

# **To the Rescue III**

By

DrT

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## Chapter 01

"You have had over a month to think about what your friendship with Mister Potter means. If you want out, tell Ms Spellman, Mister Jones, or Mister Lupin by the end of breakfast next Monday."

"You don't know us very well, sir," Ron told Myrddin hotly. When everyone looked at him, Ron blushed but went on, "I'm sticking with Harry."

"**WE** are sticking with Harry," Hermione said even more firmly. Luna said nothing, but took Harry's hand in both of hers and put her head on his shoulder. Both girls gave Myrddin a dirty look.

"If you wish, we can take a formal pledge," Ginny, looking even angrier, spat at Myrddin.

"And it would just formalize how we feel," Neville said. "Nothing could increase our loyalty to Harry."

"Fine," Myrddin said, not bothered in the least by their display, "but again, you have until Monday to change your mind. Now, tell me Harry, do you have any opinions of Justin Finch-Fletchley, Morag McDougal, and Daphne Greengrass?"

"Justin's alright, although he can be a bit of a, well. . . ."

"Pompous ass?" Ron muttered.

"Well, yes," Harry said. "I don't know the two girls." He looked at Hermione.

"Daphne and Tracy Davis are almost friendly, which is saying a lot compared to most of the Slytherins of our year. Morag is very quiet, but very reliable from what I hear."

The teens looked at Myrddin, who passed the ball to Dorff. "Dumbledore has pursued a rather 'hands-off' laissez-faire policy in many ways, especially in his treatment of certain elements in the school. Granted, Potter here has benefitted to some degree, but so have what we may as well call the 'Junior Death Eaters', although their attitudes may have changed due to the events of this summer. The two prefects from your year, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson, have been replaced by Blaise Zabini and Tracy Davis. Dumbledore doesn't like it, but he went along with it, not to punish them directly for their opinions, of course, but for abusing their power under Umbridge. He also agreed to creating an extra group of prefects."

"Justin Finch-Fletchley, Morag McDougal, and Daphne Greengrass," Harry said.

"For Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin."

"And I suppose I'm supposed to be the one for Gryffindor," Harry half-complained.

"No." Dorff turned to Neville. "Mister Longbottom would be the Gryffindor Security Prefect. You, Mister Potter, would be the Chief Security Prefect. The security prefects will be doing hall patrols, but would not have any of the mentoring responsibilities of the House prefects."

Harry nearly said no, but he knew that he should. "Very well, if Neville accepts, I'll accept."

"I do!"

"Good. Here." Dorff handed Neville a silver badge and Harry a gold one.

"Are there going to be Fifth year's doing this as well?" Harry asked.

"How do John Pritchard, Geneva Driver, William Lloyd, and Luna Lovegood sound?"

"Lloyd, and of course Luna, are fine. I don't know the others."

"Geneva is that Hufflepuff beater," Ginny said. "She's tough, fair, and honest. I'm surprised she's not the House prefect. Pritchard and his older brother would be the Slytherin beaters, if being friends with Malfoy didn't count more than ability. He's after Goyle and especially Crabbe for some reason."

"Sounds like a recommendation to me," Ron said.

"I'll have Tom and Tobias here talk with him and make certain he knows his limits," Dorff said. He handed Luna her badge. She held it in her hands, amazed. She looked up, a tear running down her cheek, "Thank you," she said softly.

"You're very welcome, Ms Lovegood." Dorff looked from Luna to Harry, and Harry suddenly realized he was under a Legilimency attack. He batted the intrusion away and glared at Dorff.

"As Alastor Moody would say, 'constant vigilance', Harry. Voldemort isn't going to give warning." Dorff suddenly swung his head at Master J and then at Spellman.

"'Constant Vigilance', sweetie," Spellman said with a grin, and Harry realized that Master J and Spellman had attacked Dorff in sequence.

"Touché," he said. Dorff nodded at Harry. "My apologies, but you WILL be tested at random. Feel free to mentally retaliate in any way you see fit. I'm certain Professor Snape will welcome the challenge."

"Oh, great! We'll have no points by the end of term," Harry complained.

"Snape will treat you fairly," Myrddin stated.

"He never has," Harry warned.

"I know. He will this year."

"And if he doesn't?"

"If he doesn't, it's up to you, Harry," Remus said. "If you keep your mouth shut, as usual, then no one will ever know about it. If you tell one of us, we'll take care of it. That includes the unfair taking of points."

"Teachers can't revoke point taking," Hermione reminded Lupin, "they can at most ask the teacher to reconsider it, and need a reason."

"First of all, that might change," Dorff said. "Part of my job on the Council is to oversee Hogwarts. Considering what Umbridge did, we obviously cannot be too heavy-handed. On the other hand, we can't have the blatant unfairness of past years, either. Snape insists his actions merely redress an unreasonable hatred of his House. Well, Professor McGonagall, Tobias, Tom, and Tabitha are going to be going over the records of the last fifteen years, and seeing how each teacher has used points, and Tobias and Tabitha will be observing this year. Anything they report as unfair will resort in that person appearing in my office, or Tudor's, to explain."

Harry looked at Jones. "Really?" he asked doubtfully.

"I am a very fair man, Potter, no matter what else you may think of me. And, if there's one thing all of us at this table agree on, it's that we DON'T like bullies."

"Really?" Hermione asked, looking at Luna. Luna's eyes went wider than usual, and she shook her head, 'no.'

"Really," Tabitha stated. "And that will include any harassment of the prefects or security prefects. All such behavior WILL be reported to Tobias here if possible, and if not, to Tom or to me."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said firmly. He had caught the by-play.

"What are you going to teach, Mister Lawrence?" Hermione asked.

The slightly portly wizard turned dark Prussian blue eyes on her which her so intense, Hermione squeaked with surprise. "Nothing that directly affects you, alas. You have quite the reputation as a scholar, Ms Granger."

Hermione colored a little at the praise.

"I will be teaching the Sixth and Seventh year Household Potions classes, the two sections of Fifth year History, and the Sixth, and Seventh year N.E.W.T. History. I'll also be teaching the Sixth and Seventh Year Household Charms classes." Hermione merely nodded, while Luna and Ginny looked at him with slightly more interest.

"Now, the landlord said we only had to tell him when we were ready to have him serve you tea," Myrddin said, starting to stand. Jones popped out of his chair to forestall him, and went in search of Tom.

"How's everything going, Tabby?" Tudor asked.

"Great, except for one minor personal problem." She turned to her right. "Would you mind helping me solve it, Harry dear?" she asked in a seductive voice.

The teens' eyes went wide, until they realized she was talking to Henry Dorff, not Harry Potter.

"Aw, not me?" Tudor complained.

"No, you're happily married now and Gwennie would kill me."

"If Harry objects. . . ." Tom teased.

"I am always at your service, milady," Dorff said hurriedly. Tabitha stood and tugged at Henry's massive left bicep. Dorff stood, powerfully built and just over 6 foot 4 -- he towered over Tabitha's willowy 5 foot 10. Tabitha pulled him into a passionate kiss just as Jones came back into the room. Tobias' eyes went wide, and he flushed slightly.

"Tabby! Harry!" Master J scolded. "What kind of lesson is that for the students!"

Tabitha broke the kiss, but stayed in the embrace. "Trust me, at their age, this group already knows how to kiss!"

"So they probably do," the shaman agreed, seeing that Ginny and Neville were now holding hands, Luna was if anything even closer to Harry, and that Ron had a hand on Hermione's upper arm.

"Besides," Dorff said, "I'll only be at Hogwarts once a week or so, and I won't always get to stay over."

"It's too bad Sabrina can't come over," Tabitha said. She turned to Hermione. "That's our daughter. She's starting her Fourth year at the Ysgol, and especially with all the trouble here, we didn't want to make her relocate for a year or two."

"Oh," was all Hermione could say.

Myrddin stood. "Sorry to interrupt your reunion, Harry, but we have that meeting in the other parlor. Tobias, Tom? why don't you join us? J?"

The five men left. Remus and the students stared at Tabitha.

"Sorry about that. Toby has always had a bit of a crush on me, and he needed some reminding that I wasn't interested. To be a lot more open than I should be with students -- that means I'd just as soon you didn't gossip about me too much -- I am bisexual, leaning to a strong preference in women. The one exception has always been Harry, I mean Henry, Dorff. And yes, we do have a beautiful daughter."

"And you're not . . . he's not . . . married?" Hermione asked.

"Active Confederation hit wizards aren't allowed marry, although they sometimes have long-term relationships. Rather contradictory, I've always thought, but that's the rule. Tudor only married his long-term partner last year. After the last war, Harry and I both felt rather traumatized. We spent the next year together, healing each other. Any other questions?"

"So you're not in any . . . other relationship?" Ginny asked, rather tentatively.

"Not right now, no. I have been in the past." At that moment, the table was filled with food. "Let's have tea."

The sextet enjoyed a quiet evening in a suite on the top floor of the pub. When it came time to go to bed, Hermione pulled Ron into one bedroom, while Ginny led Neville into the other. Harry and Luna were quite comfortable on the large sofa.

Tabitha checked on the two young Dreamwalkers, and was satisfied that Harry had learned enough to prevent Voldemort from attacking him through dreams. Whether or not Harry could learn enough to attack Voldemort in this way was still an open question. In any event, she and Tobias Jones both believed he had learned enough to survive his next encounter through skill, rather than just luck.

Despite Ron's protests, the group was up early the next morning. Although the train left at 11:00 as always, this year the prefects (including the security prefects) had to be there when the barrier opened at 9:45. Tabitha, Remus, and Tobias took the floo with them to the platform, where Tonks and five other aurors were waiting.

"Mister Potter, Ms Lovegood, Mister Longbottom, please come with me," Jones commanded.

"The regular prefects, come with me," Tabitha added.

Justin Finch-Fletchley, Morag McDougal, and Daphne Greengrass all arrived a few minutes later. Harry didn't know Morag at all, and really had had little reason to think of Daphne outside of Potions. Morag was essentially short and dark brown -- tanned skin, with dark brown hair and eyes. Daphne looked like she could be one of The Sun's 'page three' girls. Harry knew even less about John Pritchard and Geneva Driver. Pritchard and his older brother Graham were slightly taller and more muscular than Goyle, Malfoy's huskier and slightly less-dim flunky. Both Pritchards looked intelligent, and if not nice, at least not evil. Geneva Driver was short and light brown (light tan, medium brown hair, slightly hazel brown eyes), but very stocky with solid muscle over a slim frame.

Jones went over the responsibilities of the security prefects, both for the train ride and in general. "I know feelings could be volatile," he concluded. "Professors Lupin, Spellman, Lawrence, and myself, plus the six aurors, will be on the train. You keep a special eye on the First years -- a lot of them will be even more nervous than usual. Any questions? No? Then get your luggage into the first car and come back here. The aurors, Professor Spellman, and myself will be based in the last car, and Professor Lawrence will be there the whole trip, unless you need him. Patrol the platform until the first whistle. Then Sixth years get on the last car and make your way through the train. The regular prefects will be doing the same, in pairs. Once the last whistle blows, the Fifth years do the same. Professor Lupin should be sending you all off, and then following who ever is last through the train. The Head Girl will be sending you off on patrols during the trip. Understood? Good! Get going!"

"WHO is THAT?" Daphne hissed as Harry helped her with her trunk and cat carrier.

"That's Tobias Jones, an American hit-wizard," Harry answered. "He's one of the people teaching Defense this year, and is in charge of security."

"A hit-wizard? I guess the new Council is taking things seriously at last," Morag said.

"I can understand that, but he's not very. . . ." Daphne searched for a description.

"Sympathetic?" Luna supplied.

"Exactly."

"He's a prick, but a very skilled one," Harry said bluntly.

"You know him?" Geneva Driver asked.

"We worked together a little this summer," Harry answered. "He's very good at what he does."

"You'll also all find I have EXCELLENT hearing," Jones boomed from behind them. "MOVE!" The prefects and security prefects moved. Coming out the carriage door, however, Jones caught Harry's eye and actually winked.

Harry suddenly understood. Having a tough image was exactly what Jones wanted. He would be the bad cop, Spellman the good cop. Lawrence would no doubt play whatever part was most needed at any given time.

Katie had the regular prefects making the rounds on the platform, while the eight security prefects stood in pairs at four strategic locations. The number of students looked about the same as ever, so far as Harry could see -- if anything there seemed to be more little kids running about. Some members of the DA came up to him and Luna to ask about the DA or just to ask about the summer, but most other students avoided him. When Cho and Marietta saw them, they shied quickly away. Malfoy and his two goons passed by with a sneer.

Finally, at 10:50, Katie gave a signal and the Fifth year prefects started moving through the crowd, calling for everyone to get their possessions on board. At 10:54, the first whistle sounded. The Sixth year prefects and security prefects moved through, calling, "Five minutes! Everyone on board! Five Minutes!" At 10:57, the second whistle blew. "Get on or stay behind!" the Seventh years called out. Promptly at 11:00, the Hogwarts Express pulled out.

The Prefects' car was totally open except for the loo. Katie ran a quick general meeting once Remus Lupin had joined them. She would go into greater detail with the Fifth years about their duties once the upper-year patrols got started.

It was well after lunch, on Harry's third pass through the train, when Draco Malfoy confronted Harry, along with Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott. Crabbe and Nott backed Draco up, while Goyle watched in the other direction.

"We're going to get you, Potter," Draco said in as menacing a tone as he could. "You're dead."



"Why?" Harry demanded. The three Slytherins looked confused. "Again, I ask why, Malfoy? Because your fathers tried to kill me, and got caught when they failed? Because despite being Pure-Blood bigots they decided to follow a Half-blood lunatic who never tried to rescue them? No, don't try to blame me, Malfoy."

"What do you mean, 'Half-blood lunatic'?" Draco hissed.

"I know your Master better than you," Harry answered. "His name at Hogwarts was Tom Marvolo Riddle. His mother was the last known heir of Salazar Slytherin, his father was a Muggle. Your father planted an avatar of a teen-age Tom Riddle in the school our Second year. That avatar was the heir of Slytherin."

Draco looked confused. He obviously had no idea what Harry was talking about. Harry half-turned. "Watch," he commanded. Harry drew his wand, and wrote 'TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE' in the air, and then rearranged the letters. 'I AM LORD VOLDEMORT' hung in the air for a few seconds, until Harry wiped them out. Harry glared at the three young men. "I'm not the major cause of your problems, Malfoy. Blame someone else."

Draco looked at Crabbe and Nott. Crabbe just looked confused, but Nott looked thoughtful. Harry could tell even Goyle had been listening. Malfoy looked back at Potter.

"Look," Harry said, "You don't like me. I don't like you. Fine. Learn who it is that led your fathers to prison, and then left your fathers in prison to be killed before you decide to follow him."

"You might be right," Draco said slowly. "I still hate you, and all your friends." He turned to the others, "Come on."

Professor Spellman came up to Harry a moment later, although he hadn't noticed her before. "Where did you come from?" Harry asked.

"I don't have to be seen, and I thought I'd leave that up to you. Well done."

"Thank you."

"Do you want to fill me in on Luna's troubles, or shall I have Hermione do that?" She was curious to see if Harry would tell her, since he didn't know Hermione already had.

Harry thought about that a few seconds. "Ask Hermione, maybe Sunday, and then I'll be happy to fill you in on anything you still need to know afterwards."

"Fair enough." She slipped by Harry, going back towards the Prefects' carriage.

"Firs' years! Firs' years, o'er here!"

Harry and Luna made their way over to Hagrid. "Hi'ya Harry. An' you must be Luna Lovegood, righ'?"

Luna merely nodded her head. She had never been this close to the half-giant.

"How's your brother, Hagrid?" Harry asked, after they had greeted each other.

"He's fine. Working with some o' Dumbledore's frien's, o'er in tha Urals." Harry understood that meant Grawp was helping out with the remaining giants still. "Now, you bes' be off! Got us a right large class this year, tha bigges' since the late Sixties."

"He's nicer than I expected from what some of the Ravenclaws have said," Luna offered.

"He's really the nicest person you could meet," Harry stated. Harry and Luna strolled towards the carriages. "I wonder why the class is so large this year," Harry pondered.

"Baby-boom," Luna answered. "Births started going up the year after You-Know-Who . . . I mean Voldemort's defeat, but they exploded after 1985, and the birth rate has been increasing ever since. They'll probably have to hire more faculty in a year or so."

"Oh." Harry then noticed the thestrals. He and Luna stared at them. One shook its harnesses at them in what could have been a friendly gesture.

"I'm not certain, but I believe that's the one you flew," Luna told Harry.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Tabitha said from behind them.

"So you can see them, too?" Harry asked rhetorically.

"Unfortunately. Now, get in the carriage. Meet up with your friends in the Great Hall." Harry did as he was told, and they rode up with three very shy Second year Hufflepuffs.

The Sorting Hat made another plea for House unity for the greater good, and then, much to Ron's complaints, took its time Sorting the 84 students, which was about twice the size of Harry's class. In the end, Hufflepuff ended up with 24, Ravenclaw and Slytherin 21 each, and Gryffindor 18.

After singing the school song ("I was hoping they'd forget that again," Ron complained), Dumbledore allowed the Feast to begin. Afterwards, the new staff arrangements brought about a great deal of surprise and speculation.

Harry had asked that the security prefects stay back a bit, so he watched Ginny and Oliver Wood's younger brother Leo escort the Gryffindor First years out. After a short conference, the security prefects agreed on a time to meet the next day, and then Harry, Neville, and William hurried off to Gryffindor.

## Chapter 02

Saturday, September 2, 1996

Harry and his five close friends, plus Seamus and Dean, were up early the next morning. They and the other prefects and security prefects were the only ones allowed into the small workout area, but the only ones interested that morning were the sextet and Harry's other two dorm mates. It would take a few weeks before most of the others used the equipment even on a part-time basis. After a workout, the group went back to their dorms to shower, and then made it to breakfast by 7:45.

At breakfast, Harry found a note asking him to meet with Dumbledore, which rather spoiled his hopes for some flying with Ron. When he arrived right after finishing his own breakfast, he found Spellman, Jones, Lawrence, and Dorff finishing their breakfasts with the Headmaster.

"We have news, Harry," Dorff said right out. "Objectively, some of it's not good or bad, although you might feel it's good news for you."

"Alright," Harry responded.

"This is all confidential. Share it only with your five friends, and only if they agree to keep it amongst yourselves and only where we tell you it's safe to speak. Meet with Lupin after this, and he'll tell you where the six of you may meet in private. Agreed?"

"Agreed, sir."

"Voldemort has left the Urals and moved south. The remaining giants have refused to go along with him, as have the small hidden communities of wizards he was trying to influence -- although some may join him later if he picks up any momentum. That's mostly good news, of course, at least for the moment. He is now in Afghanistan. The small magical communities there have been under attack by the fundamentalist Muggle government, after enduring being caught in the cross-fire of the Muggle wars there in the 1980s. Voldemort is hoping to rally those communities to his side, slaughter the local Muggles, and use that as a base of operations. The International has arranged for a squad of volunteers, aurors, and hit-wizards to confront him. Hopefully, we can at least drive him out without causing a total upheaval in the magical and Muggle communities. If not, hopefully we can at least drive him out."

"Are you going?" Harry asked.

"In a few moments," Dorff answered. "I'll be the co-leader of the mission."

"Good luck, sir, and be careful." Harry smiled. "And thanks for telling me."

Dorff smiled. "Let's see, in order, thank you, I'll try, and you're welcome." He glanced at his watch. "Actually, I should get going." He stood, and Tabitha stood as well, hugging him very tightly. Harry could see that this time it was not for show, but very genuine.

"Harry," Dorff said as Tabitha broke away from him, "Lupin's office is on my way out. Walk with me."

"Harry. . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"Barring a brilliant victory or great defeat, there won't be any news of this action until it's over, which could easily take several months."

"Yes, sir?"

"So, please, don't bother Tabitha for information. If she gets anything, she's to share it with you. If she doesn't, and again she probably won't because we won't be in contact too often, then obviously she can't share anything with you. So please, don't bother her. She'll be worried enough as it is."

"Yes, sir." Harry looked at the big man. Whenever he, Jones, and Myrddin were next to each other, it was if their features blended and the only thing that distinguished them was their hair color (Myrddin's black, Jones' light brown, and Dorff's reddish chestnut). Alone, they were easier to read. "You love her, don't you sir?"

"I met her my first day at school. At eleven, you don't know what love is. I did know from the moment I met her that I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could, even if I only realized it was love well into our Third year. We were Housemates, and also worked together for five years of druidical training. She's the light of my life and the mother of my only child. She has Walked in my dreams since I was twelve just as Ms Lovegood does in yours. Does that give you an idea of how I feel for her?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, don't give her too hard a time," Dorff said with a smile.

"Yes, sir. We'll make time to be with her."

Dorff's smile grew. "You are a bright one, Harry Potter."

"I'm learning. Good luck, Harry Dorff." They shook hands, and Harry went into Remus' office.

Remus had borrowed the Marauder's Map and had found two locations for Harry take meetings. Although in different parts of the castle, they were very similar. Each had two suits of armor flanking a tapestry on the wall of a corridor. Simply by being identified by either of the suits of armor and giving the password allowed a person to pass through the tapestry to a small room.

"Why isn't this system used more often?" Harry asked as they moved from the Security Prefect Room, which was between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff common rooms, towards

the one to be used by Harry and his friends, which was between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw towers.

"The charm is limited to twelve people at a time. Besides the eight security prefects and yourself, that will be Spellman, Tonks, and Jones." Tonks would be assisting with security at Hogwarts that year. "In addition, the regular prefects, myself, Lawrence, and the Heads of Houses can call in, although we can't actually enter. You also saw the two portraits, correct?"

"Right. Those can relay messages, too."

"Exactly. And of course the Headmaster can override any password in the Castle. We'll find the same set-up for your little group to meet, except that I'll be allowed in there as well. Again, the Heads of House can call in, while Spellman, Jones, Tonks, Lawrence, and I can enter."

"Sounds like a good plan." They reached the next room, and this time Remus went in with Harry. After they came out, they walked together. Harry was curious where they were going, but said nothing. After a while, they reached the alcove with the hump-backed hag.

"Two more things, Harry. First of all, this exit is now spelled shut. I'm sure you understand the need."

"Yes, sir."

"Second, here."

"The Map? Really?" Harry had missed it.

"I made some copies of it. We had always meant to, but we never actually got around to it. Now, the map as we designed it will only reveal a Marauder when asked by a Marauder. I mis-spoke the night we uncovered Peter. I had been asking just for Sirius, but that night I said 'identify Marauders.' Anyway, I've added you to the Marauders, so you won't show up on your map if it's stolen. Now, any questions?"

Harry thought. "One, although it's not about any of this."

"Go on."

"Do you know why Mister Dorff is going to Afghanistan? I thought Professor Jones was in charge of chasing Voldemort down?"

"That was the original set-up," Lupin admitted. "That was before Myrddin and the others decided that in the long-term, you would be Voldemort's primary target once he came back from the giants. Myrddin, Dorff, and Jones are three of the best-qualified hit-wizards there are. Myrddin can't go, since he's head of the Council. Jones can't go, because he's committed here and they couldn't find anyone trustworthy and skilled enough to take his place on short notice." He shrugged. "I don't think anyone is happy about the switch, except Dorff."

"I hope Professor Spellman doesn't blame me," Harry said.

"I doubt the idea has even occurred to her, Harry." Remus smiled at Harry. "So, what are your plans for today and tomorrow?"

Harry sighed. "This afternoon, tomorrow morning, and tomorrow night, Hermione is having some big review sessions for the anatomy test Tuesday morning. Everyone who wants to take the class is invited."

"Good luck!" Remus said. "What else?"

"Ron is having an open practice for Quidditch hopefuls today and tomorrow afternoon. I'll be there tomorrow." It was too late to join Ron now.

"And?"

Harry frowned. "And I'll be seeing Luna tonight and hopefully tomorrow. Why?"

Remus looked at the Map to verify they were alone, then he pointed his wand at it and said something Harry never thought anyone would ever say, "I love Snivellus." He looked at Harry. "We wanted a password no one would ever guess. Now look."

Harry saw six new rooms were outlined in pulsing red. "These rooms are very private, or at least they were twenty years ago and five of them were still secure three years ago. We used them as, well . . . Sirius' term was 'love nests.' Check them out. Make certain there aren't any paintings -- we didn't know the paintings were informers, although we should have guessed. If any look undisturbed for twenty years or so, well. . . ."

"I get the idea," Harry said, very red in the face. "Thanks."

"You might want to check these two out. Fred and George used this one; be careful to check for pranks. Maybe you can tell Ron or Neville about it if it looks undisturbed."

"But not both," Harry said with a grin.

"Oh, my, no! Give that one to Ron and perhaps this one to Neville. I promise not to tell anyone about them, barring an emergency. You might want to check this one out. I . . . well, I used this one. When I left, there was an unopened bottle of Scotch, unhexed of course. I used it as a check -- I figured anyone who came across the room would at least take a drink."

"Why didn't you take the bottle with you?"

"I don't like Scotch." Remus grinned. "Don't set a trap with bait you might take."

"Won't you need it for you and Tonks?"

"Don't be cheeky, pup! Tonks and I are sharing a very nice suite of room. Now shoo!"

"Arf!" Harry teased back.

Except for some time spent with Luna in Remus' old snogging room, the highlight of Harry's weekend was finally mounting his broom Sunday afternoon. There were any number of students in the stands watching, some to support their friends in Gryffindor, others scouting for their House teams.

Luna sat next to Hermione, Lavender, and Parvati. "Thank you," she said while sitting.

"For what?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"First of all, for not making Harry study anatomy this afternoon." She nodded towards where Harry was leading a group of flyers through warm-ups. "I have never seen Harry so care-free as he is right now."

"He's always that way on a broom," Parvati said.

"Since the first time he touched one in flying class," Lavender agreed.

"As much as he could use some more study time, this will do him more good in the long-run," Hermione said. "What?" she demanded when she saw Parvati and Lavender's surprised looks, "Am I really that much of a swot?"

"Sometimes," Parvati told her. "The few exceptions have nearly always centered around Harry."

"You seem happy with Ron," Lavender went on, "but we always thought you'd end up with Harry."

"Not that you and Ron don't make a nice couple, or you and Harry," Parvati said to Luna quickly.

"I do love Harry, just not the same way as I care for Ron," Hermione told them. She looked at Luna. "I'm glad you and Harry are together. Truly."

"I know," Luna said simply. "Secondly, apparently you and Harry told Professors Flitwick, Lupin, and Spellman, and Padma, some of my personal business. I should feel very upset and violated, but because I know you did it out of concern for me, I will thank you."

"Padma called a meeting of the Fourth through Seventh year Ravenclaw girls before dinner yesterday," Parvati said.

"No one told me," Luna said with a slight pout.

"They were discussing you," Parvati returned. "They could hardly do so with you there! Anyway, Padma, Lisa, Mandy, and Morag laid down the law to them, telling them to leave you alone, unless they wanted to risk being expelled. Four of your roommates agreed, and backed them up."

"Maureen, Deborah, Merry, and Diana," Luna suggested. The sixth girl actually hated Luna and was part of Cho Chang's clique. Once the bullying had started, she had been the one who had kept it going.

"Exactly. Well, Chang apparently threw a fit, and she and her friends aren't speaking to the others."

"Margot Smythe slept with the Seventh years last night," Luna told them. "They're claiming they are going to draw up a petition to rearrange the top four years by friendships instead of by year. I really would prefer we all got along as we were instead."

"You've tried that for over four years," Lavender pointed out. "Look as us. There are five of us, and we've always been divided two, two, and one." She looked at Hermione. "We've had a few disagreements, but even last September we were civil to each other, weren't we?"

"Barely, but we both tried and we managed," Hermione agreed. Lavender had suggested the Ministry and The Daily Prophet were right about Harry's lack of stability. After the initial blow-up, they had still managed to be civil, until Lavender decided Harry was right after all.

"My point is, it takes both sides to be civil. You've tried, they haven't. Don't feel badly because they've been called on it."

"Thank you," Luna said.

"So you're dating Harry," Parvati said with a smile. "I hope he's a better date than he was at the Yule Ball."

"You know, we haven't actually been on a formal date, let alone a dance," Luna mused. "We'll have to see how they go."

"No offence," Lavender said carefully, "but you're dressing very differently so far this term, compared to the last two years or so. It looks good on you."

"Those girls were stealing and hexing her clothes," Hermione said with a huff, "and mixing in any stray clothing that more or less fit. Ginny and I helped her go through her things and pick out some new clothes. And Professor Spellman and I put hexes on **everything**. If anyone steals **anything**, they'll be sorry."

Lavender turned to the two girls. "You know, some of us have been meeting Saturday mornings. We do our hair and nails and talk. There are girls from all different years and Houses. Even Ginny comes sometimes, but the Ravenclaw clique goes off on their own. Why don't both of you start coming next week? It's only from Eight to Ten. If Padma can find the time, you two can."

Parvati told Luna, "Your other roommates usually show up, and even if we don't study then, we talk about classes and set up study times and the like. Please come, both of you."

"Thank you," Luna said in a small voice. "I will."

"We will," Hermione confirmed. Then she frowned. "But why?"

Lavender and Parvati looked at each other, then Lavender said, "I was so wrong last year. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back. He's out there somewhere, but sooner or later he'll be back in Britain. Our families both suffered losses last time. We could be hit again."



"Lavender lost an uncle and his entire family and some other cousins, I lost three cousins and their families," Parvati said softly.

"Harry seems to be at the center of this somehow, even though that doesn't really make sense. He is, isn't he?"

Luna and Hermione exchanged glances. "He is," Hermione said, "but we're not allowed to explain what little we know."

"So, if he's at the center, then he needs you two to support him," Lavender concluded. "That puts you two as Harry's main supports."

"And Ron," Hermione protested.

"To a degree," Lavender agreed.

"But only to a degree," Parvati said. "Ron, Seamus, Dean, and even Neville and Ginny are secondary supports. Harry respects you, Hermione. You, and now maybe Luna, are the only person who can argue with him without him totally exploding, and you know it. None of us likes that you're almost always right, but you are, at least compared to the rest of us. Harry knows that, too."

"So, if you two are Harry's main supports, we are going to support the pair of you," Lavender said firmly.

"We're going to round up general support for Harry, too. We should have done more last year, and we failed Harry. We won't fail him again."

"And we won't fail you."

"So we only have one more question," Parvati said, her face losing its serious mien.

"What's with the knitting?" they asked together.

Coming back towards the castle an hour later, the group of observers were met by Padma and Lisa. "What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Quite a bit, actually," Padma stated. "Come on," she told the group. "Parvati, why don't you wait for Harry? Bring him to the Infirmary."

"What's happened?" Parvati demanded.

"Cho and her clique decided to teach Luna a lesson. They apparently thought the way to get around the hexes on Luna's trunk and possessions would be for all of them to aim reductor curses at her stuff at one time."

"Are they really **that** stupid?" Hermione demanded. "The trunk alone, even before we reinforced it, would have reflected the curses back at the senders!"

"Apparently, they were that stupid."

"Are, are they alright?" Luna asked in a slightly panicky voice.

"No, although none were killed or maimed," Lisa answered. "Some of their parents are here, and are kicking up quite a fuss."

"Oh, Merlin! I'm going to be expelled!"

"No, you're not," Hermione said firmly. "Every hex I put on your things was legal, and I'm sure all the ones Professor Spellman put on them were as well. Our trunks even came with protections, so they're legal. They were all warned the hexes were there. They are all old enough to know better, and they are all old enough to know that shooting a reductor curse at **anything** without the supervision of a staff member is grounds for expulsion."

Luna recaptured her poise. "I hope you're right."

Entering waiting areas just outside the Infirmary proper, the students encountered a group of parents that were indeed demanding Luna and Hermione's expulsion and threatening law suits. Professors Spellman and Flitwick were repeating the same arguments as Hermione, but were being out-shouted twelve to two. When he arrived, not even Professor Dumbledore could calm the parents, by then the full compliment of fourteen, since as soon as he quieted some of the parents, others restarted the threats and yelling. He was tempted to quiet them all with a spell, but knew that would only make the problems worse in the long run. He rather hoped the parents would run-down soon.

Parvati, Harry, Ron, and Ginny had arrived by then as well, and the students stood around Luna, supporting her. Forty minutes after Hermione and Luna had arrived, the room was suddenly flooded by aurors, who separated the groups, and quieted the parents by the simple threat of arrest.

Then Tudor Myrddin swept into the room, followed by Thomas Lawrence and Tobias Jones. Myrddin glared at everyone equally, and then turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, please explain why Professors Jones and Lawrence felt in necessary to summons me." He glanced at the irate, grumbling parents. "If **anyone** else so much as squawks, stun them!"

The Headmaster, followed by Flitwick and Spellman, explained the situation. Myrddin turned to the parents, who by now were, for the most part, more embarrassed by their children's poor judgement than they were angry. "Do any of you have anything intelligent to say, other than offering apologies for yourselves and your daughters?"

They all looked rather abashed and said nothing.

At that point, Madam Pomfrey came in. "Headmaster? Some of the girls are awake."

The parents made moves towards the door, but the aurors held them back. Myrddin and Dumbledore exchanged a look, and Myrddin nodded.

"Professor Spellman? Would you please interview the girls and see what they have to say?"  
Dumbledore asked. Tabitha nodded and followed Madam Pomfrey.

## **Chapter 03**

At that point, Madam Pomfrey came in. "Headmaster? Some of the girls are awake."

The parents made moves towards the door, but the aurors held them back. Myrddin and Dumbledore exchanged a look, and Myrddin nodded.

"Professor Spellman? Would you please interview the girls and see what they have to say?" Dumbledore asked. Tabitha nodded and followed Madam Pomfrey.

The group waited in silence. Harry stood behind the now-seated Luna, his hands softly massaging her shoulders. Hermione and Ginny sat on either side of her, holding her hands. Luna was not pleased by all this attention, but decided it was easier to put up with it than to fight it.

Tabitha was back about twenty minutes later. "The girls did not all shoot reductor curses at Ms Lovegood's possessions. Ms Chang and Ms Smythe did, however, while the other girls projected shields, which explains why they were not more seriously injured. They were not trying to destroy Ms Lovegood's possessions; they believed the reductor curse would break the commercial spells on her trunk. They weren't certain it would work, which is why they also projected the shields."

"Ravenclaws," Ginny sniffed.

Tabitha ignored that. "Then they hoped they could hex her clothes, to embarrass her as they have for the last five years. The reason, of course, is pure ignorant malice and the fact they enjoy bullying someone they perceive as 'different.'"

The parents made noises of protest, but Spellman, Jones, Myrddin, Dumbledore, and Flitwick all stared them down, while Lawrence kept an eye on the students, who were all (except Luna) giving the parents dirty looks. When the parents quieted down, Myrddin asked, "Why would they believe a reductor curse would break the hexes on the trunk?"

"Because they were told that by someone they believed a reliable source."

Myrddin frowned. "Who was that?"

Spellman, Flitwick, Dumbledore, and even Hermione and Ginny, all answered together. "Michael Corner."

"I see." Myrddin looked at Hermione and Ginny, and then decided. "Ms Weasley, perhaps you will explain who Michael Corner is to me."

"Michael is a Sixth year Ravenclaw," Ginny answered. "I dated him last year, and then Cho started dating him last June."

"And why would he be considered a reliable source?"

"His family makes and sells the trunks," Ginny answered simply.

"I see." Myrddin turned to Jones. "Professor Jones, could you locate Mister Corner?"

"Perhaps Professor Flitwick should go as well, bringing Mister Corner's close friend, Stephen Cornfoot, as well," Dumbledore suggested.

"Of course, Headmaster," Myrddin agreed. "Thomas, go with them as well."

"May we see our daughters?" Mrs. Edgecomb asked.

"They're asleep again," Madam Pomfrey told them. "All will fully recover, although Miss Chang and Miss Smythe will take two or three days, while the others should be out of the Infirmary either tomorrow afternoon or Tuesday morning."

Professors Flitwick and Lawrence came back twenty minutes later. "Mister Corner and Mister Cornfoot have disappeared," Flitwick reported. "Their possessions are also gone. Professor Jones is finishing his investigations, and asked that one of these aurors see him before leaving."

"I see." Myrddin looked at his watch. "It's almost Six."

"Would you and your escort care to stay to dinner, Councillor?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, that might be best." He and Dumbledore looked at Harry and his friends.

Harry stood. "If we could be excused for dinner, Headmaster?"

"Very good, Harry." Dumbledore turned to the parents. "I will have food sent up. We will discuss disciplinary action later."

"So Corner and Cornfoot were working for Voldemort?" Harry asked much later that evening. He was seated in the Headmaster's office, along with Jones, Lawrence, Spellman, and Myrddin.

"That seems the only likely explanation," Jones answered. "If they were under the Imperius, I don't doubt that they would have been released to try and explain themselves. They must have been under orders to cause an incident, if only to hurt the school, and discredit both Dumbledore and our involvement here."

"What happens to Luna's torturers?" Harry asked.

"That seems a bit strong, Harry," Dumbledore responded.

"For four years of extreme bullying? I don't know what else **to** call it!" Harry retorted, adding a "sir" as an afterthought.

"Do you really wish them expelled, Harry?"

"Isn't that the automatic penalty for the use of a reductor curse, Professor?"

"No, that is the automatic penalty for one directed directly against a student," Dumbledore answered. "Expulsion may be considered for this offense, but it is not automatic. The seven students are not being expelled. They are being relocated to their own room, and they will all stay segregated during their remaining time at Hogwarts, even the two Fourth years, Miss Robin and Miss Saint Claire. They may not earn any points for Ravenclaw for this academic year, although they may still lose points. If there are any further major violations, they will be expelled. If there are any against Miss Lovegood, no matter how minor, they will be expelled. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered.

"Harry," Tudor Myrddin broke in, "no one had any idea that Corner or Cornfoot were allying themselves with Voldemort. Is there any student, other than the children of known Death Eaters, you have any suspicions of?"

Harry thought for a moment, then said, "Zach Smith, in Hufflepuff. Just from his general attitude and the fact that he seemed friendlier with Corner and Cornfoot than with anyone in his House. Nothing concrete."

"Thank you, Harry," Myrddin said. "Good luck with your classes."

"Thank you, sir. Goodnight; goodnight Headmaster, Professors."

The runners jogged inside the castle, the stairs compensating for a shorter running time. They managed to reach breakfast by 7:35, and the three Sixth years simply handed Hermione their schedules, knowing she would tell them what to do in any event.

"Charms this morning at Eight," she told them. "Ron -- you, Harry, and Neville have Creatures at Nine-thirty. Neville has Herbology at Eleven, and you have Divination at One. We meet at Three and again at Seven to study for the anatomy test."

"It will be interesting to see how Spellman is as a regular teacher," Hermione told her friends on the way to class.

"I don't think she'll be much different from Flitwick," Harry mused. "As long as no one fools around or causes trouble, it should be fine."

There would have been 30 students in the N.E.W.T. Charms class. Corner and Cornfoot were gone, however, and Li and Edgecomb were still in the Infirmary. Draco might have been

tempted to cause trouble had he had his usual group of supporters, but Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott were not in the class. With only Pansy available for support, Draco was not about to call attention to himself, at least not yet. The class itself went smoothly, and while most of the Sixth years liked and respected Flitwick, they agreed Spellman was good, too.

Ron, Harry, and Neville were glad to see Draco had dropped Creatures. Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and Bulstrode were still in the class, but seemed unwilling to make a scene without Malfoy there to egg them on. Since they were studying magical birds that term, it seemed unlikely they would have to face anything too dangerous, at least until after Christmas.

Harry managed to squeeze in a little quality time with Luna between finishing dinner and the 7:00 study session. Things were still tense amongst the Ravenclaws, and it would no doubt grow worse when some of the Clique were released from the Infirmary the next morning.

To make matters more difficult, N.E.W.T. Transfiguration was Tuesday mornings at 8:00. Professor Jones had hoped to teach N.E.W.T. Transfiguration, but after a long private interview with Professor McGonagall, he had happily agreed to take the Sixth and Seventh year 'Household' Transfiguration classes instead. There had been 19 students signed up for the Sixth year N.E.W.T. Transfiguration class (although again Corner and Cornfoot were gone). Six of the eight students signed up for the Medical class were also in Transfiguration, including Su Li, who was trying to make herself very inconspicuous in the back of the class room. After forty minutes of working the students hard, McGonagall had let them out early, so that the medical students could prepare themselves mentally.

Su Li tentatively approached Harry and Hermione, and said that she would be apologizing to Luna later that morning, although she admitted all of the other students were refusing to do so. Harry thanked the girl, and then he and Hermione made a point of wishing her good luck on the exam.

The anatomy exam was thorough and detailed. Even Hermione took nearly the full 75 minutes to complete the exam. They would learn their fate Friday morning.

While the Sixth years were suffering in the anatomy exam, the Fifth year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws were meeting their first History class. Most of the class was in place (since it was their first class of the day as well) when Professor Lawrence strode into the room. "Good morning!" he called out. The class responded with a rather unenthusiastic "Good morning," in return.

"Come now! It's not like this is an Eight o'clock class," Lawrence gently chided them with a friendly smile. He was either a morning person or had had a lot of strong coffee. A number of the students managed a wan smile in return. He was about to continue when Binns drifted in through the chalk board.

"May I help you?" Lawrence asked.

Binns blinked. "Are you lost?"

"No. Are you?"

"There's a different class assigned to my class room?" Binns asked in surprise.

"No, there's a different teacher assigned to this class. Remember, Professor? This year you're only teaching the First through Fourth years."

"What? What is Headmaster Longbottom thinking! I've been teaching here for over a hundred years, and I have never been so insulted!"

"Professor, Headmaster Longbottom retired a hundred years or so ago, and while you may have indeed taught for over a hundred years, you've been holding classes for slightly closer to two hundred than one hundred. You died in the early part of this century, which, if you haven't noticed, is almost over. Now, please do NOT interrupt my class again."

Binns looked at Lawrence in shock. So did the students, for Lawrence's easy going-manner of his entrance was gone and the students decided then and there that they would not be able to catch up on their other homework in History any longer. Binns, meanwhile, had nodded and left the classroom.

Lawrence turned to the students. "Now, as I am certain you are all aware, and have already been reminded, this is your WT, I mean your O.W.L. year. Now the British history O.W.L. is, unfortunately, partially governed by the Hogwarts curriculum instead of the other way around, which means about three-quarters of it will be geared towards Goblin Rebellions, interesting inventions, and International Conferences and various codes. I've read over your text book, and I must say it is the worst-written magical history school text I have ever seen. It rather reminds me of a typical American attempt at an education text. I also sat in on three of Professor Binn's lectures yesterday, so I have some idea of how he taught you and how well you all probably paid attention in class. Miss Weasley, Miss Hughes, could you come up here please?"

Lawrence handed the two prefects large stacks of paper -- the first photocopies most of them had ever seen. "Please distribute these. The top two pages are an outline of the Goblin Rebellions, the third is a list of the inventions which might be covered in the O.W.L., while the last three pages list the major conferences, codes, and other events covered by the exam. By the start of the Christmas break, you will turn in two reports. In the first, you will write at least one paragraph on each of the Goblin Rebellions, explaining how you can distinguish it from the others. You will also list the major participants on each side and any agreement or treaty. In the second, you will write one paragraph on each of the inventions listed. Make certain they are legible, succinct, and complete."

"Now, by the start of the Spring vacation, you will turn in a report on all the events listed on pages four, five, and six, in the same format as the report on the Goblin Rebellions. That will cover what Professor Binns was going to be rehashing this year."

He glared at the class. "Now, why do few Hogwarts students manage to earn O's in their History O.W.L.?"



The group looked back, none willing to try to lay the blame on Binns' poor lecturing. They all understood that, while true, this was not the exact answer Lawrence was looking for. Finally Luna raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Lovegood?"

"If Professor Binns only teaches us Goblin Rebellions, inventions, and conferences, codes, and conventions, and that only amounts to three-quarters of the materials on the exam, what's the remaining quarter of the material?"

"Exactly, Miss Lovegood. One point to Ravenclaw. The answer is wizarding culture and the history of the magical peoples." Lawrence started walking back and forth behind the desk, forcing the students to watch him and so pay attention to what he was saying instead of pretending to take notes. "Professor Binns only touches on it in passing, usually on the way to discuss some Conference or Convention or set of regulations. He has you do a report on the Muggle witch-burning crazes for summer homework before your Third year, for example, so he can teach you about the important regulations regarding Muggle-wizarding separations. He does not teach you about the mixed cults of witches, mostly Muggle-born or of mixed ancestry and actual Muggles that inspired those witch-hunts in the first place, trusting that you'll pick that up from the text. He also does nothing with the pre-medieval history of magic. You know nothing of the Old Believers or the Old Belief, nothing about the ancient magics of Egypt or Mesopotamia, let alone the rest of the world! It's as if you think magic started in the European Dark Ages, instead of having a world history going back more than five thousand years in recorded history, and of course back before that into the mists of pre-history."

He stopped and looked at them. "Get out your ink and parchment." He waited a few seconds, and then gave them a smirk. "Now you are going to learn some history that you need to know. Today, the pre-history of magic, or thirty-thousand years of shamanism in sixty minutes or less. I hope you have a lot of ink!"

Two groups of dazed students met at one of the large sets of stairs. "What's wrong with you?" Hermione, who was about the only person not in shock in either group, asked.

"History," Colin managed to say.

"That was the most intense, but interesting, lecture I have ever heard at Hogwarts," Luna said thoughtfully.

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Really," Ginny agreed. "Lawrence gave us three huge sets of written assignments and then launched into this lecture on shamans." She shook her head. "It was interesting, but there was a lot of it."

"Binns never lectured on shamans, and there was a short essay on them on the O.W.L.," Hermione stated.

"He's out to fill in all the gaps Binns left," Luna told Hermione.

"I wonder what Binns would think of that."

"He's not thinking about much right now," Ginny said with a smile. "Lawrence chased Binns out."

"He what?" Harry roused himself to ask.

"He chased Binns out when Binns tried to teach the class," Colin answered. "I wish I'd had my camera!"

Harry would have liked to have taken Luna to 'their' room, but she still had classes in the afternoon, and that night Harry had some security patrols.

Wednesday was a more leisurely morning, at least for Harry, Ron, and Hermione. It was not one they were looking forward to, however. The N.E.W.T. Law and Regulations class would meet from 10:00-10:50 and the Defense class would meet from 1:00-2:20. While Jones would no doubt be tough, the trio (and Neville) knew him and had some idea what to expect.

No, the challenge would be the Law and Regulations class, with part-time Professor Percy Weasley.

The class on Law and Regulations (usually simply called 'Regs' by the students), was larger than the Trio had expected. Besides the Trio, twelve other students gathered in the small classroom (Seamus Finnegan, Margot Rivers, and Doreen Spinks from Gryffindor; Blaise Zabini from Slytherin; Marietta Edgecombe, Kevin Entwhistle, and Mandy Brocklehurst from Ravenclaw; and Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Susan Bones, Eloise Midgen, and Megan Jones from Hufflepuff).

"Interesting group," Hermione said as they settled in the back of the room. For once, she decided that it might be best in the back. She had spent a lot of time so far that week convincing Ron to just grit his teeth and say nothing if Percy was provocative.

"How so?" Harry asked.

"Except for you, me, Seamus, and Justin, everyone else has a parent or close relative working for the Ministry."

Seamus turned around. "My Mum's oldest brother works for the Ministry, but in Ireland."

"And actually, didn't Sirius say he and your father went through auror training, even if they wound up not joining?" Ron pointed out.

"There are a number of magical families known as the 'Ministry families'," Susan Bones commented. "Those included the Potters, Harry." The class then went silent as Percy swept into the room, a disgruntled look on his face.

"Good morning," Percy said rapidly, "Since you were all Third years when I was Head Boy, you all know who I am. I also know who all you are. You are all either from families who have worked closely with the Ministry for some generations, or are new to our world. You are all at least seriously considering careers within the Ministry. A N.E.W.T. in this class is not required for a career in the Ministry, but failing to get one for those taking the class will almost destroy any chance of a Ministry career. Getting an E or O will advance your initial level within the Ministry, other than with the aurors, and even there it will up your pay-level after the three year training period."

Percy paused, mostly because he had run out of breath. He seemed to settle himself, and then went on, now very intent on making his point. "Why do we have rules, laws, and regulations? Because they are needed if any society is to function. If everyone did as they pleased, there would be nothing but chaos. An individual may be able to live like that, but a society can not. Our society is currently under attack from someone who believes that he should make the rules for everyone. That the rules don't apply to him. Think about that, when you wonder why there are rules."

"Some of you have reputations for not believing in the rules, or at least believing that they can flout the rules at will." Ron stirred somewhat angrily in his seat, but held his tongue. Percy looked Harry in the eyes. "I probably have the reputation of only caring about the rules. Well, rules are there for a reason. Perhaps some rules are bad rules, or are there for a bad reason. No matter, the rules are the rules. If you break one, even if you have a good reason, even if you're right, that doesn't mean you can get away with it with no consequences. If you break a rule because you think it's the right thing to do, don't expect the rest of the world to agree with you."

He then switched his attention to Ron. "You are all going to learn the basic rules and regulations, along with the structures of the British Ministry and the International, over the course of this year. Next year, we will be going over the fundamental laws of both our Ministry and the International. We will not just learn the rules, but learn why they are the rules. If you know the rules, the regulations, the laws, you will learn you can function more easily in nearly every situation."

He turned his attention to Hermione. "But, some of you will say, sometimes we are faced with a situation outside the rules. Or we are faced in a situation where the rules seem to conflict, or where we believe the rules will cause much greater harm than good. Until this past year or so, I would have said, 'go to your superior.' Well, I have learned that is not always possible, or the best solution. When faced with that situation, you might have to make a choice. Just remember, it may not be the right one. And, if it **is** the right one, it may not be the correct one according to other peoples' interpretation of the regulations or laws. If you break the law, even if you have right on your side, you must be willing to take the consequences. If you are not willing to learn and follow the rules, if you aren't willing to take the consequences for both following the rules, and breaking them, you don't belong in government service."

Percy took a step back and took a deep breath. "Now, we're going to start by learning the Ministry flow chart. Please take out your parchment and quills."

## Chapter 04

"This class will be very different than last year's," Professor Jones stated. He looked over the 22 students with a cold, calculating eye. "If any of you paid attention last year, you should be well-grounded in theory. Some of you may be a bit weak on the practical side, however. Who here thinks they're good?"

"Go on, Potter," Draco hissed. "You know you think you're good!"

"Ah, Mister Malfoy I believe. Thank you for volunteering. Come up here, please." They were not in the usual classroom, but in an old dungeon set up as a dueling area. "Now, I wonder who might prove a challenge to the great, expensively and privately tutored Mister Malfoy?" Jones looked one student right in the eye, and after a moment's hesitation, the student nodded.

"Yes . . . Mister Longbottom, come on up."

"Longbottom!" Malfoy was obviously insulted.

"What's the problem with Mister Longbottom, Mister Malfoy? Is Mister Longbottom too much for your to handle? Should I try to find someone easier?"

Draco gave Jones an evil grin. "Why, no sir."

"Now, **nothing** above a Third year hex for offense except the disarm spell, understand? Anything more will result in at least expulsion from this class." Jones looked down at Malfoy with such a look that Malfoy actually shook for an instant. "And don't think I couldn't make it stick! Defensively, you may use any shields you know. Now remember, this is a proper duel, not a fight!"

Draco bowed with a smirk, and then sent off three straight curses in what he thought was a rapid salvo. Compared to what he had practiced against that summer, Neville considered them almost leisurely. He could have avoided them, but instead blocked them easily. When Draco paused for a brief instant, mostly due to surprise at his attack's ineffectiveness, Neville caught him with a leg-locker curse while he was off-balance. Draco toppled over on his face and Neville disarmed him easily.

"Well done, Mister Longbottom. One point to Gryffindor. Would someone please unlock Mister Malfoy? One point from Slytherin. Would someone like to challenge Mister Longbottom?" The other eleven non-Gryffindors didn't make a move, mostly from surprise. Neville's fellows were not going to challenge him. Just as Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Anthony Goldstein, and Blaise Zabini each started to make a move, Jones said, "Very well. Mister Potter. We will continue in this fashion until we get through everyone."

Harry managed to get through dueling everyone in class. The only ones who came close to beating him were Hermione, who was tricky, and Ron, who went last, when Harry was tiring. Most of the class he managed to beat in under two minutes, which was still more than twice as long as Draco Malfoy had lasted against Neville. When Harry finished Ron off, there were only five minutes left with the class.

"I now have a good idea of everyone's skill. Next week, we're going to be practicing the basic shield spell -- nearly everyone's needs work. For those interested in dueling, there will be a Sixth year's dueling club meeting Mondays from Seven until Eight-thirty, starting in three weeks. Dismissed."

Draco gave the entire class a dirty look, and fled the room while the rest of the class went to congratulate Neville.

Technically, Harry and Ron had all Thursday and Friday off. In reality, Harry would have individual coaching most Thursday and Friday mornings. On Thursdays, it would usually be Professor Jones, but Professors Spellman, Lupin, and Lawrence would also help out on occasion, as Tonks and the other security people assigned to Hogwarts and Hogsmeade would as well. On Friday mornings, it would usually be the security people only. Ron would take Thursday mornings to plan out Quidditch strategies -- they had selected Ginny and Third Year Natalie Macdonald as the new chasers, with two Fourth years, Paul Robinson and Jason Prince, as the beaters. Ron did agree to study all Thursday afternoon. Considering the large pile of assignments they would have to finish by Christmas, even Ron realized that delay or procrastination would be fatal.

Hermione had Runes from 8:00-9:20 and Arithmancy from 9:30-10:50 on Thursday, and the College Prep Friday mornings, while Neville had the Accounting course Thursday morning and Herbology again at 11:00 Friday. Hermione decided that the best time for the group to get together as a group to talk would be from 3:00 to 5:00 on alternating Thursday afternoons (alternating with a Quidditch practice Harry had set up).

Harry found September and most of October sweeping by. The only real break had been giving Hermione a birthday party in mid-September. Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration had nearly as much homework as the year before. Even though Percy seemed to be trying to be polite, perhaps even nice, to the trio, the Regs class generated as much homework as any two classes ever had before. Add in Harry's time devoted to dueling, Quidditch, and snogging Luna, and Harry had little time to worry about the time passing by. In addition, the entire Medical group had passed their anatomy exam (although some just barely), and the added workload made this Harry's second busiest and most difficult year academically after the Fifth year. Only Hagrid's Care class kept what Harry and Ron felt was a reasonable work schedule.

As Councillor Dorff had predicted, nothing was heard of Voldemort. Professor Spellman had passed on two brief messages, both merely saying that Dorff was well and his mission 'progressing as expected.'

Tobias Jones still held himself somewhat aloof from all the students, not just the sextet. Most of the Slytherins had joined the various dueling clubs, and found all the professors overseeing them fair. A number of the Fifth and Sixth year Slytherins who had never closely associated with Draco were now found gravitating towards the impartial Jones, who treated them well without showing any favoritism. The sextet, and a number of other students from all four Houses, found Professor Spellman easy to talk to outside of class. A few of the Ravenclaws,

and Hermione, also found themselves drawn to Professor Lawrence. Lawrence and Spellman were even happy to help Hermione with her private research on sentients' rights.

The Ravenclaws had settled down to a large degree by the end of the second week of classes. Things were tense, but everyone was taking care not to annoy each other. Things were also tense in Slytherin, but no one inside the House would elaborate to those outside.

Of the sextet, Ron was having the most difficult time adjusting to the new year. Luna and Neville, on the other hand, were blossoming. Neville's performance in the first DADA class had just been a preview of the abilities which had just started to show themselves in the DA the year before. Now, except for Harry, Neville was the star of the Sixth year dueling club. Add to that the powerful physique he had gained from his summer workouts and his dating the undeniably attractive Ginny Weasley, and Neville was becoming considered something of the 'stud' of the term. Ginny had had to defend her 'property' a number of times. Not that Neville ever encouraged any of the other girls -- or Colin -- he just didn't have the experience yet to know how to send them gently on their way.

Parvati and Lavender had kept their promises, and, by working with Padma and some of the Ravenclaw Sixth and Fifth year girls, Luna was partially incorporated into a strong support network. Luna would have just as soon been left alone, but believed it would be rude to send these late-coming supporters off to mind their own business. After all, they did insure that the Clique kept to themselves and left Luna, and some of their other, younger, victims alone (Luna had been far from the only one they had bullied, just their favorite target). Putting up with having the other girls primp her every Saturday and keep an eye on her the rest of the week was a small price to pay, she decided, for helping the other girls who had been harassed. It also made the helpers feel better about having failed to help before.

Luna was happiest when she was alone with Harry, or when she was sketching her Housemates or her new friends. Still, finding time to be with Harry as well as either Ginny and Neville or Hermione and Ron (or sometimes all six teens) gave her life more variety, and made it easier to go back to her O.W.L. work when the time came to study.

Ginny was busy with Quidditch, Neville, dueling, her O.W.L. work, and her prefect duties, often in that order. Hermione had her myriad research projects, her prefect duties, her studies, and she had decided to knit everyone jumpers for Christmas. Harry was just plain busy, although he was often found late at night in the common room, reading one of his fantasy novels.

It was Ron who was feeling a bit left out.

Ron found his prefect duties boring and useless, unlike Hermione who adored them, and Harry, Neville, Luna, and Ginny, who found them worthwhile. He had the least direction in his studies -- Harry wanted to become an auror, Neville would have a small estate to run, Hermione loved to study, and the two girls had their O.W.L.s. Ron was just in school. Ron knew his relationship with Hermione was stronger and at least as intimate as most of the relationships he saw around him at school -- except for Harry and Luna's and Neville and Ginny's.

He decided he would have to work through these problems on his own. There was still Quidditch to plan for, and You-Know-Who to deal with.

Most of the other students were able to put the threat of Voldemort out of their minds as the mundane concerns of everyday life took over. The same seemed true outside of Hogwarts, and towards the middle of October a few discreet paragraphs in The Daily Prophet hinted that it might be time to turn power back over to Fudge.

The date of the four semi-formal dances was announced in late September, and as expected the first would be right after Halloween. The first Hogsmeade weekend would be October 26th and 27th and the actual dance would be Friday, November 1, while of course the Feast would be on Halloween. All Fourth years and above were invited to the dance, as were any younger students who could find a date with an older student.

As soon as it was announced at dinner, Neville asked Ginny, while Harry asked Luna right after dinner. Ron, however, got in trouble with Hermione, and then every one else in Gryffindor immediately thereafter, by not asking Hermione to the dance. All four of his room mates tried to convince Ron that he needed to ask Hermione to accompany him both to Hogsmeade and to the dance. Ron refused for over a week, saying that since they were dating, of course they would go together, and had in fact planned on going to the dance since August. Ron said this many times, and rather too loudly at least once, making Hermione run from the other end of the Common Room in tears, although Ron, who hadn't seen it, didn't believe it.

Neville and Dean had had to drag Harry away that night before he hexed his best friend, while Seamus tried to talk some sense into Ron.

It was because of this incident, and Hermione's growing shortness of temper, that Lavender, Parvati, Ginny, and six other girls cornered Ron the morning after he had made Hermione cry and threatened to collectively hex him if he didn't do something about Hermione (and they told him they would then turn what was left over to Harry, and finally turn anything left after that over to Snape for potions ingredients) that Ron was convinced to actually ask her. Hermione managed to hold her temper and agree to go with him, although Ginny and the other Fifth year girls still dragged him into a deserted classroom that evening to explain the facts of dating to him a second time. They didn't want to have to deal with a grumpy prefect again.

Harmony seemed to reign again, at least in Gryffindor. The Clique, as well as Draco Malfoy and the group around him, were still very quiet throughout the opening weeks of the term, to everyone's surprise. Then, on the morning of October 12, Ginny pointed out, "Where are the Slytherins?"

Everyone looked, and sure enough, there were no Slytherins at breakfast. None showed up for breakfast or even lunch. The entire House finally showed up for dinner as a group.

"They're sitting . . . oddly," Hermione said softly.

They were indeed. Normally, the Houses sat roughly by year, youngest up near the teachers, the oldest back near the entrance. All 75 Slytherins were present, but seemed to be arranged in four groups of 6, 12, 12, and 45. Three Seventh years (Adrian Pucey, Miles Bletchley, and St. John Montague) along with two First years (Maurice Flint and Andrea Pucey) and Third year Margaret Montague sat at the far end, scowling. The second group seemed based around Malfoy (and included Crabbe, Goyle, Nott and Parkinson), the third around Head Boy Terence Higgs and Millicent Bulstrode and her friends Margot Rivers and Doreen Spinks. The largest group seemed based around the Pritchard brothers and Zabini.

"Lisa and I are supposed to meet with Daphne and Tracy tonight, to set up a study time for the entire Medical group the day after the dance," Hermione said softly. "If they show up, I'll find out what happened."

"We can guess as it is," Harry said, looking the group over.

"What do you think?" Neville asked.

"The smallest group are almost certainly pro-Death Eaters who still support Voldemort, although the younger three might still be saved. Malfoy's group are the pro-Death Eaters who like the program but aren't willing to follow him any longer."

Seeing some puzzled looks, he explained, "Voldemort was revealed to be a Half-blood, failed to kill me, failed to save some of their parents, and hasn't been heard from in months. They're probably all still waiting for some Pure-Blood messiah to come and sweep away all their enemies."

"Voldemort just isn't who they expected him to be," Hermione agreed.

"Like I said, he's a Half-blood, and that's not good enough, especially when he's not winning," Harry said.

"And Higgs, Bulstrode, and their group?" Lavender asked.

"They don't like us, they don't trust us," Hermione said. "They probably want to stay as neutral as possible." She paused. "If that's so, that's quite an improvement for Bulstrode."

"Of course, they could be divided those that want to kill us right now, those who want wait to kill us as soon as they get the order, those that will help them kill us, and those who don't care if they kill us," Ron pointed out.

"You're just a ray of sunshine today," Lavender said.

"How much verbal abuse have you taken from that lot over the years?" Dean asked, backing Ron for once. He turned to Parvati. "Your family has been magical longer than any of theirs by thousands of years. Do they accept you as a Pure-Blood, or are you another wog, or worse?"

"They've called me worse," Parvati replied, "or I should say some of them have. Tracy and Daphne went to Little Witches School with us, and have always been friendly, even after we came here. I know Bulstrode's been more than mean to Hermione, but the only ones that have ever said anything nasty to me have been Pansy, Malfoy, and Crabbe."



"The whole House isn't bigoted," Ginny piped up from down the table, "but that's the House that tolerates bigotry."

"Ginny's right," Hermione agreed. "Except for the near-universal bigotry against sentients that I see everywhere, the only bigotry I've ever seen in Gryffindor is some anti-Slytherin prejudice."

Before anyone could jump on those remarks, Harry intervened. "You're right. I've never heard a racial or ethnic slur in Gryffindor, other than people complaining about being insulted by Slytherins."

"I've heard a few," Seamus said, drawing everyone's attention, "even if people were saying them in fun."

"So have I," Dean said, "but nothing like I heard in school before I came here."

"Well, we should all watch our language. . . ."

"No more Irish jokes, please," Seamus asked.

"Or other ethnic jokes," Parvati added.

"How about 'these two Slytherins walked into a pub, one with a duck on his shoulder'?" Ron asked.

Silence descended on the table for an instant.

"Right. Let us know what you find out," Harry asked Hermione over the silence.

"I will, although I suspect you guessed right."

Harry had, as it turned out, guessed right. How that might affect things, both internally in Slytherin and in general, remained to be seen.

Friday, October 18, 1996

"You wanted to see me, Headmaster?" Harry asked, poking his head through the inner office door. Lupin had passed the message on to Harry at dinner that night. Harry had wondered if there as news to share about the strange actions of the Slytherins the previous weekend.

"Yes, Harry; come in please." Harry came in and saw that Professors Jones and Lawrence were there. "Councillor Myrddin asked that we meet. He is expected shortly. He asked Professor Spellman to meet him and escort him here."

Harry sat, refusing the offer of his choice of sweet. Harry instead entertained himself by talking softly to Fawkes while the two professors talked academic shop with the Headmaster. After nearly ten minutes, both Fawkes and Dumbledore looked up towards the door.

It was not Councillor Myrddin who came in, however. It was a broadly grinning Councillor Dorff, his arm wrapped around an equally-smiling Professor Spellman.

Dumbledore and the two professors welcomed Dorff back, while Harry exchanged a nod with him. Dorff started to sit in one of the armchairs, but Tabitha stopped him. She transfigured the two remaining armchairs together into a love seat for the pair of them. Dorff sat and Tabitha snuggled up together, making Dumbledore smile, Jones frown, and Dorff actually blush a bit.

"Tudor agreed that I should come brief all of you," Dorff finally said, after more pleasantries were exchanged. "I come with some good news and some bad news. The good news is, we managed to chase Voldemort out of Afghanistan. As best we can tell, he is seriously injured, and accompanied only by Bellatrix Lestrangle and perhaps a few Afghans. Part of the bad news is, we have lost all trace of him."

He took a deep breath. "We had a series of violent run-ins from the moment we arrived in early September. Some were with Voldemort's forces, some were with the Muggle Taliban, and a few were with local wizards who just don't like, let alone trust, anyone else. We made successful contact with the hidden Zoroastrian wizards, but they only form about a third of the small wizarding population. They are well-hidden from the Muggles and well-able to defend themselves from Voldemort, with just a little help from us. The others are really much closer to the general population. They have been under attack since 1980, first by the Soviet Muggles and then by the Taliban."

"But I thought most Moslems who know about us accept the wizarding community," Jones protested.

"Most do, this group doesn't. Voldemort tried to make contact with the regular Afghan wizarding population, but they didn't trust him, either. So, Voldemort did something that he thought was being clever -- he revealed the location of one of their hidden villages to the Muggle Taliban. He thought they would attack and he would appear and save them, thus creating a situation where they would accept him as their leader."

"What actually happened? Didn't the Muggles take the bait?"

"Oh, they took the bait alright! It's hard to believe Voldemort was raised Muggle during the Second World War! He should have some idea of what Muggles are capable of, even if he's a bit behind the times! He was apparently expecting a group would show up with a few old fashioned rifles at best. Instead, a group appeared with a dozen shoulder-launched missiles, and they all had automatic or semi-automatic rifles and some heavier weapons, RPGs and the like. They launched eleven of the missiles and six grenades into the village, and then two attack helicopters came in attacked the village with machine-guns and rocket-fire for half an hour. Then the troops when in and shot the few who were alive but injured. About a third of the village managed to apparate or port-key out."

"What happened with the twelfth missile?" Harry asked quietly.

"Very good," Dorff acknowledged. "The twelfth man was a young Muggle-born who refused to be trained for religious reasons. He saw through the simple concealments they had set up, because he saw a glint off to the side -- probably Pettigrew's hand. He then saw six figures there, only a hundred meters away, realized they must be wizards, and launched his missile right at them just as the others were launching theirs. They go far too fast for any human's

reaction time. If Voldemort were fully human, he'd be dead right now. As it is, he nearly bled to death, lost most of his left arm, and may never fully regain the use of his left leg. Pettigrew and the other four wizards were all killed."

"Can't he just give himself a new arm and hand, like he did Wormtail?" Harry asked.

"No," Dumbledore stated. He then explained, "That type of magic puts the wearer under the control of the caster to some degree. Voldemort can not put the spell on himself, and of course would not dare allow another to cast it on him. If it were merely a matter of power, don't you think Alastor Moody would have had me create a new leg for him years ago, if not a new eye?"

"I had wondered," Harry admitted. The group looked thoughtful for a moment.

"However," Dumbledore added, drawing attention back to himself, "Voldemort can reconstitute himself. He took his father's remaining bones when he fled the resurrection scene after your duel with him. He can use the bones to rebuild that body, although Pettigrew's flesh would have been better."

"I'll have our people check to see if his remains have been tampered with -- not that there was much that could be identified as him. If he hasn't, we'll destroy what's left. It was remarkable that Voldemort survived at all." Dorff stretched and then let his right arm pull Tabitha even closer. "Still, it's good to be back, although I'm not looking forward to seeing all the paperwork that's no doubt built up."

"It can wait until Monday morning," Tabitha stated. She slipped out from under Dorff's arm and stood. "You're staying here until then. Come on. Let's get the grime of Afghanistan off you." She held out her hand.

"I assure you I've showered a few times since I left, including right after I returned yesterday morning, Tabby."

"I'll find some place to wash, now come on!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Dorff said with a goofy smile as he stood. "Headmaster, professors," he nodded. He then turned to Harry. "Don't tell anyone except your five friends, and them only in private. This news will be released by the International Sunday afternoon. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Will I see you this weekend?"

"Yes. . . ." Dorff started to say, but he was interrupted.

"Maybe," Tabitha said. "We'll let you know. Come, Harry."

"Yes, ma'am," Dorff said with a smile, and he let her lead him out of the room.

## **Chapter 05**

No one had seen Professor Spellman or Councillor Dorff from the time they left Dumbledore's office Friday evening until they appeared for lunch on Sunday. On his way out from lunch to apparate back to London, he stopped by the Gryffindor table to murmur to Harry that he hoped to be back for at least one of the next three weekends (the third would be the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch game).

The news that Voldemort had been driven out of Afghanistan quieted the demands that power be transferred back to Fudge. The International was obviously more effective than the Ministry had ever been. Plus, while Voldemort was injured, the information that he would be able to reconstitute himself reminded everyone of the Ministry's failures in the first place.

The fact that Voldemort's location was unknown also helped to reenforce public opinion to decide they preferred to stay under the control of the International for the time being. The only objections were coming from the factions within the Ministry who had supported Fudge's rise to power and his refusal to acknowledge Voldemort's return. While numerous within the Ministry, they were still discredited outside of it, even by The Daily Prophet and the other establishment media.

Percy had learned enough to keep his opinions to himself, especially as he was trying to figure out what those opinions should be. When asked about the internal politics all this was causing within the Ministry, he merely pointed out that since he was not currently operating within the Ministry, he had no inside information, and if he did, he would be expected to hold it confidential.

Ron's only response was, "I suppose he could be worse."

While the news of Voldemort's defeat seemed to keep things tense within the newly re-ordered Slytherins for the next week, the rest of the students prepared for their Hogsmeade weekend. It was also at this point that Harry realized what the other Gryffindor students had been mentioning all term -- Snape was being almost reasonable. His point-taking in Potions was down, and if he still snarled at the various Gryffindors, he now seemed more bark than bite. Harry wondered if this was because his cover as a Death Eater had been blown, if it was to encourage the changes in many Slytherins' attitudes, if it was because Dorff had threatened greater oversight, or if it was just because Harry was no longer taking Potions.

Harry suspected it was a combination.

The sextet's matching cloaks caused a little comment, but not nearly as many as the number of adults who accompanied the group to Hogsmeade. Half the faculty, Tonks and most of the

aurors on duty at Hogwarts, and some others (recognized by Harry and his friends as members of the Order) went along. There were also a large number of North Americans in the village, and the sextet were unsurprised to learn they were sponsored by the International. It was easy to spot them, since they were all wearing blue berets, the symbol of the International.

The only store any of the sextet felt they had to visit was Honeydukes, and since that's where most Third years headed first they decided to give it an early miss. It was a rather raw and chilly day, so they went directly to the Three Broomsticks for hot butterbeer.

"It's been a good year so far," Harry said when he came back with their drinks.

"So far," Ron agreed. He was in a slightly mellow mood, with his left arm around Hermione, who was snuggling close for once, and his right hand on a drink. Even though his class work was difficult, nothing was as bad as Potions with Snape had been. Even Percy, Ron had to admit, tough taskmaster that he was, was at least perfectly fair.

"Shall we toast to our good luck, and hope that it may continue?" Luna asked.

The group agreed and raised their mugs. They nursed their drinks and had a second one, then ate an early lunch. As they were finishing their lunch, other students started streaming in. The sextet therefore broke up into two trios. The girls went off to buy some hair potion and magical nail polish, to help them prepare for the dance the following week. The boys headed off in the other direction. The two groups agreed to meet at Honeydukes in an hour.

"Why are we going here?" Ron asked as they walked towards Scrivenshafts.

"Well, we thought you might want to go in on this with us," Harry said.

"On what?"

"Ginny and Luna's birthday presents," Neville answered. "A package of parchment each, a quill, and a bottle of ink. Green ink for Ginny, that two-toned stuff for Luna."

"Is that all you're getting them?"

"Of course not," Harry answered in turn, rolling his eyes. "You and I will split buying Ginny's present, you and Neville will split Luna's, unless you don't want to. We'll each get our girlfriends something nice."

"No, I don't mind. I didn't know what to buy anyway."

"Where are we going now?" Ron asked a little later.

"I thought . . . Silverstones."

"Harry! Jewelry?"

"Why not?"

"Because if you two buy jewelry, I'll have to buy it, and to be honest, I don't know if Hermione would want me to."

"Well, we had an idea. Let us show you, and then we'll talk about it."

"Alright," Ron said cautiously.

"Ah, Mister Potter. I received your note," the proprietor said as they came in. He showed them a largish rectangular locket, which Ron first thought was silver but was told was 10 carat white gold. Inside was a tiny wizarding photo of the sextet which Colin had taken two weeks before, and facing it was just a photo of Harry and Luna smiling at each other.

"You have a good photographer," the man commented.

"We do," Harry said, referring to Colin. He turned to Ron. "We give these to the girls for the dance, along with wrist corsages. I'm sure Hermione will love it. I'm also sure that if she doesn't want any more jewelry, Hermione will say so. Luna and Ginny both wear their hair long, and usually, so far this year, in braids during class. We have matching barrettes and jewelry for their hair. We'll give them those and the ink Halloween night for their birthdays, and Hermione won't feel left out, because she wears her hair differently and it's not her birthday."

Ron was a little shocked at the price, but decided to let Harry pay for Hermione's locket and necklace, adding the price on to his debt. From there, the boys went on to Honeydukes. Since they had access to the twins' full inventory, they didn't feel the need to go to Zonko's.

The next day, Luna and Hermione had been asked to stay behind by Professor Lawrence. Ginny had asked if she should as well, and had been told she was welcome to if she wanted. The boys decided to ahead and raid Zonko's anyway. "You can't have too many dungbombs," Ron had said, which made all five of the others roll their eyes.

The girls had been told to come as if they were dressed and equipped for a school day. They followed Lawrence out of his office and deep into the dungeons of the castle. Outside a nondescript door, Lawrence had them drop their book bags and took their wands. Then he blindfolded them.

"This is the scenario. You have been kidnapped from Hogwarts, let's say by portkey. You see you have been kidnaped by Death Eaters, although that wouldn't really surprise you. You are then stunned. I'm putting you in the room now. . . . Now please sit straight down . . . and now lie down. When I shut the door, you may take the blindfolds off. I'll be back in two hours. We'll see what, if anything, you've accomplished."

"Accomplished?" Hermione asked.

"When I come back, I'll stun you if I can. Think of that as your immediate motivation. Your real goal is of course learning how to deal with this type of situation. Having heard what you lot have been getting yourselves into, this in a far from unlikely situation."

"You're going to stun us?" Ginny demanded in shock.

"If this were real, I'd be coming back to rape you, torture you, and then to kill you," Lawrence said harshly. "Be glad this is only a test."

"And what do you expect us to do?" Hermione demanded.

"If we didn't think you and Miss Lovegood had the tools to deal with this, you wouldn't be here. Miss Weasley is along because of her Gryffindor enthusiasm."

"Great," Ginny grumbled.

"See you soon."

The heavy door shut.

The three girls removed their blindfolds.

"Shit," Ginny swore, "it's pitch black in here! What do we do?"

Hermione almost giggled, remembering a similar problem. She could not resist. "Are you a witch or not?"

"What?"

"Oh!" Luna said. The others heard her sweeping her hand along the floor. Satisfied there was nothing on the floor that would spread the fire, Luna conjured a bluebell flame in her hands and then set it on the bare floor.

The flames revealed a largish, shadowy room. There was nothing in the room except the three girls, their rucksacks, and in one corner, a toilet on a raised platform.

"Not much to work with," Ginny commented.

"I don't think we'd be put into a no-win situation," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"The question is, then, what can we do with just our brains and our school supplies," Luna said.

The girls spent five minutes working on the door, but it was solid. They couldn't break it down, or burn it, without their wands (bluebell flames wouldn't even burn the skin, let alone burn through a door). Then, for over twenty minutes, they checked for any secret passages or other way out. They found none. With that, they all sat and thought for ten minutes in silence.

After that, they just shot out ideas for over an hour, trying to think of any way to ambush anyone who opened the door. None were likely to result in any more than one of them from escaping, assuming only Lawrence returned.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes. Then Ginny asked, "Why wouldn't matter if I were here?"

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"I didn't have to be here for this test, so what do you two have that I'm not contributing to?"

The three looked puzzled, then Luna said, "Maybe it's not what we have, but what we know."

"Meaning?"

"Ginny studies Muggles and Creatures, I study Muggles, Runes, and Divination. You're Muggle-born, so that likely eliminates Muggles, since Ginny could help there. You and Ginny have studied Creatures as well, but there don't seem to be any here. That leaves Runes, Arithmancy, and Divination. Professor Spellman mentioned that Professor Lawrence knows even more about Runes than she does. What runes could we use?"

"There aren't any inscriptions here!" Hermione protested.

"No, but runes and symbols may be used to store and use power, and you've read ahead on how to do it. That could be the answer."

"But how could we inscribe runes?"

"Do they have to be inscribed, or can they be written?" Ginny asked. "We have ink and parchment."

"I don't think parchment would do much good. It can't store a spell, even if we could cast one," Hermione pointed out. They sat, thinking hard for several minutes.

Then Hermione realized, "We could draw the runes on the floor! Stone will hold the power, if we could figure out a way to cast a spell."

At that point, the door flew open and Lawrence said, "On the right track, but too late." He pointed his wand at Ginny, "You're raped, tortured, and killed." He moved on to Hermione, "You're gang-raped, tortured even more, until you die from the torture." He pointed at Luna, "You're tortured, raped, and used as bait for Harry. Since you finally got on the right track, however, I won't bother to stun you."

"What's the right answer?" Hermione pleaded.

"What is the easiest way to empower a symbol?"

"A spell," Hermione and Luna answered together.

"What's the hardest?"

"A potion," they answered.

"And what's the most effective?"



"Blood," Luna said softly, leaving Hermione gaping at the answer.

"But . . . but that's illegal!" Hermione protested.

"If you want to die for that legal principle, I can't stop you," Lawrence responded.  
"Remember, however, we're talking defensive magic here, not Dark Magic. Whose blood would you use?"

"Our own?" Hermione asked.

"Are you asking me or answering me?"

"Answering," Hermione decided.

"Very good. Now, here's what you would have to do. It's nothing you don't already know, you just never put it together from all the different bits and pieces you've been taught. If you'd had another day or two in solitaire, you probably would have worked it all out completely. As it was, you would have had the outline in less than another hour."

The three witches sat and learned for the next two hours. Should such a scenario arise, Luna and Hermione would have more options than they had thought they would have had just a few hours before. Ginny would be prepared to help them. Luna and Hermione also agreed to go for extra tutoring.

On their way out of the dungeon, Ginny asked, "Are there any runes or whatever that offer protection?"

"There are runes that can be inscribed, usually on amulets and such, but they often cause more harm than good."

"In what way?" Hermione asked.

"The amulet may protect you from one curse, or even a type of curse, but it would open you up to other attacks."

"What would protection against possession open you up for?" Ginny asked.

"The amulets that would protect you from possession would open you up to the Imperius Curse, and vice versa."

"Is there no way to protect Ginny from both?" Luna asked.

"Why?"

Ginny blushed, but Hermione pressed on and told Lawrence the full story of the Chamber of Secrets. Lawrence thought about the events for a moment, and then told the girls, "See me tonight at Six. Bring Mistery Longbottom and Weasley as well."

"I understand that three of you have had the Imperius Curse put on you in class, and one of you was possessed. With your permission, I will test you against both and see if you have any resistance to either."

"Why us, and why not Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Why not Harry? Because he is resistant to both, especially the Imperius. Now, we probably can't do much for you two," he said, pointing to Luna and Ron. "Anything I did would disturb any abilities in divination and second sight."

"I don't need that," Ron groused.

"You never know, Ron."

Luna showed fair resistance to the Imperius, and could not be possessed at all. Ron, on the other hand, showed some resistance to possession, but almost none to the Imperius. Hermione showed only a little resistance to both, while Ginny had none to either. Neville, to everyone's surprise, showed the most resistance to both.

Lawrence sent Neville, Luna, and Ron away, saying he would report his findings to Dumbledore and Dorff. He then outlined to Hermione and Ginny about what would have to be done if they wanted to avoid the problem entirely. It seemed almost a drastic solution, but although shocked, they decided they wanted to at least explore their options, and so gave their permissions for Lawrence to talk to their parents, Dumbledore, and Dorff.

Thursday, October 31, 1996

"What's wrong, Ron?" Harry asked as they sat down to the feast. "You've acted odd all day. Someone put an itching spell on you or something?"

"No . . . something just feels . . . off-centered. Like there's someone stalking me just out of sight, or a storm is about to break." Ron turned his attention to the piles of food in front of him, but Harry could see that he was still very tense.

"Maybe it's just because some Halloweens haven't been . . . good," Seamus suggested.

"That's probably it," Ron agreed, but Harry and Hermione exchanged a look which said that they knew Ron hadn't bought that explanation. Neither had they.

The feast seemed to go off well, although Ron was now acting more and more nervous the entire time. When the feast ended, Harry went over to Luna. "What's wrong?" she asked. She could see as well as feel how tense and worried Harry was.

"Ron's been . . . jumpy all day. It's getting worse."

"That doesn't sound like Ronald."

"You know, Dumbledore must have asked him to continue Divination for a reason," Harry said thoughtfully.

"There is Professor Lawrence. Perhaps it is time to test how much they trust your intuition."

"You might be right."

The pair approached Lawrence, who was speaking to a wizard that could almost pass for a brother.

"Ah, Harry, Luna. This is my good friend Lloyd Trowbridge."

"Good evening," Harry said politely. He frowned. "You were one of the North Americans walking the streets of Hogsmeade last weekend, right? In fact, it looked like you were directing things Sunday."

"Very good, Mister Potter. Yes, I'm coordinating the Hogsmeade defenses."

"Pleased to meet you. Professor. . . ?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"This will sound strange . . . but Ron has been feeling . . . off all day."

"Off as in sick?" Lawrence was obviously confused.

"No, sir. Off as in jumpy and nervous. As if something is about to happen, and it's getting stronger."

"Ronald is a seventh son of a seventh son," Luna added.

"Well, it wouldn't be unprecedented date for an attack, would it?" Trowbridge remarked to Lawrence. He turned to Harry. "We were all here in '81."

"We were, and you're right," Lawrence agreed. He turned back to Harry. "Yes, this has always been a favorite date for him to attack, so there is already a heightened alert for tonight, but since we have absolutely no idea where Voldemort is, or what orders he might have left or transmitted, we're totally in the dark."

"Ron has made some off-hand accurate predictions before," Harry said as he thought things through. "So have I, for that matter. I thought that might be why the Headmaster asked Ron to continue Divination. None of them were really about events too distant, in time or. . . ."

"Proximity?" Luna supplied, since Harry seemed to have been stuck.

"Exactly. And I've never seen it this strong, either." He hesitated and said. "Maybe I've been around Ron too much, but I feel it now, too."

"There's not much more we can do in Hogsmeade," Trowbridge said.

"I'll speak with Dumbledore," Lawrence said thoughtfully. "I think we should do some extra patrols tonight. If anyone or anything attacks the castle, we can repel it. If any student does anything, well, we might not be able to stop it, but we can stop it from spreading too far."

"I don't understand," Luna said.

"If you wanted to kill one of your roommates while they were asleep, no one could stop you," Harry said.

They all suddenly shivered, as if they had shared a shock. Harry, Luna, and Lawrence then all went very still, their eyes wide. Trowbridge nodded his agreement.

"Where would it be the most likely?" Trowbridge asked Harry.

"Slytherin," Harry answered without thinking. On reflection, he knew the Ravenclaws were still suspicious of the Clique, and some of the Hufflepuffs were keeping their eyes on a few suspect people. The tensions in Slytherin were the ones that seemed to be getting stronger.

Lawrence spoke with great deliberation. "Lloyd, go with Harry to take Luna back to Ravenclaw. Notify Flitwick on the way. Then go with Harry to Gryffindor, notifying McGonagall along the way. Stay in the common room. Tell any students you meet to get back to their common rooms."

"Even the Slytherins?" Harry asked.

"Use your best judgement, Harry. Go!"

They went.

They didn't run into any other students. Still, between the distances and having to brief Flitwick and McGonagall, it was more than half an hour later before Harry led Trowbridge into the Gryffindor common room.

Lloyd sent most of the other students to bed, but asked Katie Bell and Andrew Kirke, as Head Girl and the Seventh year Boy's Prefect, to keep an ear out for a while. Neville went as well, to help quiet the First year boys, who were still on a sugar high. Lloyd sat at a chair near the fire, while Harry sat opposite him. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny sat near by.

"What shall we do while we wait?" Ginny asked.

"If you don't mind, Mister Trowbridge," Hermione asked, "could you tell us how you ended up in Hogsmeade this autumn? If it's not classified, that is?"

"Tabby hasn't told you much of her service here in Eighty and Eighty-one, right?"

"No, sir," Harry answered. "When we met she said . . . how did she phrase it?"

"That she would tell us once we all got to know one another," Hermione supplied.

"That's right," Harry agreed. "And she said a few weeks ago she would sit down and tell us the full story over the Christmas break."

"The story really centers around her and Tudor Myrddin," Lloyd said thoughtfully. "Those two, Henry Dorff, and Tom Lawrence were Green dragons. That's where students who have elements of Hufflepuff and especially Ravenclaw and Gryffindor would be placed. Miss Granger here would likely have been made a Green, from what I hear. Tabby was a year ahead of Tom and myself. I was a White dragon, equivalent to your Ravenclaws. Toby was a Blue, a Gryffindor, if you will, a few years behind us. Tom and I became close friends our Sixth year. He was a Muggle-Born interested Potions and especially interested in ritual magic. I'm from an Old Colonial family, interested in magical and Muggle history, so we helped each other out. We went to New Orleans to study, magic at the Vieux Carre and Muggle history at Tulane University. We shared a little place, what's called a shotgun house, in an area called the Ninth ward."

"Tabby was always interested in the rise of Voldemort. She had newspaper clippings and such going back through her Second year. Tom was a close friend of hers, so I got to know her as well, and he and I both read her scrapbooks. We even helped her with them a few times."

"My older brother wanted to be an auror, but he didn't have high enough N.E.W.T.s. He went into the sersiants. They're better trained than your security guards, sort of a combination of security guards and constables. Even the smallest villages have at least a sersiant or two, for example. Well, he was working at the Capitol, and he and some of the other sersiants found out that the Confederation was, well, let's say encouraging a few aurors to take some leave time to come over and help out Dumbledore, all off the books, of course."

"Well, the teams over here in 1979 got nearly wiped out in a firefight. When my brother learned some new teams were going to be assembled, he mentioned it to me -- I'm really fascinated by British Muggle history for some reason, and had been here on my own a few times. He wondered how hard it might be for him to get a team of sersiants accepted for the fight. He and I came up with a plan and presented it to Tudor, who was in charge of the new teams coming over, just before Tabby and Tom recruited me."

Lloyd's expression turned very sad. "I came over part-time in February, 1980, full-time in May. From then until the following Easter, we were hammering Voldemort's Death Eaters pretty hard." He brightened slightly. "I was the supply officer. I supplied five groups, one pretty large, with food and such. One group. . . ." He looked around. "If I'm going to tell you any of this, one of you should get Mister Longbottom."

"I'll get him," Harry volunteered

## **Chapter 06**

"As I was saying," Lloyd Trowbridge continued after Neville came down and was brought up to speed, "one of the groups had four aurors, including Henry Dorff and Tobias Jones. There were also four intelligence officers, two from our side and two from the Order. Tabby and Tom were ours. The Order's were Alice Longbottom and Lily Potter." That caught everyone's attention.

"Alice was never really happy, because she was an auror and wanted to be out in the field with Frank. Still, when we arrived, they were both starting their eighth month of pregnancy. Neville here was due in late July, and Harry here in early August. As it was, Alice was a few days late and Lily a few days early. Poppy delivered both of you at the house in Whinging. . . ."

"Where?" Harry demanded.

"A little Surrey town called Whinging. You know it?"

"The Dursleys . . . my mother's sister, that is, live in Little Whinging."

"Right, that modern snooty sub-division across the canal."

"Let me guess," Harry said, "the haunted house near the Methodist chapel?"

"Right you are! Now we didn't see much of either of your fathers, they were both active in the field. The Muggles never knew anyone except Tabby and Tom were staying there, by the way."

For the next two hours, Lloyd kept the students entertained with stories of the First War which did not involve Tabitha, Henry, Tom, or Tobias too directly, and stories of growing up in a Confederation wizarding village and life in New Orleans.

After that, Neville, Harry, and Ron gave the girls their presents. The two girls loved their lockets, and predicted Luna would enjoy hers as well. Ginny also liked her birthday presents.

Finally, though, Harry backtracked. "Mister Trowbridge, what went wrong after Easter, 1981?"

Lloyd gave a sigh. "That's when the Death Eaters started taking their own back. By July, we knew there was a leak somewhere. Then the sersiants were attacked, with only three survivors, plus myself, and we were pretty well injured. By September, Dumbledore had insisted that James take you and Lily into hiding. Don't ask me why."

Hermione noticed that Harry obviously knew why, and wasn't saying.

"They went into hiding, and for a few weeks I was supplying them with food as well. Then Dumbledore had me supply them food for six months, in preparation for the Fidelius. He

wanted the three of you to hide away for a while, not just hide the house. It was cast in early October. I guess Voldemort waited for Halloween to make some sort of perverse statement."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. At that point, McGonagall came in and said that Lloyd and Harry were wanted.

It had taken Tom Lawrence less time to reach his objectives than Lloyd and Harry, in part because Dumbledore, Jones, and Snape were standing in the corridor, talking. It took less than two minutes to explain the potential problem. Dumbledore looked concerned, Jones interested, and Snape doubtful.

"You think we should act in a way which will disturb my House, upset the students, and possibly sow the very dissent you hope to stop, all because Weasley's hormones are too active and Potter was affected by them?" Snape demanded. "Maybe, just maybe, if either had made some sort of real prediction. . . ."

"Is it worth the risk in case his feelings are pointing to a problem? and you must admit this is a very likely scenario," Lawrence pointed out.

"Well, one possible scenario," Snape admitted reluctantly. He sighed. "Very well, come along." The other three followed Snape and Dumbledore towards the Slytherin common room in the dungeons.

Just before they arrived at the entrance, Snape and Dumbledore stiffened in pain. "What is it?" Jones demanded.

"Some one has cast a major curse," Dumbledore said. "Only the headmaster and heads of Houses can feel the wards . . . scream. From the intensity, it must have been several Unforgivables or a major battle that only lasted a few seconds, or both."

"Shit," Lawrence muttered.

"It is still going on," Dumbledore stated, anxiety in his voice.

Snape had opened the entrance, so they hustled through the common room. There was screaming and the sound of hexes ahead of them as they turned into the boys' dorm area. They heard a screaming voice shout out "AVADA KEDARVA!", followed by more screams and hexes.

It took the four men some time to sort out the casualties. Lawrence had sent a firecall out to some of the other faculty as soon as he was sure the fighting had stopped. Spellman, Sinistra, Hooch, and Vector showed up quickly thereafter, along with Madam Pomfrey.

A little before midnight, Harry sat in on a meeting with the heads of Houses, Spellman, Jones, Lawrence, Trowbridge, Dorff, and Myrddin in the Headmaster's office.

"Why is he here?" Snape demanded as Harry and Lloyd came in.

"Because I sent for him," Myrddin answered.

"That does not answer my question! It's improper for a student to be here!"

"Why?"

"**Why!?**"

"Why."

"You **must** be . . . joking!"

"Do I **look** like I'm joking, Mister Snape?"

"No," Snape had to admit, "you don't."

"I may want input from all of you. Tobias?"

"As best we can reconstruct what happened, Adrian Pucey, Miles Bletchley, and St. John Montague returned to their rooms after the feast. There were only five Seventh year Slytherins because two of the prospective seventh years did not return this year. The remaining two, Terence Higgs and Graham Pritchard, came in after the first three. At that point, two of the three sent the Death Curse at Higgs and Pritchard. The other boys in their rooms heard, of course." The Death Curse can not of course be cast quietly.

Dumbledore took up the story. "John Pritchard, the Fifth year security prefect, set off the alarms, but by then we were already at the entrance to the common area. A general melee was going on as we approached. Two other students decided to take the side of the attacking trio -- Vincent Crabbe, a Sixth year, and Jason Babcock, a Fifth year. We had thought both Crabbe and Babcock had moved away from their pro-Death Eater stance to the slightly less radical position of Mister Malfoy."

Snape interrupted the Headmaster. "Crabbe always did as he was told, but may have just been caught up in the excitement. I'm sure the subtleties of the differences between the trio and Malfoy were too complicated for him to understand. Babcock is a very cruel young man, and likely just saw the chance to cause pain."

"Possibly," the Headmaster agreed. "In any event, three of the five attackers were stunned. Twelve other students were injured, six rather seriously. Mister Crabbe was killed. Pucey was splinched as he tried to take a portkey out. Apparently the new anti-portkey ward Professor Spellman created over the majority of the castle worked well."

"Thank you," she said. "Madam Pomfrey and I managed to put him back together again. He will be unconscious for a day or two, however."



"Were there any disturbances of any kind in the other Houses?" Myrddin asked. The three heads of the other Houses shook their heads. Myrddin turned to Snape and Jones. "Have you determined who killed Crabbe?"

"Draco Malfoy," Jones said, while Snape winced.

"Was he under a direct threat, an indirect threat, or did he kill to cover his own complicity?" Myrddin asked.

"Or because this Crabbe acted without orders?" Dorff added.

"There is no way to tell," Snape stated through clenched teeth. "And as he is underage, he may **NOT** be subjected to any truth potion."

"Does that suggest you believe him guilty of deliberate murder?" Dorff asked.

"No, it does not. It merely reminds you of what you may or may not do," Snape retorted.

"Then you are mistaken about my authority," Myrddin said. He turned to Tabitha. "What kinds of truth potions do you have readily available?"

"Now you wait right there!" Snape shouted, standing. Dorff easily made him sit back down.

"Councillor," Dumbledore stated, steel in his voice, "Professor Snape was correct. You may **NOT** use a truth potion on a minor!"

"No, Professor Snape was incorrect, as you are. We operate on the International's rules, rather than the normal British ones. We may not use any evidence obtained by a truth potion in court when used on a minor. We may use it to obtain the evidence of his guilt or innocence, and if guilty we may establish that guilty by other means."

"No," Dumbledore stated firmly.

"Yes," Myrddin stated, equally firmly.

"He has International practice on his side," Tabitha said after a few minutes of silent confrontation.

"Even if he confesses his guilt, we cannot touch him until it is proven by other methods," Dorff reminded Dumbledore.

"Ask him first," Harry said quietly.

"What?" Snape demanded.

"Ask Malfoy to take the potion voluntarily." He turned to Snape. "What's your objection, anyway? You. . . ." Harry stopped there for a moment. He decided not to reveal Snape had once threatened him with a truth potion. Snape had, after all, also substituted a placebo when Umbridge had wanted to use it on him. "I don't like Malfoy, but I don't think he would have been stupid enough or sadistic enough to kill Crabbe just because he could, or for the fun of it. And he wouldn't kill Crabbe to cover up that he was involved. Believe me, he would have

been the first person to try and portkey out if he had been involved. He either killed Crabbe because he felt threatened, or because Crabbe joined in without orders. Probably both. That might give him some muddy motivation, but it wouldn't make him legally guilty, would it?"

"The first or third alternative? Considering his age, no, probably not," Myrddin agreed. "The second, yes, that would be murder."

"Very well," Dumbledore said. "Harry, please return to Gryffindor. Do **not** speak of this until after noon tomorrow, and even then only to your five friends. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

The non-Slytherin students were all called into the great hall early the next morning. They took the announcement of the attack with varying degrees of shock. A few even seemed more upset that the dance had been canceled for that night than they were over the attack.

"It's a good thing wizarding culture is different than Muggle," Hermione commented as they ate afterwards.

"Why? Or should I say how?" Ron asked, puzzled.

Hermione turned to Colin and Dean. "What would happen in a school if three students came in and shot some of their classmates and then a general gun battle erupted?"

"There would be inquiries for a start," Colin said.

"Inquiries?" Ron asked.

"Not just about why they had done it, but how they'd gotten the weapons, and how they had smuggled them in," Dean told the interested wizard-born students. "There'd be a chance the school officials or teachers or house masters would be dismissed. The scandal in the Press could be horrible."

"But here, let's face it -- we all carry lethal weapons," Hermione continued. "There hasn't been more than a twelve year period in Hogwarts' history where there hasn't been at least one student murdering another, and it's been almost twelve years since the last one."

"So you're saying we were due?" Ron asked.

"No, I'm just saying it's not terribly unusual. It's not like Dumbledore or even Snape will lose their job over this."

"Snape probably thought he could control things," Harry said.

"Did any of us ever think those three would commit outright murder on their fellow Slytherins?" Hermione demanded.

"No," Ron had to admit. "Against about anyone else, maybe, but not their own dorm mates."

"Well, it's not like they just snapped," Seamus pointed out.

"If it were, we'd have killed you and Weasley long ago for snoring," Dean pointed out.

That raised a weak collective giggle.

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Snape growled as he passed them. He had just brought most of his House in to eat breakfast. "For lack of respect."

"How about a thousand from Slytherin for murdering each other?" Seamus muttered.

**"WHAT DID YOU SAY, POTTER?"** Snape demanded. Silence descended on the hall.

"I didn't say anything, Professor," Harry said quietly.

Snape could tell that whomever had said it had been sitting someplace away from Harry Potter. Uncertain of his ground, Snape didn't dare do anything with the eyes of Potter's latest group of fans looking at him from the dais -- Dorff and Myrddin were not only still at the castle, both men had stood to observe what he was doing. "If I was certain who said that, I'd put you in detention for the rest of the year," he snarled, and then stalked off.

"You know he had ears like a bat," Ginny hissed up the table.

"Sorry," Seamus muttered.

"Where's Ferret-boy?" Ron wondered. It had not been announced that Malfoy had killed Crabbe.

"Probably doesn't want to face everyone," Harry said around a mouthful of crumpet.

"Harry, swallow first, then talk. I swear, you're almost as bad as Ron."

Harry and Ron rolled their eyes, but said nothing to Hermione. She waved Luna over and poured her some hot chocolate. Harry was always better behaved when Luna was there.

That morning, a little after 11:00, Harry was called into Professor Spellman's office. Henry Dorff was alone, sitting at her desk and writing out a report. "Come in Harry. Just for your personal information, Malfoy did it largely because he was terrified."

"Terrified?"

"Yes. This Crabbe was one of his followers, right?"

"Right. Him and Goyle, and Nott to some degree."

"In his mind, it was like having your private attack dog attacking without your command. He was afraid Crabbe was going to turn on him, and there was some evidence that it could have happened."

"So Crabbe wasn't attacking him?"

"No, not directly, but Crabbe had just attacked others and was turning on Malfoy. Would he attack, or by-pass Malfoy? Crabbe may not have used the Killing Curse, but Malfoy didn't know that for certain, and others certainly had."

"Malfoy should still have used a stunner, right?"

"Right. He's been removed to the Ministry for trial. Considering he was attacking partially in self-defense, and his age, we'll settle for probation for some kind, which is the most the Court will impose, since Fudge is arranging things."

"Fudge will want to give him a medal," Harry warned.

"He probably will, but he's already been removed from Hogwarts until his trial," Henry said. "It won't work. We can't have people casting Unforgivables at will. Rather takes some of the meaning of the phrase away."

Harry sighed. "I cast one."

Henry stopped writing, but didn't look up. Harry explained in detail what had happened.

Dorff sat in silence for a few moments and then finally set down his quill. "How do you feel about having done it, looking back," he finally said.

"I needed to hurt her," Harry said. "It was wrong, but I had to try. She had tortured my friends, she had killed Sirius. If I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have tried to cast it, but I still would have tried to hurt her badly."

"Has Tabby told you much about our time here, back in 1980 and 81?"

"No, sir. Mister Trowbridge told us a little, but both he and Professor Spellman have said they'll explain more over Christmas. Why are you trying to keep this a secret from me?"

"We're trying to keep it a secret from everyone who doesn't need to know, and we'll need to tell you when you have time to think about what we say. We will include you, Harry, I promise."

"Yes, sir." Harry was obviously unsatisfied.

"Tell me, Harry, have you ever seen a baby born?"

"No, sir," Harry answered, startled.

"I held you and Neville in my arms when you were each under an hour old. So did Tabby, Tom, Toby and Lloyd. We swore to protect you then. We -- Tabby, Tom, Tudor, Lloyd, and myself -- swore a stronger oath to protect you and Neville when you were sent into hiding. I hold your life as sacred and valuable as my own daughter's, Harry."

Harry was stunned.

Dorff went on. "When your parents were murdered, we all swore an oath to avenge you. We thought we had been forestalled, although not foresworn, when the Ministry caught up with Sirius Black before we did, although we now know he was the wrong target. Tudor and I fought political battles and pulled strings like you wouldn't believe to get this assignment. If the entire story comes out to the public, the Ministry will be forever discredited, there will be political upheavals all around the magical world, especially in the Confederation, and Dumbledore will be totally discredited and destroyed. We intend to tell you, because you and Neville have a right to know. Please, don't ask us yet."

"Alright." Harry wasn't certainly why all those things would come to pass, but took Dorff's word for it.

"I shall make certain a pardon for all actions you undertook at the Battle at the Ministry is entered onto all your records. I think you should talk with someone about the feelings that made you strike out like that. It would be best if you could do so sooner and more often than I can. Consider talking with Remus or Tabby."

"Yes, sir."

"If you need to hear someone say it, I forgive you, Harry. Come here." Dorff rang a small bell, and an elf Harry didn't know appeared.

"Please bring me a small bowl, a little extra virgin olive oil, and a cup of red wine."

"Yes, Mister Councillor, sir," the elf squeaked and disappeared.

"Take off your robe and shirt," Dorff commanded.

Mystified, Harry complied.

When the wine and oil appeared, Dorff poured a little of the oil into the bowl. He said a series of prayers and spells over both the oil and wine.

"Please get on your knees, Harry, and shut your eyes. Now tell me, do you regret trying to use that curse?"

"I do," Harry admitted. He had felt twinges of guilt ever since he had used it.

Dorff marked Harry's forehead, eyelids, lips, and over his heart. "Open your eyes and drink some of the wine."

As Harry did so, Dorff said another incantation, and then added in English, "You are relieved of all legal and residual guilt. Learn your lesson, and do not repeat the transgression in anger, hate, or ambition."

"I will do my best." To his surprise, Harry felt much better.

"And we will do our best for you, Harry Potter." Dorff looked at Harry. "Have you told anyone about the Prophecy?"

"Luna knows, but I never actually told her, and I gave Neville a general idea. I don't think he's told Ginny."

"Luna knows from the Dreamwalking?" Harry nodded. "It's easy to share with the one you love that way. You should tell the others. They know you're at the center. They deserve to know the details."

"Yes, sir. Maybe we can all tell our secrets at the same time."

"Touché," Dorff said with a smile. "We'll try and show up for your first Quidditch match."

"It will probably have to be canceled."

"Delayed a week or two, not canceled," Dorff said.

"Did you play?"

"Tudor and I were both beaters, although not at the same time, of course. We'll enjoy seeing you play."

That afternoon, before anyone could even think about heading off to dinner, Harry had all the Gryffindors meet in the common room. "I know, many of us wanted to go to the dance tonight. Obviously, it is still canceled. The House tables are still going to be moved however. We'll be sitting in groups of twelve. Try and sit with people from other houses."

"Who are you going to be sitting with, Potter, other than Luna Lovegood?" Jack Sloper asked.

"Goyle and Bulstrode," he answered, which certainly surprised a lot of people. "Dumbledore will propose a toast to the slain Slytherins. Remember how we felt when certain Slytherins sneered at Cedric Diggory's death? Well, Higgs and Pritchard were no Cedric Diggory, but neither were they Death Eaters. They died because they were standing up to the Death Eaters. Let's show our respects."

That night, every student stood to show their respects.

## **Chapter 07**

The Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match was finally played a few weeks late, on November 23. Both Myrddin and Dorff both came to see the game. Ravenclaw-Slytherin was pushed back well into December, as both were totally disorganized. Crabbe's death was one reason for Slytherin's problems. Malfoy had managed to hang on as seeker, despite being on academic as well as legal probation, but was replaced as captain.

Cho Chang had been named the Ravenclaw captain the previous summer, and she had decided to totally remake the team in her image, much to the anger of most of the House. She and the chasers were all part of the Clique, while the keeper and beaters were dating the chasers.

The three weeks had hurried past, and were only remarkable to the general student population for Draco Malfoy's return to the school on November 9. It was quickly clear that no one cared to associate too closely with Malfoy after his return. Even Nott, Goyle, and Pansy were keeping their distance from him.

"Nothing like being a convicted murderer to show you who your friends are," Ron had stated a few nights later in the common room. Only Hermione and Ginny had noticed that Harry had winced.

As far as the sextet were concerned, Ron, Neville, and Luna had started their training to fight off the Imperius curse. Harry's special training continued, as did Occlumency training for all of them.

Game day itself was a decent day for Quidditch. Although it was just above freezing, it was a bright day with little wind. It was quickly clear that in many ways the two teams were fairly even. Gryffindor's offense, the three chasers, were superior to Hufflepuff's, but the Hufflepuff beaters were more experienced. Ron was also getting a bit too involved in yelling plays and suggestions, which allowed the Hufflepuffs a few extra scores when Ron was caught out of position. Harry managed to catch the snitch by out-climbing the Hufflepuff seeker just after the second hour of play had started, giving Gryffindor a 330-180 victory.

Harry had of course planned on going straight back to the common room after dinner to celebrate (he had spent the time before dinner celebrating with Luna). Professor Lawrence came up to him as soon as Harry and Luna had come into the great hall for dinner to tell him that Myrddin and Dorff wanted to talk with him at 6:30 in Dumbledore's office, although he wouldn't even give Harry a hint why he was wanted. The two Councillors had already congratulated him, after all.

Harry was slightly surprised to see that it was indeed just himself, Dumbledore, Myrddin, and Dorff. "Good evening, Harry," Dumbledore greeted, "Congratulations on your win. We shall not keep you from the victory party long."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore."

"We need to start thinking about your Yule break," Myrddin said.

"In what way, sir?"

"Well, you probably remember we wanted you to visit your aunt's for at least a day or two. Your friend Neville may go with you, if you and he are both agreeable. You then have three basic options, since I'm sure two days at your aunt's will be more than long enough for you. First, return here for the majority of the break. Second, stay at Grimmauld Place. Third, come a training trip we'll arrange for you, and we'll also tell you the stories Tabitha, Lloyd, and Henry have promised to tell you."

"Where?"

"That would be classified until you get there. Any of those options would include three other arrangements: just yourself; just yourself and Neville; or yourself and all five of your friends. That is initially up to you, and then between yourself and them."

"No matter what options you take, do think about how your friends would feel if you leave them behind," Dorff added. "I know you feel the need to protect them, but they do provide you with a wonderful support system."

Harry thought about that, then said, "If you can't tell me where I'll be training, can you tell me what type of training I'll be doing?"

"No, other than it will involve your getting prepared to confront Voldemort, and that we think all of your friends would be able to help you."

Dorff jumped in again. "Which assumes you would like to help us go on the offensive at some point. If you prefer to continue to train defensively, as you have, then choose one of the first two options."

Harry opened his mouth, but now Myrddin forestalled him by raising his hand. "I know, Harry. You would likely wish to go on the offensive. Still, you should think about it."

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who said, "I believe you shall have to face Voldemort sooner or later, Harry. I believe it would be best to be later, but it may take this training at some point for you to win."

"Why can't I know what this training is?" Harry asked.

"We are exploring several options. If any of them works, it will awaken powers inside of you that cannot be put back into a dormant state," Dorff answered. "If you do not wish the training, we do not want you doing this on your own."

"I suggest you talk with Ms Granger first," Dorff went on. "Ms Lovegood will wish to come no matter what. Ms Granger will be able to take a more impartial view of your situation."

"I suppose," Harry agreed.



"Oh, and here," Myrddin said, holding out a large cardboard box. Harry looked puzzled. "Twelve bottles of American sparkling cider. Non-alcoholic, of course," he assured Dumbledore. "You should have something fizzy to celebrate with."

"Thank you, sir." Harry took his leave.

"We didn't over-sell it, did we?" Dorff worried.

"Over-sell it'? Interesting phrase," Dumbledore commented. "No, no I don't believe so. It must be his free choice, after all. As you said, he will want to go for the training in any event. This way, he will think things through first."

"And Snape and Jones are prepared to start in on the Patronus training for the rest of the students?" Myrddin asked.

"Yes, during the last fifteen minutes of each dueling club. Since the dementors are all we know for certain Voldemort has left, he will try to use them sooner or later."

Harry's sparkling cider added an extra note of cheer to the celebrations, which started from the moment he had stepped back into the common room until just after 9:00. It was a little before 9:00 when Harry was able to sit down with Hermione and explain what the meeting had been about.

"We'll all want to be with you as much as possible," Hermione said with a shrug. "I'll find out what others have in the works, and try to sound out Professor Lawrence."

"You're spending an awful lot of time with him, especially since you don't have a class with him."

"He's teaching Luna and myself quite a lot about ritual magic. It really is a powerful, and neglected, subject."

"Alright," Harry said.

"Harry. . . ?"

"H'mmm?"

"Was I missing some subtle sub-meanings of Quidditch strategy, or did Ron . . . did Ron almost blow the game today by not paying attention to his job?"

"You rarely miss much, and I think you misinterpret even less."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"I thought I might talk with Katie before the next practice. If I don't, she'll tear him a new one."

"Don't talk with him about it tonight," Hermione suggested.

"No, I won't." At that moment, he saw Hermione's eyes go wide.

"Don't talk to me about what?" Ron demanded from behind them.

Harry joined Hermione in staring at Ron.

"What shouldn't you talk to me about tonight?" Ron demanded even more loudly, causing silence to fall over the common room. He had been eavesdropping for some time and wasn't going to back down now.

It was Katie who came to the rescue. "What did you think about today's game, Weasley?"

He turned on her. "It want okay. It wouldn't have hurt if you chasers listened to my directions a bit more. We could have scored at least three more goals. The beaters seemed even more deaf to directions."

"Oh, is that what you think?" she replied. "Well, you may be right. On the other hand, if you had yelled about half the amount of directions, it may have been easier to for us to follow at least some of them. And, if you hadn't been yelling so much, you might have stopped at least a few of the six goals you were out of position for."

"Really? If you wanted to be captain, then you shouldn't have let me do it!"

"Why yell at her when she's right? Or is that why you're yelling?" one of the beaters demanded.

"**QUIET!**" Harry finally shouted. "There are two ways to look at today's game. One, we won, and we played fairly well for our first game as a team. On the other hand, it wasn't a great game. The chasers need to practice their passes a lot more, the beaters need to work our end a bit better, Ron has to pay a bit more attention to the Quaffle and less to the rest of you, and I need to work on my patterns. When we practice, we'll work on all that. Tonight, we should be happy that all the work we've done paid off, and I think a lot of the credit for how well we did do goes to Ron. So, to Ron!"

The common room rang with the Gryffindor cheers, but Harry could see Ron was still bothered.

The party broke up a short while later, and Harry stayed to help Katie, Hermione, and Ginny clean up. "Why do the girls' prefects always get stuck cleaning up?" Hermione complained.

"Because the boys basically don't care enough to do more than a half-ass job, and when we bully the younger students into doing it, we end up having to straighten out what they break trying to magically clean anything," Katie replied.

"Ron's probably waiting for you," Ginny said to Harry quietly over the resulting argument between Hermione and Katie.

"Probably," Harry agreed. "If not tonight, then tomorrow."

"Don't quit as co-captain to boost his ego, Harry," Ginny advised.

"He knows more about strategy than I ever will," Harry pointed out.

"And he's about as motivating a leader as Snape with a toothache and hemorrhoids," Ginny retorted.

"I know," Harry said in a depressed voice.

"You're the leader, Harry. I know you hate it. I know you don't want it. But YOU are the leader."

"Thanks a lot."

Ginny reached up and kissed his nose. "You're welcome."

Sure enough, Seamus, Neville, and Dean were no where to be found when Harry went into his room.

"So, you think I suck as a captain and as a keeper, huh?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Right, that's why I had everyone toast you. You know perfectly well that everything I said was true. . . ."

"There's no part of your flying that you need to work on."

"Thank you for your opinion. I happen to value it, because I know you know what you're talking about. But even though you're a good keeper, even though you know more about Quidditch strategy than any two people in Gryffindor, this was the first time you captained a game. You played like it was a practice. You need to pay more attention to the game and less to the players. Even my first year, Wood didn't shout out a quarter of the directions that you did today. So you're not perfect -- no one is, Ron. Now, you can sulk and whinge, or you can say, 'you know what, I played a darn good game, but I'll be better next time, and I'll give fewer and clearer directions.' You have to decide which. I can't. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay! Shove your opinions up your arse." Ron stalked out of the dorm. A few seconds later he heard Ron and Hermione yelling at each other in the common room. By the time Harry made it down the stairs, the room was empty except for a crying Hermione, who was in the arms of a wide-eyed Ginny and Lavender on the stairs to the girls' dorms.

Harry went over to add his hug around Hermione, and then the two girls led her up to her room. Harry went up and changed into pajamas, his dressing gown, and slippers and then went to sit by the fire to wait for Ron to cool off and come back. Harry knew if he followed, even if he saved Ron from Filch with the cloak and map, it would just make Ron angrier. Harry swore that if Ron got into trouble, he wouldn't feel guilty.

A very angry Ron Weasley stormed through the deserted corridors of the castle. He was angry, mostly because Harry had been right, and that it hurt so much that he had played so poorly even Hermione could see it. He was hurting, and he had hurt Hermione, and probably hurt Harry. He wished he could hurt someone before he hurt himself.

"Well, if it isn't the keeper who can't keep his mouth shut."

"Well, if it isn't the murdering son of a death eater."

Over four hours after he had first sat in front of the fire, Harry was woken from his light sleep by the portrait opening. Harry turned, wondering what kind of mood Ron was in, when he saw it was McGonagall.

"What's happened?" Harry asked.

"Harry Potter," McGonagall stated formally, "you have been requested to appear as witness for and supporter of Ronald Bilius Weasley as he appears before the Temporary Ministry Council acting as the Wizengamot. If you accept this charge, change into formal robes and prepare to leave immediately. Do you accept?"

"What?"

"Those are your choices, Mister Potter. Say yes, and change into your robes in a hurry, or say no. I am allowed to say no more, although if you wish to help Mister Weasley I suggest you just throw your robes on and put on shoes."

Harry looked at McGonagall and then ran off to his room to change. He was back in less than five minutes. McGonagall's jaw was set when he came back, and she said nothing while she escorted him to the part of the castle where the new anti-portkey ward did not extend. She then activated the portkey, and they left Hogwarts.

Harry was very nervous even before he left. Finding himself back in the atrium of the Ministry did not lessen his nerves. These feelings increased as he found himself being led back to the very courtroom he had been tried in. Two aurors, wands drawn, relieved McGonagall and Harry of theirs (there had been no one on duty at the main desk) and let them in.

And, in the very chair where death eaters had once been tried, sat Ron, well strapped in and looking terrified. He was only in his boxer shorts, and there was something brown painted on his chest, which Harry later learned had been a truth potion.

Sitting in judgement were all the members of the Council, except for Dumbledore and Arthur Weasley. Arthur and Molly Weasley were in the gallery, and Molly had been crying. Dumbledore was also there, as were Jones, Snape, Filch (both of whom were looking rather triumphant), and several Ministry officials. As the testimony went on, other people quietly entered the courtroom as well.

"Mister Potter, do you stand for Mister Weasley?" an African wizard (Councillor Anadi) asked.

"I do," Harry answered in a puzzled voice. "What. . . ."

"In a moment, Mister Potter. Please tell us the emotional state of Mister Weasley the last time you saw him."

Harry answered carefully, uncertain if Ron's being angry should be down-played or emphasized. He had obviously done something very wrong, and Harry didn't want them to think Ron was so angry he just wanted to hurt someone, or cold-blooded enough to do whatever he had done in cold blood.

"Thank you, Mister Potter. Just to be clear, Mister Weasley did not appear to leave for a prior engagement?"

"Absolutely not," Harry stated firmly.

"How can you be that certain?" Anadi asked.

"Ron isn't that good of an actor. He could have slipped out without making any sort of scene."

"I see. Thank you, you may find a seat. Now, the last witness." Anadi pulled a pair of wands out and said, "Prior Incantato." A sickly green light flashed. Harry looked at Ron, slack-jawed. It was the Death Curse, although it seemed as though Ron had missed.

"Let the record show a missed Killing Curse was indeed the last spell performed by the wand of Draco Malfoy," Anadi stated. Harry was now even more confused, although he saw Snape wasn't looking as pleased.

Anadi addressed the rest of the Council. "To sum up, Draco Malfoy, convicted of one only partially justified use of the Death Curse and on probation, was not seen by any in his House after Nine o'clock last night. He left after engaging in several arguments. Ronald Weasley stormed out of his House common room shortly after losing his temper with his team mates and girl friend shortly after Nine-thirty."

"At Nine-fiftyfive, Argus Filch reported a major duel going on near the entrance hall. The two faculty on duty, Severus Snape and Tobias Jones, came on the scene and witnessed Ronald Weasley attempt the Killing Curse on Draco Malfoy. It missed, but was partially reflected back at Malfoy, who was at that point crouching near a wall, knocking Mister Malfoy unconscious. Ronald Weasley stated under truth potion that Malfoy started the argument, cast the first curse, and used the Death Curse first. A test of Malfoy's wand showed that it had last cast the Killing Curse."

Harry gave a sigh of relief. Ron hadn't used the curse first, and Malfoy hadn't been killed. Ron was in trouble, but not as much as Malfoy had been, and was again.

"Perhaps we should see all the hexes Mister Malfoy used," Dorff suggested.

"It seems unnecessary," Anadi said. "We already have the evidence from Weasley's wand that he didn't use a major hex before the Killing Curse."

"Exactly. I want to know how much restraint Mister Weasley showed before losing his temper. And should anyone be thinking of asking for mercy for Mister Malfoy, that might help or hinder his case."

Fudge and Snape looked very disappointed with that idea. Malfoy's wand soon proved that they had had every reason to be pessimistic, as many of his attempted jinxes and hexes were, to say the least, questionable.

"Who votes Ronald Weasley guilty of the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy, with or without mitigating circumstances?"

The entire Council who were voting (they were all present, and all voted except for Arthur Weasley and Dumbledore) voted guilty.

"Who votes mitigating circumstances?" Here they all raised their hands except for Fudge.

"Who wishes to speak before we consider the sentences for Ronald Weasley or Draco Malfoy?"

Snape stood up.

"We recognize Severus Snape, Head of Draco Malfoy's House at Hogwarts, and his godfather. Speak for the family."

"I will not ask for clemency for Draco Malfoy. I do ask, however, that the long-standing mutual rivalry between the two boys be kept in mind. I believe it would be . . . fair that their sentences, whatever they may be, be similar."

Even Harry saw this as a back-handed attempt to get Malfoy a lighter sentence.

"Thank you. Anyone else who wishes to speak against leniency for Mister Weasley? No? For leniency?"

Harry and Molly both stood up. "Harry Potter."

"I just wish to say to the Council that while Malfoy and Ron have, as Professor Snape said, disliked each other from the time they met on the Hogwarts Express for the first time, I have **never** known Ron to start any arguments or fights with Malfoy. In every case, Malfoy has started the argument by harassing Ron, myself, or someone else. Ron doesn't start fights, and I don't think I have to remind you that Ron was dueling someone whose wand shows was fighting dirty, and who had already killed one student this year. I don't think defending yourself can be too harshly punished. If it means anything, I'll stand for Ron in any way that helps."

Molly Weasley again stood up and made an emotional plea for her son, and then the Council stood and left whispering -- until everyone heard Fudge state, just before he left the room, "I'm just saying we can't be seen as giving one of our own favored treatment."

A somewhat nasty looking auror kept anyone from coming too close to Ron, so after Mrs. Weasley thanked Harry for his help, they had nothing to do except wait. Severus Snape wisely kept to the other end of the room.



## Chapter 08

Sunday, November 24, 1996

"Do these trials always happen this quickly?" Harry asked Dumbledore, "and why is the Council trying Ron?"

"They happen this quickly whenever possible, especially whenever murder or attempted murder is involved, to prevent things from escalating, and because it is one of the options the Weasleys' had. Arthur no doubt believes the Council will be fairer than the regular court, since I would not be able to preside and a number of those who might have been the most likely available to serve do not care for Arthur or dislike the Council in general. Remember, Minister Fudge sat in judgement of you."

"Oh. What's the worst that could happen to Ron?"

"In theory, he could have his wand snapped for ten years and be sent to Azkaban for three, but I cannot see that happening here, considering the circumstances."

"Oh. I was just wondering what they are going to do to me, when I kill Voldemort."

"This will be different."

"Why? I mean, Malfoy, a convicted killer, tried to kill Ron, so Ron tried to kill Malfoy. Voldemort, who we all claim is a mass murderer but who has never been convicted of anything let alone anything worse so far as I know, will try to kill me and I will kill him or die trying. The differences are too subtle for me to see anything automatic about it."

At that point a young official that Harry vaguely recognized as a Hufflepuff who had left two years before came up and whisked Dumbledore away. Harry looked around and saw there were a number of people who had come in. Meanwhile, Arthur came over and took Dumbledore's place next to Harry.

"I've been told Ginny, Hermione, and Neville Longbottom are here. Molly doesn't think they should be allowed in. What do you think, Harry?"

"No, don't let them in if you have the choice," Harry said firmly.

"At this stage, we do. But why not let them in? Molly . . . is rather too upset to explain."

"Think of how humiliated Ron feels, strapped down like that," Harry said. "Ron is proud. That's what set him off tonight. I wish I hadn't. . . ."

"It's not your fault, Harry," Arthur said. "I swear to you, on the lives of all my children, you are **not** responsible."

"I only hope Ron agrees," Harry answered sadly. "But please, don't let Hermione see him like this. It would tear him down even more."

"Alright. I'll send out a note to Ginny, asking her to stay with Neville and Hermione. She could get in if she really wanted to, but she should keep the others company."



The group sat quietly, all very tired from the lateness of the hour, for nearly ninety more minutes. At that point, the inner doors opened, but instead of the Council coming in, it was Draco Malfoy. He was also strapped into a chair, but he was gagged as well.

"What is the meaning of that!" Snape demanded of the guard who was levitating the chair.

"Can' keep 'is ruddy gob shut," the guard snarled. "Wan'ter join 'im?"

Snape recoiled as if slapped. Ron managed a smirk but wisely said nothing.

The doors opened again, and the Council came in, although Dumbledore did not return.

Myrddin started right in as soon as they were settled. "Draco Nero Malfoy? Oh, take the gag off! If he spouts off again, **then** silence him. Draco Nero Malfoy, you have been found guilty of unprovoked attempted murder and the use of numerous spells, hexes, and curses forbidden to those underage against Ronald Weasley. You have broken the probation set up by the full Wizengamot. Guard, snap his wand."

Harry thought there would be some kind of explosion, or sparks, or something, but it was as if the man had just snapped a stick in half. "You are forbidden a wand for three years. You are expelled from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and forbidden to enroll in any other. You may not undertake any further magical training of any type with or without an apprentice contract without prior approval by the British Ministry of Magic for ten years. You are forbidden to exit the island of Great Britain for any reason for ten years. You are forbidden to learn to apparate for ten years. You are confined to the property known as Malfoy Manor until your seventeenth birthday. Should you break any of these restrictions, you will be jailed for ten years in addition to any other penalties which may be assessed. You are also fined five thousand galleons in blood money, half to be paid to the Weasley family."

Malfoy sat there, gaping in shock.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley, while you had total justification in defending yourself against Draco Malfoy, the attacks would have been best countered with a stunner. Considering the evidence of Professor Jones on your relative abilities, Mister Malfoy should not have been a serious threat to you." Malfoy winced at that.

"You were obviously toying with him, hoping to both incite and humiliate him." From the way Ron hung his head, and from what he had seen in the dueling tutorials, Harry knew that was likely true. Malfoy knew an awful lot, but he wasn't half as good as Ron at applying what he knew. "Had Malfoy been a danger to you on the order of, say, the Dark Wizard calling himself Voldemort, it would have been a different story. As it is, two instances of students using the Death Curse in one term is far too many, and the British Educational Laws and Regulations require us to apply a stiffer sentence than we first at first wished to impose." All the sitting Council members gave Fudge a dirty look at that, which made Fudge wince.

Myrddin took a deep breath, and looking rather upset he had to do his duty. "Ronald Bilius Weasley, you are expelled from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, forbidden to attend any other school in Britain or Ireland, forbidden to use your wand for twenty-four

hours, and fined two sickles of blood-money, one to be paid to the Malfoy estate. Let this be a warning to all other students in Britain and Ireland. This session of the Council acting as the Wizengamot is ended. Guards, take Mister Malfoy to his cell until arrangements can be made to transport him to Malfoy Manor. Mister Weasley is to be released into the custody of his parents."

"Councillor?" Snape asked, standing.

"Yes, Mister Snape?"

"I would be willing to escort Mister Malfoy."

"Very well."

As soon as the pair was leaving, Myrddin nodded and a guard started to undo Ron's restraints. As soon as he was released, he was embraced by Molly and Arthur. A few seconds later, they were joined by Hermione and Ginny, who had finally been allowed in.

Neville came up and nudged Harry, and they approached the group together. Ron saw Harry coming, and he moved forward.

"I so sorry, Ron."

"So am I, Harry. I'm sorry I yelled at you last night."

"I'm sorry if I said the wrong thing."

"No, no, I was wrong," Ron mumbled. "I was mad at myself and took it out on everyone." He slumped against his father from mental and physical exhaustion.

"I thought that was supposed to be me," Harry teased. Ron managed a wan smile.

An active and elderly man approached them accompanied by Dumbledore. "Arthur, Molly, Ron? This is my friend Hugh FitzWilliam, Headmaster of the Ysgol."

"Well, Mister Weasley, how would you like to attend the Ysgol?"

"What?" Ron asked, looking up, dazed.

"We're transferring you to the Ysgol in North America," Dumbledore said.

"You mean . . . I can finish school?"

"Well, I hope so," FitzWilliam said with a smile. "If you come along now, we'll have you in class by tomorrow morning."

"Now?" Ron, Molly, and Hermione asked.

"It would be best," Dumbledore said. "The quicker the less publicity."

"Oh . . . alright," Ron said. He hugged his parents, Hermione, and Ginny, and after a moment's hesitation, he hugged Harry. When Harry went so far as to hug Ron back, Ron finally lost his composure and left in tears.

Harry came down the stairs to the common room a little after 11:00. He found it empty except for three Second years scribbling quietly in a far corner and Hermione and Ginny, sitting before the fire. Hermione was crying, and it was clear Ginny had been.

Harry came up to them and hugged them both. He felt bereft, knowing that Ron was thousands of miles away. Harry sighed.

"None of that," Ginny stated. "This is not our fault. What fault there was belongs to Ron and Malfoy. Harry, your temper has been getting better since your birthday, and Ron's has been getting worse since the term started."

"We should have done more," Hermione sobbed.

"You and I tried," Ginny said.

"I didn't really notice," Harry said guiltily.

"I know, and we should have pointed it out," Ginny said. "Now, Ron's going to be lonely without us and we're going to miss him, but it's not like he's in prison, or even under house arrest like Malfoy. He's at a wonderful school, and I'm sure we'll see him next summer."

"Maybe before," Harry said.

"Huh?"

"They want me to go for extra training over Christmas."

"Just you?" Ginny asked.

"No, all of us can go if you want to," Harry said. "Hopefully Ron will be there, too."

"And if our parents will let us," Hermione added, her tears ending. "Your parents might not want you to go now."

"Maybe not, but we'll find a way," Ginny said. "I'll talk with Neville. Harry, you talk with Luna. Now, we're going to go to lunch, and our heads will be held high, because except for the last thing Ron did, he did nothing wrong and he only did that under provocation."

"I still can't believe they expelled Ron," Hermione said, obviously not for the first time.

"Especially since Malfoy only got probation for killing Crabbe," Ginny added bitterly.

"Well, first we had the attacks, and now here was another case of students using the Killing Curse," Harry reminded them. "Pucey, Bletchley, and Montague are in Azkaban for life."

Babcock is in for fifteen years. Just think -- how else could they show that using the Killing Curse at school won't be tolerated?"

"They shouldn't have let Malfoy back in the first place," Ginny stated.

"You're right, of course," Hermione agreed.

"It wasn't the Council who allowed Malfoy back -- it was the Wizengamot, and you can bet a lot of Malfoy money was spent to make certain he wasn't punished too harshly. And I bet Fudge pushed to punish Ron and let Malfoy off easy."

Ginny stood. "Come on. We all missed breakfast."

Harry stood and helped Hermione to her feet. "Come on," he said. "We'll collect Luna and Neville, and we'll talk about Christmas." Ginny put her arms around Hermione's waist, and Harry his around her shoulders and the trio of Gryffindors made their way down to the great hall.

After lunch, Neville, Ginny, Harry, and Luna were standing besides one of the great doors on the inside of the room. Luna suddenly broke in on Ginny by pointing towards the front of the hall. "I think we all know what she'll be asking."

The quartet saw Hermione approaching the Headmaster. "Come on," Harry said.

"Are you sure we should?" Neville asked.

"Yes," Harry stated. "She needs to know we'll be here for her, and we'll support her either way."

"Yes . . . I think you're right," Luna agreed.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"May I speak with you privately, Headmaster?"

"Yes, you may, or you may have your four friends there as well," Dumbledore said with a nod.

Hermione looked in the direction Dumbledore had indicated, and wasn't really surprised to see her remaining best friends coming for her. She turned back to Dumbledore, "But. . . ."

"Think of all the times you have warned Ron and Harry to wait and think, Miss Granger. This is one time where you need to listen to your own advice." He turned to the approaching quartet. "Come along, students." Dumbledore led them back to his office.

All the students refused any sweets and merely sat down and looked at the Headmaster. "You are all angry, and you feel betrayed. You are upset because Ron was treated so harshly after Mister Malfoy was initially allowed to return to Hogwarts. Unfortunately, Ronald Weasley was caught in a set of rules which have not been invoked for a great many years -- there was a time when students often dueled to the death in the halls of Hogwarts. Even I had forgotten that penalties must go up after the first instance of an actual death -- these laws, applied to all the schools, were written to prevent duels from escalating into open feuds and vendettas. Minister Fudge revealed them to the Council, hoping that since they wanted to impose a lighter sentence on your friend, they could then be forced to impose an equally light sentence on Mister Malfoy, ignoring the rules altogether. Once they were told the special laws which applied, however, they would not circumvent them, to Minister Fudge's surprise."

Hermione was puzzled. "How would Fudge know, sir, if you didn't remember?" She frowned. "Come to think of it, I don't believe it was in Hogwarts: A History, either." Hermione seemed very aggrieved over that.

"I am not certain," Dumbledore said. "It was last invoked when I was a Second year student. I remember how a House Prefect explained it to us, since he was the one who dug up the rule."

Dumbledore sighed. "He was a great one for knowing all the rules. He was later the second head of the MLES."

That reminded Harry of someone, which set off a chain of reasoning and memories. "I bet I know then," Harry said viciously. "Have any of you read a book called Prefects Who Gained Power?"

Dumbledore frowned, and said, "No. I shall be back in a moment." He quickly came back with a small book, and muttered a phrase. A few moments later, the book opened itself to two places. "You were correct, Harry," Dumbledore said after reading the two passages. "How did you know?" He obviously didn't think it likely Harry had read the book.

"Know what?" Ginny demanded. "Who wrote the book?"

"I don't know who wrote the book, but I do know one person who's read it," Harry said.

"Who!"

Harry took a deep breath, and said, "Percy."

**"I'll kill him!"**

"Ginny!"

**"I'LL SHRED HIS FACE AND FEED IT TO HAGRID'S PETS!"**

"Miss Weasley, please don't kill or injure anyone, especially a faculty member. You would suffer more than expulsion."

"I didn't see Percy there," Hermione reminded Ginny, trying to calm the seething girl down.

"Neither did I," Harry added.

"Actually, Mister Weasley is coming, so we can ask him," Dumbledore stated, and sure enough, a few seconds later, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in!"

It was indeed Percy Weasley, a very wild-looking and harried Percy Weasley at that.

**"IT WAS YOU!** Ginny screamed. She launched herself at Percy, looking like she was going to rake his face to ribbons with her nails. Neville and Harry grabbed her as she passed, and only held on her by hugging her tightly between them, her arms trapped at her sides.

"I didn't know, Ginny!" Percy shouted. "Minister Fudge firecalled me in the middle of the night. I didn't know it was Ron! **I swear** I didn't know!"

Ginny suddenly stopped struggling and stood perfectly still. "Would it really have made any difference, Percy? Excuse me," she spat, "**Professor** Weasley, **sir**."

"Why didn't any one wake me up?" Percy demanded.

"There was no time," Dumbledore answered. "Minister Fudge would have called his hand-picked Wizengamot and imposed the same sentences on both your brother and Draco Malfoy, despite the great differences in most of the actions and their situations, and the minimum required their expulsion from Hogwarts. You know perfectly well that the Minister may demand an immediate trial for murder or attempted murder if he deems it in the public interest, which he did. That power is left intact under a Council, although the Council may also initiate an immediate trial."

"So he used me?" Percy asked, amazed.

"Yes, Percy, he used you," Dumbledore said frankly. "He used you to punish your brother. He punished your brother to punish your father and to embarrass the Council and myself. He succeeded."

"And he used me to do it. . . ." Percy said in a small voice. He collapsed into a chair.

"Of course he did," Hermione said, almost snarling. "It made his manipulations all the more satisfying! Haven't you realized yet that he's been using you since the end of the Third Task?"

"That's not fair!"

"But it **IS** accurate," Hermione insisted, "and you should finally admit it!"

Percy sat up straight, pushed his glasses up his nose, and took a deep breath. "Professor Dumbledore. . . ."

"No," Dumbledore said kindly, "you may not resign, Professor Weasley. You have agreed to serve for at least this school year, and I know you will keep your word. Now, I agree what was done to your brother was not totally fair. With one exception, everyone on the Council believes so as well, but it was what the law required." Percy winced at that. "I would hope you all realize how much effort it took to secure young Ron's immediate transfer to the Ysgol."

"How did that happen so quickly?" Hermione asked. "I mean, considering the distances involved. . . ."

"No one felt put out by the exertion, although it was not easy, and a number of us will be answering questions to various authorities for many days, perhaps many weeks."

"Why the Ysgol, instead of one of the minor schools here, Professor?" Luna asked.

"Ron was banned from attending school in Britain," Hermione reminded her.

"And any of the minor schools would be under Ministry supervision and pressure. We feel it here, and we, unlike they, are self-governing. Ronald would have been in a vulnerable position in any school in the British Isles. The Ysgol is well-protected, politically as well as magically. While he may feel homesick, I assure all of you he will be accepted."

Dumbledore turned to Hermione. "I believe you were going to request a transfer to the Ysgol?" Hermione nodded. "Please talk over the possibility with your parents, and if they support your exploring the idea, with Professor McGonagall after Christmas."

"Yes, sir."

Percy looked at Harry. "I knew being your friend would hurt Ron."

Ginny took two steps forward and slapped Percy so hard his glasses flew across the room.

"Miss Weasley, leave the room!" Dumbledore ordered.

"This isn't a school matter, sir," Ginny hissed, "this is a family matter."

Percy stood and looked down at his sister. "She's correct, Headmaster. And I was right. Being friends with Harry has hurt Ron."

"Yes," Hermione said, "it has, although it was more Ron's temper than his friendship with Harry that got him into this particular trouble. Even if that friendship had been totally responsible, however, it was a price Ron was willing to pay. It's a price that I am willing to pay. It's the price that needs to be paid to help Harry stand up to Voldemort."

"Harry doesn't have to stand up to Voldemort!"

"He does, Percy," Dumbledore said. "In one way, it is a choice we must all make. In another, Harry is Voldemort's most immediate target. We can only protect him to a relative degree. In some ways, Harry must learn to protect himself, and his friends help him bear that burden."

"I never asked Ron to stand up with me," Harry said.

"I know," Percy said, slumping back into the chair.

"I want to live a long, happy life, Percy," Hermione told her old mentor. "I can't have either, if Voldemort wins. The way I fight is by helping Harry. If that means I suffer or sacrifice, or even have to die to make certain other people live those long, happy lives, then I'll do it. I've made my choice. I'll fight. Ron made his choices."

"Don't blame Harry because Ron got caught in a side-issue," Neville said.

"Where will you stand, Percy Weasley, when you are asked to make a stand against evil?" Luna asked. "Will you take an active stand, or will you continue to be a passive follower of others, of those who represent order instead of those who represent right?"

Percy looked at Luna, his mouth open in amazement. "I . . . I don't know."

"I have a feeling you will have to decide soon," Luna told him. "You will have one more chance to follow your family, to follow your heart, or to follow the easier path and allow others to decide for you."

Luna walked over and picked up Percy's glasses. She held them out. "Decide where you are going." She looked at Harry and the others. "We shall follow Harry. Shall we retire to the study?"

They all nodded. As they started to leave, Ginny turned to Percy. "I don't want to lose you forever, Percy." The five students left.

Percy sat, looking as the door closed.

"It's up to you to decide if your pride will allow you to ever reopen the doors to their hearts, Percy," Dumbledore told him. "You are a brilliant and talented wizard. Only you can decide your path."

"I know." Somehow, that did not seem at all comforting.

Monday, November 25, 1996

Ron woke up to bright sunlight and a light knocking on a door. "What?" he managed to say.

He heard a door open and an accented voice say, "So, you're finally awake!"

Ron sat up, confused. "Where am I?"

"You were pretty out of it when you came in yesterday morning, and they had you running around all afternoon," the voice said. Ron saw it was a teen his age and almost his height, with equally red hair and bright hazel eyes. "I'm not surprised you slept twelve hours. The Headmaster said your memory might be hazy."

"Where am I?" Ron asked again.

"Let's see," another voice said. This boy was shorter and had messy black hair and blue eyes, "zooming in on things, you're in North America, in the Muggle state of Maine and wizarding zone of Newton, at the Ysgol. This is the Blue Dragon boys' dorm area, and you're in your bedroom, which is part of a three room suite. Normally, you don't get a single room in a suite, but the Headmaster asked us to move into the other bed room yesterday, and to help show you around."



"I'm Bill Jefferson, that's Leroy Trowbridge," the redhead added.

Ron remembered why he was here, and fell back on the bed. "Oh, shite."

"Ah, I see you remember," Leroy said. "Get dressed if you want breakfast. It's a little before Eight, and we have Charms at Nine. Bill and I are the only two students who know the story, so just stick close to us, okay? At least one of us will be in each of your classes."

"Okay . . . toothbrush?" Ron managed to say.

"FitzWilliam said our set-up is slightly different than Hogwarts. Get dressed and we'll show you the bathroom. And hurry up! I'm hungry!"

"Bill, you're always hungry."

"This is so weird," Ron said to himself.

The House of the Blue Dragons was very different than the Gryffindor Tower. There were two small towers, one each for First through Fifth year boys and girls. The Sixth and Seventh years were on two parallel corridors, with the towers behind them and a complex of common rooms between them.

Ron was surprised at the size of the castle and grounds. It wasn't as eclectically built as Hogwarts, and was even larger. There was also a much larger staff. Ron was surprised to learn that all five of his teachers (he wasn't taking Regulations at the Ysgol) had also taught Dorff, Spellman, or Lawrence. Marcus Williams was his Charms teacher, Awstin Llwyd taught Creatures, Richard Lazlo DADA, Lowri Buddug Divination, and Cadi Sior Transfiguration. All seemed more informal than most of their Hogwarts counterparts, although Ron would learn that was partly due to the luck of which professors he had drawn.

Ron quickly made friends during his first week. The flying instructor (and head of the Greens), Peter Bredon, even recruited Ron to help referee some of the junior Quidditch matches and to coach the Second year Blue flyers. In short, although Ron missed his friends, especially Hermione and Harry, and Quidditch, Ron found he fit in moderately well. There was no Snape, no Malfoy, no older brothers' reputations to compete against, no Harry to be over-shadowed by.

Ron started to enjoy himself. He missed everyone, of course, but he really liked his new situation.

## Chapter 09

Monday, November 25, 1996

"Percy looks like he had a worse night than we did," Hermione commented the next morning.

"Good," Ginny and Harry said together. They looked at each other. "Maybe he'll finally realize what he needs to do," Harry suggested. "He can't just back an authority figure."

"We'll see," Ginny answered.

"Mail," Neville pointed out, to distract everyone.

"Shit," Ginny muttered.

"Ginny!" Hermione admonished.

"You should know perfectly well what the main story is going to be in The Prophet!"

Hermione sighed. An owl dropped her copy off. "I suppose you're right."

"Well?" Ginny demanded a few minutes later, as Hermione hadn't said anything as she scanned the newspaper, although her expressions were changing a great deal.

Hermione looked up. "It's . . . odd. It's as if there are three different newspapers here. There's a fairly factual account, which is strange in and of itself." The Daily Prophet rarely missed a chance to mix editorial views within its news stories. "About a third of the related articles seemed to be trying to justify Fudge's position, and are trying to both excuse Malfoy and attack the Council. Most of the others are attacking Fudge's position and defending Ron and the Council."

"Look at the by-lines," Luna said, looking up from her own copy. She had decided to sit with Harry and her Gryffindor friends this morning, as the Clique seemed too happy to see Ron gone. "The ones attacking Ronald and the Council are those that have been defending the Malfoys and Fudge all along. The others are all either being more reasonable, or are toadying up to the Council."

"Maybe this means Fudge will be gone soon," Lavender suggested from across the table.

"Maybe, but it won't help much," Harry answered. "I just wonder why Fudge screwed Ron. I mean, I thought he was cooperating."

"Cooperating, but not joining in," Hermione pointed out. "Remember, it appears as if a majority of the population like the Council, but a majority of the Ministry doesn't. If Fudge can drive the Council out, he might be able to stay in as Minister."

"And he must stay on. After all, the goblins will be after him the moment he leaves office."

"Luna, this isn't about those goblin pies again, is it?" Hermione demanded.

"Whether or not you believe that about the Minister or not, I assure you the goblins hate him," Luna said with dignity.

"That I'll believe," Hermione said. She glanced at her watch. "Come on, it's almost time for Charms."

Saturday, November 30, 1996  
The Ysgol

"So," Bill asked Ron, "how has your first week been?" The three boys were sitting in the small study room between their two bedrooms. Bill was a beater on the Blue dragon Quidditch team and he and Leroy were on the dueling team. Bill and the rest of the Quidditch team had spent the early afternoon putting Ron through his paces (because Ron had done a little boasting about his abilities). While transfers were barred from playing Quidditch their first year, Ron had a good chance of becoming at least the reserve keeper his Seventh year, if he was still at the Ysgol then.

"It's been busy," Ron admitted. Even without the Regulations course, there was a lot of academic adjusting for him to do. Other than flying that afternoon, about the only non-school related thing he had done all week was sending a note to his parents and what was basically a copy to Hermione and Harry, and he wouldn't have found time even for that if the Headmaster himself hadn't reminded him to do so that morning. "I hope next week is easier."

"Well, it's a big adjustment," Bill pointed out.

"And a fast one," Leroy added, and then went on, "Did you finish that letter the Headmaster wanted you to do?"

"Yeah. I had been trying to find the time all week. I did one to my friends, too."

"You haven't talked much about your friends," Bill said.

"They're the best, but they're over there, Ron said, a little sadly. He also didn't want people asking about Harry, for a number of reasons -- from not wanting to talk about the famous side of Harry's life to worrying about saying too much about the parts that should be kept quiet. He decided to divert attention. "Are you related to Lloyd Trowbridge?"

"He's my uncle." Leroy turned to Bill. "I told you about my uncles, right?"

"Yeah, they went off to fight Voldemort in 1980. One was killed and one came back." Ron didn't think he'd ever get used to the casual use these people made of 'Voldemort'.

"Right. Aunt Betsy and my cousins all live in the Capitol, and won't visit when Uncle Lloyd is around. He's not around too much, though." Leroy turned to Ron. "We live in a wizarding town called Carantouan, which is about . . . some 500, 550 miles or so to the southwest of here. We were some of the first Old Colonial families in the area, back in the 1780s. My older brother, father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great great grandfather are all magical instrument makers. Uncle Lloyd owns a small cabin on a mountain outside of town -- and the mountain, for what little that's worth."

"How'd you meet him?" Bill asked. Ron was suddenly embarrassed. He wasn't sure how to explain the set-up in Hogsmeade.

"Uncle Lloyd works for that governing Council the International set up." Leroy looked at Ron. "He's at some place called Hogsmeade, right?"

"Right, that's the village less than a mile from Hogwarts. He works with the sersiants the International have stationed there. He was at our Halloween Feast."

"Maybe he'll be home for Christmas," Leroy said.

"Maybe he'll visit here," Ron said a bit wistfully. He knew it was unlikely he would be going home for the holidays.

"Maybe Rina will take you home with her," Bill said with a smirk.

"Rina? The red-headed chaser? The one with the large . . . well. . . ."

"Yeah, she's pretty stacked for a thin Fourth year," Bill agreed. "She's so thin she looks even more stacked than she is."

"If she heard either of you, she'd hex you."

"Well, she is top-heavy, and she was making eyes at Ron," Bill teased.

"She's nice," Ron allowed.

"She'll probably be staying over," Leroy said.

"Really?" That peaked Ron's interest. "Why?"

"Yeah, why? She's never stayed over before," Bill commented.

"Both her parents are in Britain, too," Leroy said simply.

"Who are they? Maybe I met one of them."

"Her mom is Tabitha Spellman. Isn't she teaching at Hogwarts? And her dad is. . . ."

"Henry Dorff?" Ron said. He wasn't so sure if it was a good idea to return the flirtatious Rina's attentions now or not.

"Right."

"Why doesn't she use her father's name?" Bill demanded, smelling scandal.

"Her dad was a hit-wizard."

"Oh." Bill turned to Ron. "Is her mother as good looking as she is?"

"Oh, yeah, although she's taller and, well, thinner, but she's a good dueler, too. She gave a demonstration with of Defense teacher -- he's another Confederation hit wizard -- and I don't think I've ever seen the like before."

"Well, I've never seen Sabrina interested in anyone before," Leroy said. "Better watch yourself. I bet she's a real tiger once she gets started. Let her make the first moves -- she's a great dueler for a Fourth year."

"I guess I better." Ron wondered who would do the most damage to him if he glanced at Rina the wrong way -- Spellman, Dorff, or Hermione, or perhaps Rina her self.

Back in Britain, the battle between the supporters of the Council and Fudge continued to rage on in The Daily Prophet past the week after the trial. It was soon clear that the only real support Fudge had was from some of the families compromised by Death Eater connections or Malfoy money, and some of the more conservative elements inside the Ministry itself. The media, what passed for public opinion within the magical community, and the major institutions (including Gringotts) were now all opposing Fudge.

Then, on December 2, The Daily Prophet had a detailed account on how Malfoy money had bought the first lenient decision for Draco, and how many members of the Ministry had been using Malfoy money to fund the projects they had built their careers on. That would force almost half of the Wizengamot to resign that afternoon, as they were all implicated. Since these people were, for the most part, also middle to upper-level members of the Ministry, that meant the core of Fudge's supporters were gone by the end of the week. The newspaper's headlines on December 9 trumpeted Fudge's resignation as well.

Perhaps partially as an exercise in redeeming his image, Percy explained exactly how the infighting was being conducted in a series of impromptu afternoon discussion sessions, as well as in his two classes. Hermione made Harry read a copy of Machiavelli to help him understand some of the principles.

Through it all, Hermione had written to Ron every day, telling him what was going on. She had only received two short notes back, basically saying that he was fitting in at the Ysgol so well he hardly missed Hogwarts, although he of course missed her and his other friends and hoped to see them over the summer, since he'd already been told he would be staying in North America during the winter break.

That came as news to the entire group. Meanwhile, Neville's grandmother gave her permission for Neville to spend the entire Christmas break with Harry. Luna's father and the Weasleys gave their daughters permission to spend the entire break with Harry, after the first few days. Hermione's parents were the only one's wavering, so Professors Spellman and Lawrence had spent all December 7 talking with the Grangers. They had come back with the same deal for Hermione as the other two girls.

The Winter Dance would be December 20, and the students would leave for their Christmas break the next morning. The three girls would go home to their families, while Harry and Neville would spend the Saturday night at the Dursleys. They would leave Sunday afternoon to go to Neville's, and then leave Monday morning for where ever they were going. The girls would spend the weekend with their families and then leave Monday morning as well. They would be returning to Hogwarts on January 4.

Despite all that was going on in the background, the everyday work and normal events continued at the school. Most of the Fifth through Seventh year students worked on their Patronus spells, with widely varied success. Ravenclaw and Slytherin played what most observers thought was the most poorly-played game in recent memory. When Cho finally caught the snitch (on her third try), some five hours into the game, the score was 180 - 30.

As Ginny said on the way back to the dorms, "Any game where Goyle is the most competent overall player says a lot about both teams."

After dinner that evening, Professor Lawrence called Ginny and Hermione to his office to discuss the problems of Imperio and possessions.

"No one is happy with the solution," Lawrence told them. He turned to Hermione, "Especially your parents. However, all have agreed to leave the decisions up to you."

"Tattoos," Ginny stated.

"Ritual tattoos," Lawrence agreed. "It is possible, in theory, to draw some of the runes and symbols on your skin and have them work. To do so means being able to put yourself into a trance, a number of flexibility charms, a perfect knowledge of the spells and signs, the ability to cut yourself when necessary, and above all, you can't make a mistake. So far as I know, Tabitha Spellman is the only living person to accomplish all that."

"How many, and how large?" Hermione asked.

"Twenty-seven in nine different locations. Two are very small -- these go on the top of your forehead and the back of your skull. The other seven positions are on your heels and wrists, the inside of the elbow of your wand arm, over your heart, and in a swath from your navel and inner left thigh. It would work most powerfully if I do the two of you together, and you exchange some of the blood shed during the procedure. It is a long, painful ordeal, and will join the two of you in a bond that will make you as close as twin sisters, should you choose that option. It will expose the pair of you to each other, and to me, in ways you might prefer to keep private."

"I'll do it, even if Hermione prefers not to," Ginny said.

"I don't know," Hermione said.

"Fine," Lawrence said. "Miss Weasley . . . Ginny. Please come to the dungeon where I tested the three you, tomorrow morning at Eight. Don't eat anything between now and then. Don't drink anything after midnight. Bring two towels, several wash cloths, and your wand. Miss Granger, if you decide to come along, you will be welcome. It will make no difference to my preparations."

"What are the down sides to this?" Hermione asked.

"Besides losing any special powers of divination or second sight? Eight hours of pain, several days of discomfort, and the fact that they cannot be removed," he answered. "Professor Spellman is in her office, if you wish to talk with her."

"Thank you."

Sunday, December 14, 1996

"Ginny, Hermione, come in."

The two girls walked nervously into the dungeon. The room was decorated with runes and symbols chalked on the walls, ceiling, and floor, nearly half of which Hermione had never seen before. There were also two Gurneys, covered with sheets which had painted symbols on them, inside a pentagram which covered most of the floor. A chalk path was marked out of it to the toilet. The only other thing in the room was a small wheeled table, filled with inks, old-fashioned manual tattooing needles, and other things that looked rather like instruments of delicate torture.

"Do not exit the semi-circle," Lawrence said, pointing to one that covered the entrance area. "Close the door together. Now, take off all your clothes and place them on either side of the door, but still inside the semi-circle. Place the towels on top of your clothes." Lawrence turned around to give them some privacy. "Now, one at a time. Touch the door handle with your wand and say 'I, your full name, swear I enter this covenant with free will, and will leave free.'"

Hermione went first. "I, Hermione Jane Granger, swear I enter this covenant with free will, and will leave free."

"I, Genevra Molly Weasley, swear I enter this covenant with free will, and will leave free."

"Then pick up the towels and cross into the pentagram. I apologize for the pain I am about to cause."

Friday, December 20, 1996

Since the first dance had been canceled right after Halloween, most of the older students were looking forward to the winter dance. Hermione had tried to duck out of the dance, since Ron wasn't there to go with her. Ginny, Parvati, and Lavender managed to talk her into accepting a date with Kevin Entwhistle, a Sixth year Ravenclaw. Kevin had been eager for a date with

Hermione for some time. After Harry had had a 'talk' with Kevin that would have done any over-protective big brother proud, Kevin had toned down his enthusiasm a little.

Harry insisted on escorting Hermione over to Ravenclaw, where Kevin and Luna were waiting for them. Ginny and Neville went with them.

Neville, it turned out, had convinced his grandmother to send him out for some dancing lessons the previous July, although he hadn't taken many before joining Harry's training. Of course, Neville's grandmother's idea of dance lessons had leaned heavily towards the waltz. Still, that had given Neville some sense of rhythm, and if he was far from the most graceful dancer on the floor, he at least didn't stomp on Ginny once the entire evening. Kevin and Hermione were much better, and seemed to enjoy themselves.

Harry steeled himself, and led Luna out on the first slow dance.

"Is everyone watching us?" Luna asked in a small voice. She loved music, but did not care for the idea of dancing very much.

Harry glanced around. "You know, I don't think any one is."

"Really?"

"Really."

Harry felt Luna relax in his arms, and Harry relaxed as well. Probably someone was watching, because it seemed like someone was always watching him. But if there were, there weren't many.

"Have I told you lately how much you mean to me?" Harry asked.

Luna scrunched up her face in concentration. Since they had started dating, Harry had noticed how some mannerisms looked silly on some people and attractive on others. He had yet to meet one of Luna's that he hadn't found immediately endearing.

"I believe the last time you told me you thought me beautiful was approximately forty-five minutes ago. The last time you told me you loved me was about thirty minutes ago. The last time you relaxed in my arms like this, however, was before Halloween, the afternoon after Councillor Dorff told you the news from Afghanistan."

She thought about that. "I wasn't close to you last year. I know you were more irritable then; were you also this tense?"

"Probably a lot more so. I was under a lot more pressure last year."

"What sort of pressure were you under then that you're not now?"

"Besides O.W.L.s and Umbridge? Last year few people believed me. . . ."

"I did."



"I know, and I could never thank you enough. It really meant a lot to me that you believed in me."

"What did Hermione say about that?"

"Something rather rude, actually," Harry admitted. "I think that was the first time I ever told her off about being rude to somebody. Usually, that's her line to me or, well, to Ron."

"She seems to be enjoying herself tonight. I hope you didn't scare Kevin too much."

"Hermione is still committed to Ron."

"Perhaps. From Ronald's letters, however, it isn't certain if he is still committed to Hermione. He hasn't sent anything like a love letter, or even an affectionate one, from what Ginny has said."

Harry sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"Why?"

"Because Ron wants to shine. He's a good student, but who looks good next to Hermione? I've always wondered if he liked her as her, or liked her because they were close."

"You mean because Hermione knows him so well, he can just be himself?"

"Exactly. I know Ron likes Hermione, I know he was even in a bit of lust with Hermione. I just don't know how much he loves her."

"I don't know how much she loves him, either," Luna responded, to Harry's surprise.

"Hermione also liked Ronald in part because he knows her so well. She feels very out of place here, you know, more than any other Muggle-born I know."

"Still? I thought she'd gotten over that."

"Muggle-borns often feel that way, you know. They see themselves as plain owls in a flock of fwoopers, without realizing that when you want a letter delivered, fwoopers are pretty but not very useful. Hermione needs to excel, and feels she's far behind all the rest of us."

Harry had to think about that, but decided she had a point. The slow dance ended, and neither had any intention of dancing the faster numbers. As they walked off the dance floor, Harry said, "I suppose Hermione feels it even more than most."

"She needs to be at the top. I think that's why she has problems accepting new ideas from me. If I had handed her an old book my father has, which described the Crumpled-horn Snorkack along with other magical creatures she had heard of in classes, she would have believed it. But from a peer?" Luna shook her head sadly.

"Have you ever heard of a Muggle author named Lewis Carroll?" Harry asked.

"No, why?"

"A character in one book says something like she tries to believe three impossible things before breakfast. That's you. Hermione tries to prove three things before breakfast. Those are two very different outlooks."

"Very good," Luna said with approval. "You know, I have an idea."

"What's that?"

"Are you finished packing?"

"Almost."

"We leave at Nine tomorrow morning," Luna reminded him. "Why don't we leave the dance around Nine tonight. You can finish packing, and we'll go to bed early. Then we can meet in our dreams."

"Brilliant idea."

## Chapter 10

Saturday, December 21, 1996

The train ride to London was a fairly rowdy affair. Neville told Harry that this was far from unusual, as the students were anxious to return home. The prefects and security prefects didn't have any major problems, but were certainly kept on their toes.

Harry, who had never liked returning to the Dursleys, only understood the idea of returning home as an intellectual concept. Even though he would be only spending a little less than twenty-four hours at the Dursleys, and Neville would be with him, Harry was far from thrilled. He was fairly confident the Dursleys felt much the same.

Harry wasn't certain how to describe his ride to Surrey. Lloyd Trowbridge drove him and Neville. The boys soon learned why Professors Lupin, Lawrence, Jones, and Spellman, along with Tonks, apparated to Mrs. Figg's, and why Lawrence had wished them luck. It wasn't that Lloyd was exactly a bad driver, and he certainly wasn't inattentive. It was more that his first instincts were primarily based on driving on the right side on the road instead of the left. It made for an interesting and exciting ride.

Still, they reached Privet Drive in a very short time, even allowing for a detour around Whinging to show the boys the house they had been born in.

"It's not a bad house," Harry said as they passed. "I remembered it as a lot more run-down and spooky."

"It still looks that way to most people. I've keyed the wards to the pair of you since the last time you've seen it," Lloyd answered. "I've kept it since the last war, and have even stayed in it a few times." He headed over towards the bridge leading to Little Whinging. "Now, Lupin and Tonks will be at Mrs. Figg's. Spellman, Lawrence, and I will be in the house in Whinging. Jones will be at the hotel near the train station. That puts you near the center of a triangle." Lloyd shot into the Dursleys' drive and he stopped the Land Rover about a quarter of an inch short of Vernon's company Mercedes. "Here," Lloyd said, handing each boy a small quartz amulet on a chain. "Put these on and do NOT remove them for any reason. Grab the stone and say 'help' and we'll answer. Unless your uncle or cousin take a swing at one of you, DON'T use magic on them."

"Is that likely?" Neville asked, surprised. He had known things were bad for Harry, but not that bad.

"Likely, no. Possible, yes," Harry answered honestly.

"Hopefully, you'll have a quiet, if stressed-filled and boring, evening." Dumbledore had hoped for Harry to spend at least 36 hours at the Dursleys, but ended up agreeing even 24 hours was pushing things. "If not, well, remember Voldemort still can't attack you here, nor can any other witch or wizard. There's always the possibility he's gotten smart enough to hire Muggles to attack, or will send in dementors. In any event, call for help. Alright?"

"Alright," both boys said in turn. They exited the car, Harry carrying a duffle bag that had their few clothes for their short stay. Harry knocked on the door, and then opened it. Only once the boys were inside did Lloyd pull out of the drive.

"Well, boy. Back again I see," Vernon sneered.

"Happy holidays, Uncle Vernon," Harry said with some effort at civility. "This is my friend, Neville Longbottom."

Vernon looked at his nephew. He really hadn't noticed the changes in the boy the previous July. The ragamuffin was long gone. Harry was still shortish, a shade over five foot seven, and while long in the leg for his height, once he took his jacket off Vernon could see the boy had put on some real muscle. He looked like a gymnast.

"Hello, Mister Dursley," the other freak said politely. This one stood between Vernon's and Dudley's height, and had shoulders wider than Vernon or Dudley. He looked a bit like the heavy-weight power-lifters Dudley wanted to look like, but didn't.

"Longbottom," Vernon managed to say, with just a slight sneer. He took a deep breath. "Dinner will be at Seven," he managed to say between clenched teeth.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," Harry said, taking the hint. "Come on, Neville." He and Neville went up to Harry's room.

As soon as the door shut, Neville said to himself (for he was far too polite to say anything out right), 'After meeting Harry's guardians, it's a miracle he's such a nice guy.'

Dinner was very quiet, in large part because Dudley hadn't returned and Vernon had little to say. When Harry had asked, Petunia had merely said Dudley was 'out.' What little conversation there had been was between Petunia and Neville over protecting plants over winter.

After dinner, Harry and Neville quietly cleaned off the table and then went up to Harry's room. They took showers, and spent the rest of the evening talking. Dudley had come in while Harry was in the shower. He had scowled at Neville, but said nothing. A little after 11:00, Harry and Neville turned in.

A little before 2:00, Harry was woken up by someone shaking him violently. "Stop that!" Neville ordered, since Harry was too confused to say anything.

"They're coming!" Dudley whispered.

"What's wrong with you?" Harry demanded.

"Those dementoid things! Can't you feel them?"

"I think you were having a nightmare. Now go back to sleep."

Harry tried to lay back down, but Dudley refused to let go. "I tell you I can feel them," Dudley hissed.

"It can't hurt to check it out, can it?" Neville asked, getting the rest of the way out of his cot.

Harry sighed. "I suppose not." Harry got up and threw on his dressing gown. He tossed Neville his as well. "On the off chance, I guess we should stick together."

"Alright."

As Harry waited, he glanced into the mirror, and saw Dudley smirking. Harry immediately swirled around, wand up. "Spill it!" Harry commanded in a low voice. "I know you're up to something, Spill, or I swear I'll turn you into the pig you are!"

Dudley squeaked at the sight of the wand. "Piers and some of the boys -- they're waiting in the back garden with some buckets of ice water."

"Oh, real mature, Dudley," Harry said. At that point, Harry felt a pain seer through his scar, for the first time since July. It was so strong, Harry nearly collapsed on his cot. Harry picked himself up as he cleared his mind. "Maybe you have some second sight there, Dudders. Voldemort is isn't far away."

Dudley started to sneer, and then there was a brief scream from the back garden, which was quickly and chillingly muffled. Dudley nearly fainted.

"It's getting colder," Neville said.

"Call," Harry said to Neville, then he turned on Dudley. "You, stand right there. Neville, back against this wall." The air was getting distinctly cold, and Harry heard his uncle swear at the furnace. Harry threw open his door and commanded, "Stay in your room!"

"Don't tell me what to do, boy! See if I. . . ." Vernon trailed off. Harry could see three dementors coming slowly up the stairs. Vernon couldn't see them, but he could feel them. Petunia pulled him back inside the bedroom and slammed the door. Harry could hear Neville calling for help, and then describing the attack.

"Harry!" Neville called out. "There are at least twenty out back!"

"How long until help arrives?" He raised his wand.

"Not long," Tom Lawrence stated from behind Harry. "Stand back, and make certain that idiot cousin of yours stays puts." He stepped in front of the teen, raised his hands, and began a chant, starting with a phrase that, to Harry's surprise, froze the three dementors at the top of the stairs. Harry was used to seeing Lawrence as a hefty (as he had lost over twenty pounds that term, he wasn't quite 'portly' any more), often jolly and friendly teacher. The transformation in him to a powerful warlock was startling.

As the chant progressed, brilliant white light swirled out of Lawrence's wand and around the three dementors. As soon as the first swirl surrounded them, the three dementors screamed.

"The other dementors are gone," Neville reported. "There were three Patronus herding them together, but now they're all gone."

The swirls enclosed the three dementors in a cocoon, which then, slowly, over three minutes, squeezed together. The entire time, the dementors were screaming, without pausing for breath.

Finally, after those three long, agonizing minutes, the cocoon collapsed into nothing, and the noise stopped.

Silence reigned for fifteen seconds.

"What the hell was that!" Vernon Dursley screamed, coming out of his bedroom.

"That' were three embodied demons, known as dementors," Lawrence answered.

"Demons . . . as in. . . ."

"Creatures that feed on your soul, Mister Dursley. Creatures that would have long ago enslaved your kind, so they could freely feed on you, had it not been for my kind. Resent us all you wish, but just remember, your kind built your civilization, but only because my kind tamed forces you cannot imagine. I shall now go down to your basement and paint four symbols which will prevent them from ever entering again."

"Why didn't you people do that before?"

"First, because I am the only person in the British Isles capable of doing so, and as you can probably tell from my accent, I'm not from around here. Second, because the magical signature will make your house stand out from those who know how to look. Since the enemy obviously now knows which house you live in, that no longer applies."

"What about Dudley's friends?" Harry asked.

"What about Dudley's friends?" Vernon roared.

"Dudley tried to lure us out back, where some of his friends were going to dump ice water on us," Harry snapped.

"Dudley!" Vernon yelled, "I told you to leave the boy alone! 'Let him show up and get out', I said!"

Lloyd popped into Harry's room. "We have three teens Kissed out back. Any idea who they were?"

"What does that mean!" Vernon demanded.

"That means their souls, their consciousness, are gone," Lloyd said.

"They were friends of Dudley. They were going to pull a prank on me."

"They . . . they . . . were. . . ?"

"They're husks, Dudley," Harry informed his cousin. "That's what I was trying to tell you two summers ago. You can't fight them physically."

"What are you going to do about it?" Vernon demanded.

Lawrence shrugged. "There is nothing that can be done. They are gone. Their bodies will survive for some time. Even if I should happen to destroy the dementors that have their souls, there is no known way to rejoin the soul to the body."

"But. . . ."

"But nothing. They are gone."

"You wouldn't be so casual if it was one of you freaks, instead of one of us!" Vernon accused.

"It's possible I might care a bit more," Lawrence mused, "but there still wouldn't be any more I could do for my nearest and dearest. I can no more restore them than I could restore life to any other dead person. Now, do you want my protection, or do you want to risk a horrible death?"

"And if I just told you to leave, to take the boy with you and never come back?" Petunia squawked at the suggestion, but Vernon paid her no mind.

"Then your protections would collapse in a few weeks to a few months, the enemy would capture the three of you, torture you and your son to death for fun, and hope that by torturing and holding your wife, Harry might be tempted to come and save her."

Vernon stood there, gaping. Lloyd spoke into the silence. "Toby went for the Obliviators. The cover story will be the three boys put themselves into comas with drug overdoses." He disappeared.

"So, do you want to live, or not?" Lawrence asked Vernon, in a tone that clearly said it mattered little to him which Vernon picked.

"Yes, damn you!" Vernon said through clenched teeth. He turned around and stormed back into the bedroom.

Lawrence turned to Harry. "You two go back to bed. I'll do the runes and be back up in about an hour. If you're still awake, I'll put you to sleep. We'll wake you up before Seven, and we'll be out of here by Seven. I doubt we'll be welcome here in the morning."

Harry and Neville went back into Harry's room. "Go to sleep, Dudley. The excitement is over."

"But . . . but Piers, Danny. . . ."

"I know."

"What kind of freak are you? Don't you care that Piers is as good as dead?"

"What do you want me to feel for Piers, who used to help you beat me up? How many tears should I waste on him? Tell me, if I did, would you make fun of me like you did when I was having nightmares about Cedric, a really nice guy that I saw murdered in front of me?"

Dudley said nothing, but slammed the door going back into his room.

"Sorry you were here for this, Neville," Harry said.

To Harry's shock, Neville grabbed him and hugged him briefly, then held him back and looked the smaller teen in the eye. "Harry, you're never going to be alone again. I wish I'd known how horrible it was for you here."

"Err, Neville . . . you're very strong, you know."

"Sorry, Harry."

Harry patted Neville on the back. "It's okay. You're a good friend."

"From the cradle, it would appear."

"Yeah, how about that? We'll probably have to endure Professor Spellman showing the girls our baby pictures."

"As long as she doesn't go on and on about changing our diapers."

"It could be worse."

"How?"

"Professor Jones could go on and on about changing our diapers."

Sunday, December 22, 1996

"I didn't realize you were to be here this early, Neville," Mrs. Longbottom said with a sniff, looking up from her morning cup of tea. As she was every morning from 6:45 until 7:30, she was sitting in the small solarium in the 15th century manor house.

"We weren't supposed to be," Neville admitted.

"Oh, Neville! What did you do?"

"Well, we survived a dementor attack," Harry offered.

Mrs. Longbottom dropped her tea cup.

"Good morning, Mum, Dad." Hermione was startled to be greeted by silence. "What's happened?" Her parents were sitting very still, even stiffly, in their dining room chairs.

"Well. . . ." her mother said slowly.

"We were rather hoping you would bring this up last night," her father went on.



"Bring what up?"

"The tattoos," her father answered.

"You must know we agreed very reluctantly. Now . . . please show us."

"You won't like it," Hermione warned.

"We already don't like it!" her father almost snapped, which was very unusual behavior for either of Hermione's parents. "What we want to know is how much we should hate it!"

"Alright. "She stood up and started stripping in the dining room.

**"Hermione!"** her parents exclaimed, shocked.

"If you want to see, you might as well see," Hermione snapped, now standing with her back to them, and in just her blouse, bra, and panties. She parted the thick hair on the back of her neck. "You might be able to see the little tattoo at the base of my skull. Well . . . you wanted to see."

Her parents sheepishly came closer, but couldn't see it. Nor could they easily see the small tattoo just above her forehead hairline. "The other seven are easier to see." The two tattoos on the back of her heels were in black, blue, and green, and about half an inch across.

"The same are on my inner wrists," Hermione pointed out, rolling up her loose sleeves. She kept going on the right arm. The rune there was in red and orange. Hermione stripped off her blouse and bra, and her parents' took in shocked breaths.

There was a series of signs that covered the valley between her small breasts, and the entire right side of her small, round left breast, right up to the large pink nipple.

Then Hermione took off her panties. The Grangers were even more shocked at the sight of the signs that started off by surrounding her navel and swept down in a crescent that touched the very base of her clitoris and ended a quarter way down her inner left thigh. Hermione had kept herself totally shaved since that summer, and so the tattoos were even more startling, as these had been done in magical iridescent inks, and they sparkled in twenty-seven different colors.

"Oh . . . baby," Hermione's mother cried.

"That must have hurt like hell," her father added.

"At first, it was all painful," Hermione said, "but the ritual helped me deal with the pain."

"How would you describe the process, then?" her mother asked.

Hermione looked at her parents defiantly. She picked up her clothes. "Erotic." She left the room.

At the Burrow, Ginny had gone through much the same process, although only with her mother. All the parents were shocked at how extensive, and intimate, the tattooing had been. After Hermione had dressed, however, she had firecalled the Burrow (the Granger fireplace had been opened, for firetalking only, with the Burrow the previous summer). The Grangers were relieved to learn that the Weasleys were as shocked as they had been over the size of the tattoos, and were a little assured when they were told how important the tattoos might become in the struggle against the dark wizards.

Still, none of the parents were anything but dissatisfied by the necessity.

That night, as the Grangers talked about the exceedingly upsetting day, Mrs. Granger turned to her husband and said, "You know, there was one other thing I noticed, besides the tattoos."

"What's that?"

"Our daughter is, well, buff."

"Huh?"

"Last summer, when she was out sunbathing, I saw how thin she was. She wasn't quite unhealthy, let alone anorexic, but her arms and legs had very little muscle, and her abdomen was taut only because she was so thin. I bet she's put on well over a stone of muscle, maybe two." Hermione had in fact added twenty pounds of muscle since the previous July. "She's never been athletic before, but is now."

"I wonder if she's kept it up now that that boy was sent to America," Mr. Granger wondered.

"That's one good thing. I mean, I want her to date, but I think he was too interested in her, and maybe vice versa."

"I don't know how many boys will be interested in her with all those tattoos," Mr. Granger complained. He sighed. "Well, hopefully not too many will see them."

His wife snorted. "You would have seen mine before we married, if I'd had any." She grinned. "I wonder how I'd look with a little dental mirror tattooed right above my labia."

Mr. Granger, who had started flossing, accidentally choked on one end of the floss.

"Open wide!" his wife teased. Mr. Granger swallowed the floss.

Monday, December 23, 1996

"Well, are you all ready?" Lloyd asked the five students. They were gathered around the Granger front parlor a little before noon.

"Where is everyone else?" Hermione asked. Lloyd was the only one there.

"Jones is staying in Britain, and so are Tonks and Lupin, for that matter. Tabitha and Tom went on ahead. Don't worry, he had all your presents and luggage. Tudor and Henry will be

with us on and off." He held out a long boot-string. "Now, hold on tightly. This will take about four and a half minutes.

"We're going quite a ways, I guess," Ginny said.

"We are."

End of Part III