's friends and fol, err, companions?"

"Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, this is Master Cadfael and Thomas Lawrence."

Cadfael looked at them deeply, and then smiled. "Four brave young lions. Leadership, scholarship, tactical logic, and perseverance. All loyal, determined, and brave." He nodded. "A fine quartet. Still, you should get going if you want lunch. Don't visit again until Friday afternoon at the earliest. Harry, send a note to your father with your owl when you hear back from Mister Weasley's brother."

"Yes, sir."

Ron wrote to Charlie, and then they had to wait. Starting Friday, the group, singly and together, made trips down to visit the rapidly growing dragon.

The following Wednesday evening, Ron returned from a late visit to Hagrid, sneaking a few pounds of left-over fat the house elves had collected for them at Harry's request.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked as Ron threw off the invisibility cloak.

"It was bad enough hauling that fat down there, and helping Hagrid feed that monster a case of dead rats," Ron complained, "but then the bloody thing bit me!" Ron showed Harry his hand, wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. "I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny. When it bit me, he actually told me off for frightening it! When I left, he was singing it a lullaby."

Ron scowled. Harry was searching through his trunk. He had gotten a new one shortly after Christmas, which had several magical compartments in it. "Did you hear a word I said?"

"Yes, I did." Harry straightened up, holding a bottle and a towel. "Dad told Mom what was going on, and she sent this along Saturday. If you let me clean that for you, you'll be fine by Friday morning. If you don't, it'll swell and you'll have to go to Madam Pomfrey."

Oh . . . thanks. Good thing your mum is on top of things."

"She almost always is. Annoying, sometimes."

As Harry was finishing,, there was a tap on the window. Harry let Hedwig in. "Must be your letter from Charlie."

Dear Ron

How are you? thanks for the letter -- I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you, or Harry's friends, get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

Ron looked at Harry.

"We'll send Dad the note," Harry said, "and also tell him that we'll be at Hagrid's tomorrow evening, right before dinner. That way, he can send Hedwig off tonight, and tell us if we're supposed to do anything."

"Good plan. We can tell Neville when he comes up, and Hermione in the morning before breakfast."

Henry Dorff and Cadfael were waiting for them outside of the Hagrid's cabin. Hagrid was inside with Norbert, and by the sounds of things, the dragon was a bit active.

"This reminds me why I didn't want to be a dragon rancher," Henry muttered as a particularly loud crash came from the back of the cabin.

"You could have been a dragon rancher?" Ron asked. Some remote areas had dragon reserves, and the caretakers both kept the dragons away from Muggles and culled the dragons as well as taking care of the rest.

"My family's been running one of the largest reserves in North America for almost three hundred years," Henry answered. He wrinkled his nose. "Never cared for the idea myself, which made me the odd man out."

"You'll have to meet Charlie sometime," Ron said with a smile.

"I'll meet his friends at least," Henry replied. He looked over the four children. "We'll take care of this. Stay in your common room Saturday night. If you're out, even if no one can see you" (all four paled, realizing that Henry Dorff must know about Harry's cloak) "that still could get things stirred up. In fact, I want the four of you to promise me something."

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"Don't leave the castle unsupervised when it's dark, under any circumstances. Never go into the Forest."

"Why, Dad?" Harry asked.

Cadfael and Henry exchanged looks, and then Henry explained. "There's something in the Forest at night. Something new, and something awful."

"We've chased it away three times," Cadfael said. "It is not to be trifled with."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Cadfael started to answer, but Henry made a motion which silenced him. Henry thought a few moments, and then said, "I don't want to tell you. Your mother doesn't want to tell you, either. Neither does Dumbledore. But, we also think you need to know. The thing has attacked and killed one unicorn and drained it of most of its blood. It's stalking the others. What does that tell you?"

Harry thought of what he knew of unicorns and their blood. Finally, he said, "Whatever is doing it would be cursed, because they're so pure. So, it must be a dark creature, or an evil person. Which is it?"

"It was a person," Cadfael answered. "Whether or not it can still be called a person or if we should consider it an evil, sentient creature is debatable."

"It must think it needs unicorn blood to keep it going. That means it's badly hurt or damaged. Even so. . . ."

"Even so, to live off of unicorn blood will give you strength, but also eat deeply into your soul, because you have polluted nature and magic at a fundamental level," Cadfael stated. He looked at Harry. "Have you heard of a being such as that, Harry? A being that might be acting as a parasite, and needs to strengthen its host?"

Harry's eyes went wide, and then so did Hermione's, as she figured it out. "Voldemort," she whispered. Ron and Neville flinched.

"Exactly," Henry said. "Now, since you four seem to have acquired a knack of learning things, tell me, is there anything up at the castle that Voldemort would want even more than unicorn blood?"

"The Stone!" Harry answered, his eyes wide.

"Exactly. Now, the fact that it hunts and haunts the Forest means the Stone is safe," Henry answered. "We think if we can keep it away from any more unicorns, the host will die sometime this summer and Voldemort will be disembodied yet again."

"What if someone inside Hogwarts. . . ." Harry started.

"Don't worry," Henry said. "Just keep an eye out, but don't worry, okay? No one should try anything while the students are here. So, just be careful. Alright?"

The quartet nodded, made their promises, and left after saying their goodbyes.

When the children were out of earshot, Henry rounded on Cadfael. "You and Dumbledore had better be right. If Harry is hurt or killed, Tabitha, Tudor, Tom, Lloyd and I will skin the pair of you alive."

Cadfael knew that Dorff did not mean that threat metaphorically, and that they would probably succeed.

Chapter XIV

As exams approached and then started, Harry and his friends expected something to happen at any moment. After they had thought about the information they had, they had realized that things were far from as simple as Henry Dorff had tried to portray them. The students knew Snape was likely in league with Voldemort, and that he would be making an attempt on the Stone at some point. If Voldemort managed to kill more unicorns, the growing darkness in him would no doubt make him urge Snape on. If he failed to feed on the unicorns, he would be even more desperate.

They had also decided that it would actually be harder for Snape to take the Stone once the term was over. It would be easier for Dumbledore to move in people like Henry Dorff once the students were gone.

Harry was also distracted because his scar was hurting more and more, and his dreams of a hooded figure made him sleep less and less. Still, he managed to make a pineapple dance across Flitwick's desk in his Charms final better than anyone. In the Transfiguration final, only Hermione had managed a better mouse-into-snuffbox transformation. The two friends had been especially pleased with their Astronomy finals, while Neville had been very happy with his Herbology final. Ron had only been happy with the Flying final, and Harry had coached Neville and Hermione to satisfactory performances as well.

Quirrell had been nervous throughout the Defense final, and Harry's headache had been worse than ever. Snape had been agitated during the Potions final, and their last exam, History of Magic, had been as boring as the class itself.

Out of all this, Harry had become very fidgety. He felt as if a crisis was coming. Hermione forebear her usual rehashing of the exam, and took Harry out into the bright sunlight, Ron and Neville following. Harry cheered up a little at the sight of the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan tickling one of the giant squid's tentacles, but then his face fell.

"Cheer up, mate," Ron said. "By this time next week, we'll be home, and these problems will be someone else's." They started to walk over towards Hagrid's.

"That's part of the problem," Harry said, "for some reason, I feel like they're mine, and that everything is closing in today."

"Got the inner eye, have you?" Neville teased.

"Maybe," Harry answered. "I felt I almost had the solution towards the end of the Defense exam."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, scandalized.

"I had finished first, I was just waiting for the rest of you to catch up," Harry teased back. Again, he turned serious and rubbed his scar. "I wish I knew what this means. My scar keeps hurting. It's happened before, but not like this."

"Should you go to Madam Pomfrey?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"No, I'm not ill," Harry answered. "I think it's a warning . . . it means there's danger coming."

Ron tried to push that idea away. "Relax, Harry. Look, the Stone's safe as long as Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off, so he's not likely to try it again. And we all know Neville here will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

"I didn't fly **that** badly," Neville grumbled.

Harry nodded, but he knew he had forgotten something, or hadn't realized the importance of something. Something to do with Hagrid. Still, Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Not knowingly. Hagrid wouldn't tell Snape how to get past Fluffy, not even for another dragon egg.

"Come on!" Harry called, racing towards Hagrid's. "We've got to see Hagrid now!"

"Why?" Hermione demanded, huffing to keep up.

"Don't you think it's a bit odd that what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and some stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs, since it's against the law? Lucky they found Hagrid, isn't it?"

"What are you getting on about?" Ron demanded, since Hermione and Neville were too winded to ask.

Harry didn't answer, but kept them moving until the quartet ran up to Hagrid, who was sitting in front of his hut, shelling an immense bowl of peas.

"Hello, you lot," Hagrid said to them smiling. "Finished yer exams? You look hot. Got time fer a drink?"

"Yes, please," Ron asked, panting. Hermione and Neville were too winded to even ask.

"We're in a hurry," Harry said. "Hagrid, I've got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you won him from look like?"

"Dunno," Hagrid answered with a shrug, "he wouldn't take his cloak off."

The four students stared at him. "Wot? It's not that unusual, yeh know. You get a lot o' funny folk in the Hog's Head -- that meh pub down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn' he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up."

Harry sank to the ground from the shock, but managed to ask, "What did you talk to him about? Did you mention Hogwarts?"

"Mighta come up," Hagrid allowed, frowning as he tried to remember. "Yeah . . . he asked what I did, an' I told him I was gamekeeper here. . . . He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I look after, so I told him . . . and I said what I'd always wanted was a dragon . . . it's hard to

remember, 'cause he kept on buyin' me drinks. . . . Let's see . . . yeah, then he said he had a dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted, but he had ter be sure I could handle it. He didn' want it ter go to just any old home. So, I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy!"

"And did he seem . . . interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, keeping his voice calm.

"Well, yeah, 'course he did. How many three-headed dogs d'yeh meet, even 'round the magical world? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down. Jus' play him a bit o' music, and he'll go straight off ter sleep. . . ." Hagrid realized what he'd said. "I shouldn'ta told yeh that! Forget I said it!"

The quartet assured Hagrid they would and took off.

"We'll have to go to Dumbledore," Harry said as they hurried back to the castle. "Mum, Dad, and their friends were called to London, Remus and Sirius are still out of the country, and Master Cadfael mentioned that he'd be gone. Tonight or tomorrow night would be perfect for Snape."

"But he has all those exams to grade!" Hermione objected.

"Exactly," Harry said. "The druids and my parents and their friends will be back next week, and no doubt will help watch the Stone when the castle empties out. The sooner Snape makes a grab for it, the better off he'll be. Everyone is exhausted from the exams today. By tomorrow night, students will be trying to sneak around again."

"That's true," Ron reminded Hermione. "Remember what Percy said? That the current House standings mean nothing, because so many points are taken the last week?"

"So we're going to see the Headmaster?" Neville asked nervously as they entered the castle.

"Where is his office?" Hermione asked.

"This way," Harry answered.

"What are you four doing inside?" a loud voice demanded. They were both frightened and relieved that it was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

"We want to see Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said boldly.

"Why?" McGonagall asked, puzzled.

"It's important," Harry said, "and something of a secret. Really."

McGonagall snorted. "Professor Dumbledore is on his way to London. He received an emergency owl a short time ago. He just flew off ten minutes ago."

"He's gone!" Harry demanded. "**Now?**"

"Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time."

"But this is important!"

"You have something more important than the Ministry, Potter?"

"Look, it's about the Philosopher's Stone. . . ." Harry started.

McGonagall was so surprised, she dropped her books and just stared at them. "How do you even know. . . ." she sputtered at them.

"Professor, I know that Sn . . . that someone is going to try an steal the Stone soon. I've **got** to talk with Professor Dumbledore!

McGonagall stared at him. "The Headmaster will be back tomorrow. I don't know what you think you've found out, but rest assured, no one can steal it. It's too well protected."

"But. . . ."

"Potter! I know what I'm talking about!" McGonagall started to pick up her books, and Hermione and Neville helped her. "I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine."

But they didn't.

"It must be tonight," Harry whispered once McGonagall had left. "Snape's going through the trap door tonight. Dumbledore is out of the way, and the professors who **are** here won't listen. Anyone else we could ask for help is gone. I bet the people in London will be surprised when Dumbledore and everyone shows up there."

Neville frowned, "So what. . . ." Hermione gave a gasp of surprise, and they all turned to see Snape standing near by.

"Good afternoon," he said in a more natural and even nicer voice than they had ever heard him use. "You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said with a small twisted smile. The four students just gawped at him. "You want to be more careful. Hanging around like this, people will think you're up to something. And wouldn't it be a shame for Gryffindor to lose any points?" Gryffindor was running a close second to Slytherin in the race for the House Cup.

The four students all nodded, and started edging away towards the door.

"Be warned!" Snape said firmly, "any nighttime wanderings and I will personally see to it that you are expelled! Now, good day to you!" He turned towards the staff room. They didn't hear him murmur, "That should get them down that trap door!"

Harry turned to the others. "Right. Here's what we have to do. One of us has to keep an eye on Snape. Wait outside the staff room, and follow him if possible. If not, tell the others, waiting at the back entrance to Fluffy's room. Hermione, you should keep an eye on Snape."

"Why me?"

"It's obvious," Ron teased. "You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick or someone." He tried to imitate Hermione's voice and accent, "'Oh, Professor! I'm so worried. I think I may have misread question fourteen b. . . ."

"Oh, shut it," Hermione snapped.

"Neville, you can go to dinner and snaffle some extra food for us. Ron and I will start off looking after the back way to Fluffy. Drop food off for Hermione and then us, and you can replace one of us."

Unfortunately, they hadn't even gotten in place when McGonagall turned up. "I suppose you think you're harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!" she stormed at the pair. "Enough of this nonsense! If I hear you or your friends have planted yourselves here again, I'll take fifty points off you! Yes, Weasley, fifty points off for each of you. Now scat!"

Heading back towards the common room, they ran into both Hermione and Neville. Snape had sent Flitwick out to talk to Hermione and disappeared.

"That's it then," Harry said. "After dinner, I'm sneaking out and finding the Stone myself. It's the only way.

"You can't!" Neville said.

"If Snape or McGonagall catch you, you will be expelled!" Hermione protested.

"So what?" Harry demanded. "Don't you understand? If Snape gets a hold of the Stone, Voldemort's coming back. If that happens, there won't be a Hogwarts to be expelled from, from what I've heard, at least not for long! He'll destroy it or make it Dark Arts. He'll kill you, Hermione, for having the wrong sorts of parents, and don't think he'd love the Weasleys or Longbottoms, either."

"We know," Neville said.

"Sorry," Ron said. Hermione just stood there, nearly in tears. There should be some authority figure she could turn to, but not even she could think of one at this point, not one who would take them seriously.

"I'll use the invisibility cloak," Harry said simply. "I'll take care of it."

Hermione looked at Harry, and realized that she believed in him, that she believed he could make things right. "You're right, Harry," Hermione said. "But can it cover all of us?"

"All of us?"

"You don't think we'd let you go alone?" Ron asked.

"We're in this together," Neville agreed.

"But if we get caught. . . ."

"Remember what you just told us," Neville reminded Harry.

"Don't worry," Hermione stated. "We're with you. And don't worry about our getting expelled. Professor Flitwick told me that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam, and that you were a close second. They're not letting us go."

After dinner, the four sat quietly at their usual table in the back corner. No one paid them any attention. Neville and Ron were playing torpid games of chess, Hermione was studying her texts and notes, while Harry practiced some of the basic meditation Tabitha had taught him.

Slowly, the room emptied. "Wait here while I get the cloak," Harry murmured. He picked up the cloak and a flute Hagrid had given him and came back just as the last of the other students had left.

It was a tight fit. Ron had to stand in the middle, with Neville on one side and Harry and Hermione on the other. Ron had to wrap his arms around Neville and Harry's shoulders, while they held Ron around the waist. Harry and Hermione had to do the same, while Hermione and Neville used their free hands to hold the cloak.

The quartet moved cautiously but quickly through the halls, but saw no one until they were well up the last set of stairs, when Peeves nearly came up behind them. Fortunately, he became occupied in trying to loosen the carpet that ran up the center of the stairs.

To their shock, when they arrived at the final door, they saw it was already slightly open. "If any of you want to go back, I won't blame you," Harry said. "You can take the cloak. . . ."

"Don't be stupid," Ron said.

"Seriously," Harry said, "maybe one of you should go send an owl to Dumbledore. If he's flying, they might meet along they way. Then you could go along and warn McGonagall."

"Don't look at me, Harry," Hermione said firmly. "I'm coming with you."

"So am I," Neville added, while Ron glared at Harry.

"Alright then, let's go in." Harry pushed the door fully open. They all heard soft music, and saw that Fluffy was asleep, and a small enchanted harp was playing by its left head.

"Let's go," Harry whispered. "The harp might stop playing, and Fluffy has almost got its paw on the trap door."

Ron and Neville easily opened the door, and Harry crawled over the edge. When he was hanging by his fingers, he said, "I can't see any bottom. If something goes wrong, Ron, you owl Dumbledore. Hermione, go to McGonagall. Neville, you alert Madam Pomfrey."

As the others whispered 'Good luck,' Harry dropped.

And landed in something tough but springy.

"It's okay," Harry called up. "It's a soft landing. Just make certain you roll off to one side!"

"Hurry," he heard Hermione say, "the harp is slowing down!"

Ron jumped, followed by Neville and Hermione. Just as Hermione landed with a soft FLUMP, they heard Fluffy growling at the top.

"We must be under the dungeons here," Hermione said.

"Lucky this plant was here," Ron said.

"Lucky?" Hermione replied, a note of panic in her voice, "look at you!" She started to struggle towards a wall. She had to struggle, because the plant was trying to grab her ankles. The tendrils had already twisted Harry and Ron's legs without their noticing it. It was also making the same moves against Neville.

"It's only Devil's Snare," Neville said. "It doesn't like light or heat. Lumos!" The light drove the plant off Neville, and he fell through. "It's only about a five foot drop from the bottom of the plant," they heard Neville say. In less than two minutes, he was joined by the others.

"Thanks, Neville," Harry said. "Come on." He led them in the dripping silence down the passageway, which sloped downwards.

"Can you hear something?" Ron asked softly a few minutes later.

They paused and listened. They could hear soft rustling and clinking up ahead.

"Think it's a ghost?" Neville asked.

"Sounds more like . . . wings," Harry answered.

"I see some light up ahead," Hermione pointed out.

They emerged into a well-lit chamber a few minutes later, its ceiling high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds near the ceiling, and there was a closed door opposite them.

"Do you think they'll attack if we try the door?" Neville asked.

"They don't look dangerous, but I suppose they might be. There's only one way to find out," Harry answered, and he sprinted across the floor. To his surprise, the birds stayed overhead. He tried the door, but it was locked.

The others came cautiously across, but they couldn't open the door, either, even when Hermione's opening charm was cast by all four of them.

"Now what?" Ron asked.

They looked around the chamber. "There're some brooms," Neville pointed out.

"Do you think we have to fly through the birds to find the real exit?" Hermione asked.

"Wait! Those aren't birds!" Harry exclaimed, pointing, "they're flying keys!"

"But there are hundreds of them!" Neville complained.

Ron looked back at the door. "We're looking for a big, old-fashioned key, probably silver, like the handle."

The four took off, trying to catch the keys to examine them. The keys darted away from them, and after nearly five minutes of this, Neville rammed into a wall, falling to the floor. While Hermione and Ron went to check on him, Harry spotted the key he wanted, which he noticed had slightly crumpled wings. He went after it like a snitch, and grabbed it.

Harry landed and asked, "How are you, Neville?"

"I think I broke my wrist," Neville answered. Hermione had immobilized it.

"Look, take one of the broomsticks and go back to the Devil's Snare. If we're not out in say half an hour, fly out to the owlery. Make certain you're whistling when you get up near Fluffy. You do know how to whistle, right?"

"Right." Neville limped out to the incline, while Harry rammed the key into the lock and opened the door. The key then flew out of his hand, and went back towards the ceiling.

The three went through to a darkened chamber. When the door unexpectedly slammed shut behind them, however, the room was flooded in bright light.

In front of them was a giant chess board. They saw a few pieces were just finishing reassembling themselves. They obviously had to play their way across the board, and their opponent was just as obviously just ahead of them.

"How do we do this?" Harry asked.

"I think we have to take the places of the chessmen," Ron answered. He approached a knight and touched it. The piece sprang to life, the horse pawing the ground and the knight looking ominously at Ron.

Chapter XV

"Now don't be offended," Ron said, "but neither of you is very good at chess."

"We're not offended," Harry said, "you're in charge. Let's get going."

"Harry, you take the king-side bishop, Hermione, the queen-side castle. I'll take this knight." The others had played Ron often enough as white to know he usually led off with the queen in combination with the other knight and castle.

"Shouldn't you be the king?" Harry asked. "Won't you see better that way?"

Ron shook his head. "I think the view would be better from the knight once the game gets going." At that, the three pieces moved themselves off the board. A white pawn moved forward, and the game began.

The only sounds were Ron calling out the directions, and the sound of the pieces moving, and the pieces being taken. Like in wizarding chess, the capturing piece would break the captured piece. Ron had to be careful not to let any of them be captured. Upon reflection, he realized he should have made one of them the king, as that would have been slightly less worrying.

As the opening flowed into the mid-game, Ron was getting worried. Not about losing, because the white pieces weren't winning -- they seemed to be playing for a draw. At that moment, he saw the queen turn to face him, and he knew what had to be done.

"Yes," Ron said softly, "it's the only way. I have to be taken."

"NO!" Harry and Hermione both shouted.

"That's chess!" Ron snapped. "You've got to make some sacrifices to win! When I make this move, I might not be taken and you'll take the queen and we'll mate in three anyway. If she does take me, you move three spaces ahead, to the left and it will be mate. Got it?"

"Ron. . . ." Harry tried to argue. Ron simply made his move, and the queen clubbed him right across the forehead with her stone arm before he could even try and duck out of the way.

Shaking, Harry made his move. The white king threw his crown at Harry's feet, and the pieces parted to show a path to the door, but not to Ron. Looking helplessly at each other, Hermione and Harry ran through the door.

As they moved through the door, Hermione asked, "What if he's . . . you know. . . ."

""He'll be alright, or at least he was breathing," Harry said. "What do you think is next?"

"Sprout did the Devil's Snare and Flitwick probably did the keys. McGonagall probably did the chess set. That leaves Quirrell, Snape, and Dumbledore." As she finished, they came to another door.

"Ready?"

"Go ahead," Hermione said.

Harry opened the door, and a disgusting smell filled the air. They pulled their robes to their noses and went into the dim room. There was a troll, even larger than the one that had threatened them in the lavatory. It too was out cold.

"Glad we didn't have to fight that one," Harry managed to say on the other side of the door, choking a little.

"It must have been there for weeks," Hermione agreed, looking ready to vomit. "All that filth." She shuddered.

They looked ahead, and only saw a table with seven differently-sized and shaped bottles.

"This must be Snape's," Harry commented. "I wonder what we have to do."

As they stepped forward, a wall of purple fire fared up around the threshold of the door behind them, and a black flame went up in front of the doorway they had to escape through. They also noticed there was a sheet of parchment laying on the table. Nervously, they bent over to read it.

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,
One among us seven will let you move ahead,
Another will transport the drink back instead,
Two among us hold only nettle wine,
Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line.*

*Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide,
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move forward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and second one on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.*

"This isn't magic," Harry complained.

"No, it's logic," Hermione answered. "A lot of powerful wizards haven't got an ounce of logic."

"And you've solved it already, I suppose." He looked. "None of them are full."

"No, but that's not important. The smallest bottle sends us forward, towards the Stone."

"But there's only enough for a swallow," Harry said. They looked at each other. "Which one sends you back?"

"The round one at the right end," she answered in a small voice.

Harry looked at his watch. "You drink that. Get Ron and take another broom. If you hurry, you can catch Neville before he goes."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you want to be the one who goes forward?"

Hermione thought about it and shook her head. "No, no you're the one that has to do it. You're a great wizard, Harry."

"You're at least as good, probably better," Harry responded.

"Me? Books and cleverness. There are more important things, Harry. Friendship, bravery, and . . . oh, Harry, be careful!" She flung her arms around Harry and kissed his cheek. He moved to kiss hers as well, and they brushed lips. They broke slightly apart, very embarrassed.

"You're a great wizard, and my best friend," Hermione whispered.

"And you're mine," Harry answered, still blushing. He let go of Hermione and handed her the bottle. "You first."

Hermione took the bottle drank, and then grimaced. "Yech. It's like . . . I'm turning to ice."

"Quick then, go! Before it wears off!"

"Good luck -- and don't forget, we need you." Hermione kissed Harry's cheek again and took off through the purple flame.

Harry's hand brushed his cheek, and he felt more powerful than he ever had before. He took the small bottle and drank the mouthful of potion.

It was indeed like ice pouring through his veins, which only encouraged Harry's faith in Hermione. He walked confidently through the black flame.

And on the other side, someone was waiting, but it wasn't Snape.

It was Quirrell.

"You!" Harry said with a gasp.

Quirrell smiled a cold smile, and he didn't seem his usual nervous or frightened self. "Me. I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Potter."

"But I thought . . . we all thought . . . Snape. . . !"

"Severus?" Quirrell said with a hearty laugh. "Yes, Severus does seem more the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an over-grown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p--poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

Harry managed to protest, "But Snape tried to kill me!"

"No, no, dear boy, I tried to ill you. Miss Granger interrupted my hex as she stopped Snape's counter-hex." He sighed. "Another few seconds, and I'd have had you off that broom."

"Snape was trying to save me?"

"Of course! Why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? To help Slytherin win the Cup? Well, that would have just been an extra bonus, to him. Funny, really. He needn't have bothered, since I couldn't do anything with Dumbledore right there. So all he accomplished was getting all the other teachers angry, because they thought he was trying to steal the Cup. And yet, after all that, it was all a waste of time, since I'm going to kill you tonight. Well, I will, or my Master will." Quirrell snapped his fingers and ropes sprang out of thin air, wrapping themselves tightly around Harry.

Harry was shocked. He never figured Quirrell as someone who could do that level of wandless magic.

"You're just too nose-y to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that. For all I knew, you might have seen me coming to see what might be guarding the Stone."

"So you let the troll in!"

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls. You must have seen what I did to the one a few chambers back. Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape thought to look for me. So, not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that stupid dog didn't even manage to rip Snape's leg off." He shrugged and turned away. "Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this."

It was only then that Harry saw the Mirror of Erised.

"This mirror must be the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell murmured. "Trust Dumbledore to think of this kind of puzzle. Still, he's in London, so I should have plenty of time. . . ."

There was a whispering in the back of Harry's mind, telling him to talk, to think, and to wait. Talk, to slow Quirrell down. Think, to make a plan. Wait, and not cause Quirrell to attack him now.

Harry thought of Ron and Neville, and both his birth and adoptive parents. He thought of his siblings, and his other friends and team mates, and then his adult friends and some of teachers and Dumbledore. He thought of Hermione, and he could again feel the two kisses she'd placed on his cheek, and the one on his lips.

Harry was no longer scared, or even worried. He felt powerful, and knew that he was. He looked at Quirrell and asked, "I saw you and Snape twice, once near the library at Christmas, once in the forest. I wondered about the change in you at Christmas. I might have suspected you instead of Snape if I hadn't seen you pretending to snivel."

"Yes, Snape does seem more the type, doesn't he," Quirrell answered. Then his attention snapped back to the mirror.

"Well, he does seem to hate me," Harry commented.

"Oh, yes, he hates you! You inherited the hate he felt towards your father. They were at school together, you know."

"Yes, Sirius and Remus told me all about that."

"Hush, boy! Now what does this thing do. I see myself handing the Stone to my Master. . . ."

"Amazing, isn't it? Everyone thought it would have to be a powerful wizard like Sirius who brought back Voldemort. . . ."

"Don't say the name!" Quirrell commanded, swirling around.

"Why not?" Harry asked. "And it's not his name, is it? What is his real name? Something common? I'm Harry, so maybe it's Tom or Dick or. . . ."

"Silence!" another voice demanded.

"I was wondering if you were here," Harry said. "Master Cadfael and my father said you were living as a parasite now. I knew that whatever else Snape was, he wasn't weak enough to allow that!"

"Quiet!" Quirrell ordered.

"Such brave words from such a young boy," Voldemort's muffled voice stated. "Show me to him!"

"Master?"

"Show me!"

Quirrell obediently raised his arms and started unwinding his turban. In less than a minute, Harry was confronted by something which could only be described as a horror, even if he was more than half expecting it. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white, with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

"See what I have become, Harry Potter," the face said. "Merely shadow and vapor. I have form only when I can share another's body, but there have been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds."

"For how long?" Harry asked. "Are any of them still around?"

The red eyes glared. "Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past few months, and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to again form a body of my own. So, unless you wish to die, begging for mercy like your parents, you will help me."

Harry glared at the monstrosity before him.

"So, use the boy."

Quirrell clapped his hands, and ropes binding Harry fell to his feet. "Come here!" both Quirrell and Voldemort commanded.

'What did Mom tell me? That my mother died for me, giving me complete magical protection against her murderer. That anything Voldemort did would react against him.' Harry shuffled a bit closer to the mirror, avoiding coming too close to Quirrell/Voldemort. 'That the power of my mother's love saved me, especially because the one magic that could hurt Voldemort was anything based on love.'

Harry pretended to look at the mirror. 'Love. My birth parents loved me. My parents love me. Sabrina and Henry love me. I think Remus and Sirius love me, too. A lot of people love me, in fact.'

"Look harder!" Voldemort hissed.

'Do I love them?' Harry wondered. He realized he did, and that he cared for all of them. He thought of his friends. His Quidditch team mates. Brave Ron. Steadfast Neville. Brilliant and cute Hermione.

'Cute?' Harry thought with a start.

"Did you find something?" Quirrell demanded.

Harry's lips and cheek throbbed, and the sense of power he had felt before entering this chamber came back. Harry turned to face the creature beside him, and his magical aura was actually visible to the monster.

Quirrell/Voldemort took a step back. The magic coming off the boy was actually starting to blister the skin. "Stay away!" Quirrell half-commanded and half-begged.

"Get us away!" Voldemort commanded, his voice rising in panic as well. "The boy must not touch us!"

Harry grabbed Quirrell's wrist. The wrist burned through, and the hand holding the wand dropped to the floor. Harry's hand stung, but he didn't care. As Quirrell's body fell to his knees, screaming, Harry grabbed the double head between his hands and squeezed with all his might.

The head dissolved so quickly that even Voldemort's essence didn't have time to escape.

The Dark Lord was no more.

Harry looked at his severely burned hands, and then as the adrenalin subsided, he passed out from the agony.

When Hermione ran back to the chess chamber, she was surprised to see that it was empty, other than the reassembling chess pieces. She couldn't believe Ron had already recovered, but that seemed to be the only explanation. She stepped towards the exit, and stopped.

A number of figures moved towards her. Hermione brought her wand up, wondering what she could do, when the first stepped into the full light of the chamber. "Headmaster?"

"Yes, child, it is I," Dumbledore said. Hermione saw McGonagall, Harry's parents, the druid Cadfael, Thomas Lawrence, and most surprisingly, Professor Snape, step in as well.

"I don't understand," Hermione said in a small voice.

"Harry is confronting Voldemort," Dumbledore said. "There were two prophecies which predicted this. If we do not help him more than any of us have, then Harry should totally destroy Voldemort tonight. We believe we have set things up so that even if Voldemort is not killed tonight, he shall at least be defeated. In any case, only Harry can destroy him."

"Does Harry know that?" Hermione demanded.

"Not as fact," Cadfael said. "His heart may tell him."

"Professor Sprout has taken Mister Longbottom to the Infirmary," Dumbledore went on. "Professor Flitwick has taken Mister Weasley. It might be best of Mister Lawrence took you to be with them, while we wait for Harry."

Hermione felt for the first time currents of magical power. She was never to realize that these were lines of power and fate. She had to make a decision, and that decision would affect her life's path more than she could ever guess. She looked at Tom Lawrence, and was drawn to him. She somehow felt that here was a scholar after her own heart, someone she could share ideas with more than anyone she had ever met.

Tom looked at the disheveled little girl and wondered why she was looking at him so oddly.

Hermione then realized that she was making a choice, although she didn't know why it was important. Still, she made her decision. "I'd rather wait for Harry," she said firmly.

"Very well," Dumbledore said. He turned to McGonagall. "Professor?"

McGonagall waved her wand, and the chess pieces disappeared. While she, Hermione, and Tom Lawrence waited there, the other's cast what Hermione later found later were bubblehead charms, so that they could wait in the troll chamber without the stench bothering them.

Although it was not a tremendously long time, it seemed like hours to Hermione. Finally, though, Snape and Cadfael appeared, then Henry Dorff, carrying Harry in his arms.

"Is he . . . is he alright?" Hermione cried out.

"His hands are severely burned," Tabitha Dorff said, coming into the room as Henry kept moving. "He'll be alright by morning."

"That's good," Hermione said. "He'll be angry if he misses the Quidditch game."

"He may have to miss it in any event," Dumbledore said. "The important thing is, Voldemort has been completely destroyed. Harry's life is his own again."

Tabitha put her arm around Hermione's neck. "Come along," she said. "You can see your friends."

Chapter XVI & Epilogue

Harry woke up slowly. When he opened his eyes, he saw that he was in a private room in the Infirmary, and it was just past dawn, which meant, in those high latitudes, it was very early.

Turning the other way, he saw the Headmaster sitting quietly, looking at him. "Good morning, Harry."

"Good morning, sir."

"Quite the eventful evening you had last night. Do you have any questions about it?"

"Are the others alright?"

"Oh, yes. Miss Granger had no real injuries. Mister Weasley was more injured than Mister Longbottom, but both will be out of the Infirmary by lunchtime, and you will be out by dinner."

"The Quidditch game!"

"Has been postponed until tomorrow. Madam Pomfrey may be prevailed upon to let you fly. Anything else?"

"Sir . . . was I . . . was I set up?"

Dumbledore averted his gaze. "I wish I could tell you that you were not, but alas, you were. You were 'set up', as you say, in many ways. Just before you were born, there was a prophecy made, that only one wizard, soon to be born, would be able to fully destroy Voldemort. From the details, it meant that it had to be either you or your friend Neville Longbottom. Voldemort had to choose, and he chose you, the boy most like himself."

"In what way?"

"He was the heir of Salazar Slytherin, but his father was a Muggle. You come from an equally ancient family on your father's side, but your mother was Muggle-born. Your mother's sacrifice saved you from the Killing Curse that night, and it rebounded on to him. He could not kill himself, so his essence survived, and became the parasite you encountered last night."

"Now, your mother was also given a prophecy, after they had decided to go into hiding. It said that they would be killed, and if you were given to your foster parents, you would triumph over Voldemort at the end of your first year here. If not, you would fight Voldemort at the end of your Sixth year instead. Your parents decided to intrust you to your foster parents, should the prophecy work out and they were killed."

"Your foster parents worked hard to raise you well, because they and their friends love you. The Hidden got involved, in part because they feared a later return of Voldemort would create a wider war. They also believe you are a Key, a person of great power around whom events center. I, of course, needed to use you to fight Voldemort as well, and all of us helped bring this confrontation about, where you would have as much advantage as possible."

"Did my friends know?"

"No. I doubt if even Miss Granger guessed anything like this."

"They're both gone . . . dead . . . aren't they?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"Yes, Harry. Voldemort was not quite either dead or alive, but he is now completely dead. Quirrell died because he had given himself over to Voldemort. Had he not done so, he would not have been harmed."

Harry was not comforted by these distinctions. "So, I murdered them."

"Again, you finished the destruction of Voldemort, which was started when he attempted to kill you."

Harry said nothing.

"You will have to answer some questions later," Dumbledore said. "There are a number of people waiting to see you, even at this early hour. Whom would you like to see?"

"Mom," Harry said in a strangled voice. "I need Mom, and maybe Dad and Hermione later, if any of them want to talk with me."

"They will," Dumbledore said, standing. "I hope someday you can forgive me for having to use you."

Harry said nothing, merely rolling over and hugging his pillow.

As soon as Dumbledore opened the door, Tabitha ran into the room, pushed Dumbledore out and locked the door. She gathered Harry into her arms, and rocked as he cried out his anguish and guilt for the next half an hour.

After being consoled by and talking with his mother, Harry spent time talking with Henry Dorff. Henry remembered his first 'kill,' and how he still sometimes had nightmares about it.

He had been 21, not a few months shy of 12. Both he and Tabitha knew it would take time for Harry to talk out his feelings. Tom and Lloyd would help them, and even Alastor Moody had offered to talk with Harry. They would also insure that Harry kept his privacy this coming summer.

Harry's meetings with Ron and Neville had been less stressful. Tabitha and Henry were glad that both boys were simply and totally happy that Harry was doing well. Both seemed to understand what Harry had done, but neither glamorized it or seemed to think it more important than the fact that Harry was doing well.

Hermione had simply embraced her friend and cried, and Harry had cried again with her.

All the adults were glad that Fudge had been ousted as Minister back in January. He, no doubt, would have made waves. The reporters had demanded interviews with Harry, but Tabitha and Henry made it very clear what they would do to anyone bothering Harry. The Ministry people made it clear that if Harry's parents actually did those things to a reporter, there would not be any Ministerial retribution.

The important thing, for all concerned except Harry and his parents, was that Voldemort was truly dead. There might still be unconvicted Death Eaters 'out there,' but there was no longer any focal point.

The Daily Prophet would run the biggest banner headlines the next day since November, 1981.

The next afternoon, just as a recovered Harry Potter was making his winning grab at the Snitch, Lucius Malfoy sat in his lavish personal office/library at Malfoy Manor. He had spent the morning rummaging through a pile of objects, and was contemplating what he had been searching for.

It looked like an old, inexpensive Muggle yearly diary. It was actually a very powerful magical device. He had tried three times to smuggle it to some unsuspecting young student, so they would take it with them to Hogwarts, but he had never found the right person to give it to.

If it had worked, a youthful avatar of the Dark Lord might have appeared, which could have joined with the essence of the Dark Lord. That essence was now destroyed. Was it worth the chance to try again?

Malfoy rolled up his sleeve, where the Dark Mark was hidden. He hated Muggles, and all they stood for. On the other hand, despite the recent set-backs, he was a powerful and wealthy wizard. He had risked it all when he was a young man, because then he had only risked his life.

Could he risk the entire House of Malfoy, which he now led?

Lucius picked up a letter from Dumbledore to all the governors of the school, announcing his intention of appointing Sirius Black as the Defense teacher, with an appointment of the werewolf Remus Lupin as a teaching assistant for Defense and Care for Magical Creatures as well. Could he even hope to slip something by those two? After all, they might be a blood-traitor and, well, a werewolf, but they were clever, powerful, and dangerous. Lucius reviewed his decision for the last time, and rang a bell. A house elf appeared. "Is it ready?"

"Yes, Master."

Lucius made no further sign, but hurried out of his office, out of the Manor.

A hot bonfire, of coal and charcoal, was burning in a small clearing. Taking a deep breath, Lucius tossed the small diary onto the fire, and cast protective wards around it.

The leather booklet caught fire quickly. For a brief moment, Lucius looked into the shocked and angry eyes of the young Tom Riddle, before the whole thing went up in smoke.

Lucius waited for hours, hardly moving, until the fire was gone, and the coals and ashes cold. There was no trace of the diary. He rang the small bell he had brought with him.

"Master?"

"I want you to divide these ashes into a hundred parts, and spread them all across the world. I want you to divide the very ground and rocks the fire was set on and around, and spread them to a thousand places, untouched by all the others. I order you never to speak of this to anyone. And then . . . and then I want you to go away. I never want to see you again, or for you to see me." He took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. He threw it on the ground. "That's yours, when you've done as I've commanded, and agreed to my last order. I never want to be reminded of this day. Understand?"

"Not completely, Master, but that does not matter. Dobby obeys."

Lucius stalked away, and never looked back.

Saturday, June 26, 2004

Minerva McGonagall looked at the great hall with satisfaction. The students had left the day before, but it was set for a grand party. Tonight, Albus Dumbledore would retire.

He was retiring at a time of relative peace in the wizarding world. The Pure-Blood Movement hadn't completely died just because Voldemort had been destroyed thirteen years before. Lucius Malfoy and his son were still pushing the agenda politically. The only political force organized against it were the Old Believers from North America, and it was anyone's guess where that clash might lead.

McGonagall held little in common with either, although she did enjoy watching the Old Believers undercut the prejudices of the Pure-Bloods. After all, most of the Old Believer leaders had pedigrees at least millennia or two older than people like Malfoy.

She was checking the place cards on the Gryffindor table. She realized she had stopped when she had come to a set of names that she could never forget. How she wished they were all, or at least mostly, Hogwarts staff. The magical baby-boom of the '80s and '90s meant that the staff was nearly twice what it had been thirteen years before. Hermione Potter really should have taken over her position the next year, but she was involved in assuring the Muggle-born fuller acceptance into the magical community. Certainly an up-hill fight, even for her. Her alliance with the more of the Old Believer groups certainly helped her almost as much as Harry's wife did.

Harry would make a tremendous Defense teacher, now that Sirius was leaving 'to have fun.' Harry and Remus would have made a fine team, but she would make do with Cedric Diggory, the Tri-wizard Champion, and Harry would continue being a 'trouble-shooter' for the Ministry and the Old Believers.

No, Neville Longbottom was an excellent Herbology instructor, and Ron Weasley would no doubt be a good Flying instructor, but she wished Hermione and Harry were here as well. Of course, Harry, Ron, and Neville seemed determined to create their own mini-baby boom with their wives Hermione, Sabrina, and Ginny (three each, and both Hermione and Ginny were pregnant yet again), so perhaps she shouldn't begrudge them.

She passed over to the Ravenclaw table, and soon paused again, shaking her head. "I swear, The Quibbler gets odder and odder each year," she muttered. "A pity Lovegood had such a rough time here, and never found anyone to be with."

No, life was far from perfect, but then life was never meant to be perfect. There were ripples in the magical world, and she understood there was even greater trouble than usual in the Muggle world. Still, compared with might have been, life was normal.

Minerva McGonagall smiled.