

Relations

By

DrT

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Chapter I

Monday, July 1, 1996

"You look tired today, Albus."

"I am tired, Minerva." Indeed, Albus Dumbledore for once looked his considerable age. He was nearly 150, and after the many events of the previous year, he had every right to feel his age. Wizards may often live past 150, but they rarely had as much responsibility as Dumbledore still did so long after they reached the century mark.

"Really, I do understand how hard these last thirteen months, especially this month, have been. . . ."

"True, true." Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "However, it is not the past that's weighing on me today, nor even the battles of the future. It is merely lunch, tomorrow."

McGonagall limped over (for her leg, injured the previous month, still bothered her a little on damp days like that weekend had been). "And what do you have scheduled for lunch tomorrow?"

"Don't you remember?" Dumbledore teased a little. "You and Filius were right here when the appointment was made."

Minerva McGonagall furled her brow and frowned at that; she was famous for her excellent memory. Try as she might, she couldn't think of what the Headmaster might mean.

"I grant you," Dumbledore said with a slight smile, "it was made quite some time ago."

"When?" McGonagall gave in.

"Tuesday, the Twenty-ninth of June, Nineteen hundred and eighty-two."

"Fourteen years. . . ." Her surprise suddenly sobered and disappeared. "Oh. Master Edward."

"Yes. Master Edward."

"Funny how those childhood names stick," McGonagall mused. "Do you think he'll actually show up after fourteen years?"

"Of course! In part because it would be uncharacteristic of his entire family not to, and because Filius received a note this morning from the Hogshead, asking if they might meet in the village sometime tomorrow afternoon, after lunch."

"I haven't heard anything about him since he left. I thought for sure . . . Death Eaters had killed him at some point."

"You haven't asked," Dumbledore gently chided. "I never received mail directly from him, either, but he has sent the odd note to Filius and Hagrid over the years, and other reports have

filtered through, especially through Remus. In addition, he did . . . come through here three times during Harry's Third year."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed. "I don't suppose one of those times was the day the students left two years ago?"

"Yes. He was most upset at Lupin's resignation. However, for all concerned, I think it best not to bring that up with any of the parties connected with the matter?"

McGonagall nodded her understanding. "He's . . . well?"

"Well, prosperous, even more powerful than we had predicted," Dumbledore stated, "and rather well-known in high academic Magical circles, and even a few select Muggle ones, under the name of Edward Harold."

"He's Edward Harold!"

"Yes. He left on an expedition deep into Chad in late September, Nineteen ninety-four. They were exploring a very ancient enchanted area, and so got no news of the events here until they returned to London a week ago. And I have been told that many of his party wished to stay longer, but he convinced them they didn't want to stay another summer. In fact, it turned out some of them were connected with Voldemort. It should be in the papers soon."

"So, he doesn't, or didn't, know about His return?"

"Not until a few days ago. Had he known, I believe he would have been here last June or July, or at least December, no matter his vows, my commands, the expeditions, or anything else, to take care of Harry." He sighed. "I wish he'd been able to. This has been another error on my part."

"At least he's coming here first. Harry will be surprised."

"I know." Dumbledore almost looked ashamed. "I meant to tell him several times these last few years. I couldn't, not even when I told him about the Prophecy last month. Now, I rather believe I shall lose quite a lot of Harry's remaining esteem, if I still have any."

"I'm sure Harry still respects you, even if he's still angry with you," McGonagall assured him. "However, what happens next will in part depend on how you treat Edward. Will you try and stop him seeing Harry?"

"No." Dumbledore was emphatic. "It's time Harry met his cousin."

Wednesday, November 4, 1981

The crowd in the little church was quiet, yet restless. Some who were there were present despite their grief. Most were there to show honor and respect. Some were merely there out of duty, and they were the most restless.

"Shall we start, Edward?" Dumbledore asked the young man looking through the vestry door at the crowd. No one's grief surpassed his, although some approached it. Edward Potter -- a

Seventh year student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry -- was no taller than his first cousin had been, although he was already built much broader. His eyes were blue rather than hazel-brown, but he had the trade-mark stand-up-and-messy black Potter men had had for at least a thousand years.

Both of the teachers waiting with him, Dumbledore and McGonagall, were worried about the young man. He wasn't acting normally, even considering the circumstances. For almost ten years, his hands had never been this still, except when he was holding a wand. Unable to learn real magic when his brother Harold and his favorite cousin James went off to Hogwarts together, Teddy Potter had started teaching himself 'Muggle magic,' ie slight-of-hand. One of his cousin's friends had had a similar interest, and Teddy had developed a dexterity that would have kept him well-employed in the Muggle world.

McGonagall wished those hands weren't so still now. Edward generally had a Muggle coin he would flip through his fingers, sometimes a coin either juggling in each set of fingers or appearing and disappearing, whenever he was waiting for something to happen. She remembered his doing it while taking notes in class; he even did it while waiting to enter the Great Hall for the first time (she was fairly certain he'd continued, despite her warning, right up until he sat down to be sorted, but she hadn't been able to actually catch him); he had done so before the great funeral service for his entire immediate family (other than James) after He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and the Death Eaters had attacked the Potter family one August night a few years before (James and Edward had been late returning from a visit with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, and so were the only survivors); he had done so before James' wedding the next summer. Before exams, the Gryffindors were always jovial and relaxed -- watching the normally fairly staid Ted Potter juggling or doing card or coin tricks did his fellow students good in stressful situations.

Those hands were currently totally still, though, and he had been staring out into the crowd for quite some time.

The young man, nick-named "Master Edward" or "Master Ted" by James' friends, turned his eyes from the crowd to Dumbledore and McGonagall. "Why isn't Harry here yet?"

"That seems to be his guardians' choice," McGonagall said in her most disapproving voice, "not to be here, like they should."

Dumbledore's face froze.

"Guardians? What do you mean? Since Sirius. . .well, anyway, I'm Harry's guardian."

"You have to finish school," McGonagall hedged. Edward wasn't buying it.

"No, you didn't say his temporary guardians; in fact," he said turning on Dumbledore, "you have very carefully avoided telling me where Harry is. It can't be with Remus, even if the Ministry would allow it, because I see him here. Who. . . ."

Suddenly, an awful thought hit him. "You didn't leave my cousin with. . . ."

"Don't say the name!" Dumbledore said severely. "There are still Death Eaters out there who might find him."

Edward shut the door and turned on Dumbledore. "You left Harry with that evil, limited, stupid woman, and her nearly-as-idiotic husband!"

"Mister Potter!" McGonagall reprimanded. "Do NOT speak to the Headmaster that way."

Edward's eyes blazed, and both McGonagall and Dumbledore took a step back. Sometimes it was easy to forget that James and Edward Potter were two of the six most powerful students to attend Hogwarts in at least the last two hundred years, and were probably in the top ten or fifteen students in terms of power in the history of the School. At other times, however, it was hard to forget that fact, and that Edward was even more powerful than James had been. "I am NOT addressing him student to headmaster. I am a fully qualified, adult wizard, with twelve O.W.L.s to my credit, even if I have chosen to complete the N.E.W.T.s. I am the closest wizarding relative of an orphaned magical child, whose guardian of first choice has been proclaimed a criminal without a trial. I was his parents guardian of second choice until my next birthday, when I would have become the first choice. Shall I quote the will? 'Only in the absence of these fifteen alternate guardians shall. . . .'"

"Do NOT say their name," Dumbledore instructed again. "We shall discuss this later. Now is not the time."

"Yes, we 'shall discuss this later'," Edward hissed.

Albus Dumbledore and Edward Potter sat in the headmaster's office later that evening. Dumbledore could tell that the young man was still seething and ready to do battle.

"My reasons for placing your cousin in the care of Lily's sister and her husband are several and compelling when taken together. First, Voldemort has been disembodied, not destroyed as the Ministry has hinted." That got through to Edward. "There are several ways he can be reanimated, although it shall no doubt take him a number of years to settle into a state where he can effectively plan. Should he be reanimated, he will, if possible, try to destroy you and especially Harry. As either your late brother or James no doubt told you, Voldemort is the last surviving direct magical descendent of Salazar Slytherin. There are others, of course, but they have all had at least one generation of squibs, which interrupts the power of the charm, or curse, Slytherin put on the decedents of his second marriage."

"And Harry and I are the most direct magical heirs, and last direct male heirs as well, of Godric Gryffindor, from the seventh son of his seventh son, Harold the Potterer, and therefore also heirs of Merlin second only to you," Edward agreed.

"And, most importantly, Harry has been the one predicted to end the career of this Dark Lord." Dumbledore frowned. "I know James told you that. Harry must be protected at all costs."

That puzzled Edward. "But hasn't Harry already done that?"

"Perhaps, but unlikely; and in any event I am certain Voldemort can't afford to see things in that light, should he return. And therefore, you and Harry should not be together. There are

many Death Eaters still at large, looking to kill both of you as well as to locate Voldemort's spirit."

"Then perhaps I should hunt down and destroy that spirit."

Dumbledore merely shook his head. "It can't be done until it's reattached to a body. If he is unable to do that within thirty to fifty years, he will start to fade into oblivion; we can only hope that is what happens."

Ted started to speak, but Dumbledore overrode him and went on to the real subject under argument. "And in dying as she did, Lily invoked powerful and ancient magic; although it was powerful enough to protect Harry because of Lily's power, talent, and love, it should not have destroyed Voldemort's body, unless Harry is very powerful on his own -- the one prophesied to either kill Voldemort or who must be killed for Voldemort to come to power. That will certainly compel Voldemort, should he be reanimated, to strike against Harry. That magic will increase the power of home protection over Harry, as long as he lives with his maternal relatives and only his maternal relatives. Harry cannot be harmed by Dark magic while in their care. Do not hate them because they're Muggles, Edward."

"I don't hate them because they're Muggles; Lily's parents. . . ."

"Were actually squibs, or at least the children of squibs, living as Muggles, as you no doubt know."

"Still, I have nothing against Petunia and Vernon as Muggles. I dislike them because they're hateful, limited, bigots. They will hurt him, emotionally if not physically, Professor, and they'll try to keep him from us. Potter Place is as secure as any ancient magic could make a Muggle house."

"I promise you, Edward, Harry will come to no lasting harm and that Harry will attend Hogwarts. But Harry must be left alone. Let him be raised without the burdens of being great at fifteen months, without being spoiled by house elves and retainers, as he would be a Potter Place. And, to be as safe at Potter Place, he could never leave the island in safety. Under the ancient magic, Harry can have a more normal childhood. And he needs normal friends, not an adoring public."

It was clear Edward had not thought of those points. Dumbledore pressed home his advantage. "A child needs stability. You are not ready to care for a child who is not really even a toddler yet. You will not be ready to care for Harry for at least three or four years. Think of the trauma of his having to learn to live with a new care-giver. Even if you are a more fit parent than the Dursleys, Harry couldn't help but feel unwanted yet again."

That had not occurred to Edward, either. "I'll think on it."

"I can ask nothing more right now."

Saturday, December 19, 1981

"Your Gryffindors are rather rowdy tonight, Minerva," Ivy Sprout, the new head of Hufflepuff teased. "It was only a Quidditch match."

Michael Crouch, the elderly Defense teacher and Head of Slytherin, snarled at Sprout a little. Slytherin had lost the match. Since his great-nephew had left school the year before, the team hadn't even had a good practice. Losing the first game hadn't come as a surprise, but it had still hurt to be beaten so badly.

A clanging glass from the students attracted everyone's attention. Edward Potter was standing at the head of the Gryffindor table, hitting his glass with a knife, drawing everyone's attention. Only McGonagall and Flitwick heard Dumbledore's deep breath of concern.

"My friends," Edward said in a carrying voice, "thank you for coming and cheering us, or our honorable opponents, onwards today. I also need to thank you all for your support for me during these last few trying months."

"This trial has brought to my attention the fact that I need to make special plans for my future. Even if the Dark Lord is truly gone, of which there is much doubt, his followers are still active and there will always be others who seek to follow him or imitate him. No doubt, many of you think I am being an alarmist. So be it; I hope sixty years from now, you can all look back and say I was just plain wrong. But, on the chance that I am not being an alarmist, I must take certain steps for my future. I shall not elaborate these plans to anyone, so don't even ask. However, I felt I must say something, so that my following two actions will make some little sense. First, effective immediately, I am resigning both as captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and as a beater." A loud sound of surprise arose at that.

"Tomorrow, we leave for the Yule and New Year's holidays. I shall be performing my last duties as Head Boy at that time. Professor Dumbledore," Edward said, removing his badge, "I resign as of tomorrow when the Hogwarts Express arrives in London." He put the badge in his pocket, and walked from the room.

The faculty looked at Dumbledore, who was sitting with his eyes closed and a painful look on his face.

"He can't. . . he can't be turning. . . dark, can he?" Crouch asked, fearfully. He didn't dislike this Potter as much as his trouble-making older brother, let alone his arrogant cousin and his friends, but he had a truly fearful respect for this young man's power and talent.

"A Potter?" Never!" Hagrid stated firmly.

"No Potter has followed the Dark paths, not one in a thousand years," Flitwick scolded his colleague.

"No, he is not going dark," Dumbledore said. "What we have seen is a brilliant and powerful young wizard taking the first step in becoming a true warlock." A warlock, a wizard who has not renounced magic but who has renounced convention. Some were hermits, some were scholars; all declared their hatred of Darkness as well as their contempt of wizard and Muggle society alike. Some took vows to that effect, and were joined in a Brotherhood; others would not even deign to join that loose if powerful group. Dumbledore had done the same at one point, before allowing his scholarly interest to be harnessed to teaching, and from there to helping society. He still carried the title proudly, and was still pledged to act for the good without the constraints of society.

Edward Potter was going down a similar path.

Tuesday, June 29, 1982

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office, waiting for three people to arrive: Flitwick, McGonagall, and Edward Potter. McGonagall, because she was his Head of House, and Flitwick because Edward was quite simply the best charms student even in Professor Binns' memory, even better than Flitwick himself had been while at school. And since Binns had been teaching for a century and a half as wizard and then ghost, that was a long time. If Edward still trusted anyone on the faculty, it was probably Flitwick.

Dumbledore had been associated with Hogwarts, as student, teacher, and headmaster for over seventy years of his hundred and thirty plus years. He was always interested in the differences and similarities within families. James and Edward Potter were a good example. Physically, only that wild black hair and a certain cast to their features gave them any resemblance. Edward was as stocky, sardonic, and a bit pompous (except for his slight-of-hand) as his cousin had been lean, studious, and ready to play a joke. Both were excellent in all their studies, and brilliant in some; James in Creatures and Defense, and the best Transfiguration student since Dumbledore; Edward in Runes and Defense, and even more brilliant in Charms than James had been in Transfiguration. James had been a ring-leader, Edward the person people brought their problems to. James had never been humble about anything; Edward was a bit prideful of his family's heritage. Yet both were contemptuous of the Pure Blood beliefs that was often espoused by Dark Wizards in the last two hundred years.

Both cousins had loved each other fiercely -- more like brothers than cousins, especially after the massacre of the Potter family -- and both were so powerful it sometimes startled even Dumbledore. If Voldemort hadn't caught him by surprise, James Potter should have defeated Voldemort, prophecy or no.

And that was something that worried Dumbledore.

James was dead. Edward was still trying to cope.

Finally, all three were in the office. "You wanted to see me, Mister Potter?"

"I am of course leaving tomorrow," Nick said simply. "First of all, I need your words that Harry will be watched over, and that he will be coming to Hogwarts."

All three were happy to make that pledge.

"Since James' murder, you've made it clear that you don't want me to be in contact with Harry. I don't agree, but I'll respect your demands unless I hear Harry is in direct danger. While I will be leaving Britain in August," that came as a big surprise to two of the professors, "I would like to see Harry once before I go. Since his birthday is on a Saturday. . . ."

"I suggest you go on Friday the Thirtieth, around Six forty-five," Dumbledore said. "Do you know where Harry is staying?"

"Oh, yes, I once had the displeasure of staying there one long Sunday afternoon last summer, as well as several shorter visits over the last few years. No matter what defenses you might

have set up, I assure you I can find it. Very well, Friday the Thirtieth it is. Now, after next month, do I have to wait until around Harry's seventeenth birthday before I see him again?"

Dumbledore had a rare fit of anger. Edward had been arguing against his judgement since the day of the funeral, and there was a slight sneer in the boy's voice. "Probably not. Perhaps you could ask around his sixteenth birthday," Dumbledore snapped.

Edward Potter snapped to attention in his chair at Dumbledore's tone. "Perhaps we should make it a little earlier, just to cover all possibilities. Shall we make it an official meeting? Say, lunch on . . . July Second, Nineteen ninety-six? I believe it will be a Tuesday."

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall note that in my calendar."

Edward stood up. "I hope to see you all then." He nodded and said farewell to each in turn. Before leaving, he also turned to the phoenix perched in the office. "Fawkes, please keep an eye out for Harry, too. All right?"

The phoenix sang a few short, happy notes, and then cooed.

"Goodbye, Fawkes. See you in fourteen years!" Edward stroked the bird's head, and then left the room.

"Do you know where he's going?" McGonagall asked Dumbledore.

"No; if I had kept my temper, perhaps I would have found out."

"He's going to America," Flitwick said simply. "New Orleans, to be precise. He's going to study at a Muggle university, and also apprentice at the Vieux Carre. He hopes to get his Master's license in Charms and perhaps in Runes and Ancient Languages as well."

Edward next went to visit Hagrid. The huge man adored Dumbledore, and so was very upset that one of his favorite students was having a disagreement with the great man.

"I know how great he is, Hagrid," Edward admitted. "And I know he's probably right. But when he doesn't give complete explanations, it does remind one that he's great, but not infallible."

"Well, no he's not that," Hagrid had to agree.

Edward stood up. "Hagrid, you've been a good friend to me and Harold, and I know you were to the Marauders. . . ."

"Don't mention them," Hagrid snarled. "Reminds me that thar Black were one."

Edward shrugged. "I know it looks like Sirius betrayed them. I still don't believe it, but it almost has to be true. But I don't care about that. Please, Hagrid, when Harry comes here, help him. Be the friend to him that you have been to me, Harold, James, and Lily."

"That I will, Teddy. I promise."

"I'm going to miss this place, Hagrid. I know now why you stayed. Anyway, here's my solicitor's card. If you need to get Harry anything, he's under orders to pay you back in full."

"Good luck, Teddy. I hope y'll be back before ya think yer will."

"Me, too!"

Chapter II

'Bloody hell, this place is hot!' Edward H. Potter, now going under the name of Edward Harold, had never felt a combination of heat and humidity like this as he stood out on the grounds of the Magical Institute.

He had flown, on Muggle jets, from London to New Orleans via Detroit. It had been a very strange, disconcerting, experience. Compared to most pure-blooded wizards, Ted had a fair amount of experience in dealing with the Muggle world. He knew how to drive a motorcycle, he could deal with Muggle money, he and James had spent one summer taking Muggle transportation all over Britain (although somehow, they'd often ended up visiting Lily and staying at Sirius' parents every few days).

The major problems with the modern Muggle world, he'd decided, were crowding and speed. There were an amazing 5,500,000,000 or so people on Earth, only 6,000,000 or so of whom were directly connected to the Magical world (and a number of them not very magical). Somehow, the Muggle population had exploded, while the Magical population had risen very very slowly. Most Magical people seemed to live in rather rural areas. The exceptions, like Diagon Alley, were crowded but still worked at a nearly pre-modern pace. A Muggle place like a major airport made little sense to someone like Edward. Being strapped into a small seat, next to an obviously uncomfortable over-weight Muggle, for over six hours for the first flight, would make anyone a little claustrophobic. Most Muggle environments seemed either too sterile or too filthy to Edward, and the flying experience was a bit of both.

He was met at the New Orleans airport by a representative of the Vieux Carre, an old association for Magical Studies. Not quite a University in the Muggle-sense, these associations still offered what higher education there was in the Magical world. Only his 'associate' (the wizard who met him, who was responsible for helping him adjust to the new culture) and the Master of the Vieux Carre knew who he really was. For all other purposes, he was Edward Harold.

Edward had spent the next week being tested. He'd thought the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s had been difficult (although he'd managed twelve of each), but these were even tougher. After the weekend, he had spent three days renting and furnishing a small house, and buying a (non-enchanted) motorcycle and getting a licence. He still needed to register at the small open-enrollment state university, where classes would be starting in just over a week.

He'd thought the Academy would have been located in the oldest part of the city. That's where it had been located for almost 200 years, but it had relocated a few years before to a more spacious area in what was called New Orleans East. Ted now stood just inside its hidden (to Muggles) grounds, waiting to hear what they would allow him to do. Since they'd helped him rent a small house and buy a motorcycle, they must have accepted him for something!

The Master and his Associate came out to greet him.

"Mister Harold," the Master said, with a slight incline of his head, "welcome officially to the Vieux Carre Academy of Advanced Magical Studies. We have decided to accept you as a student of ancient symbols and languages; what your school mis-calls simply 'runes.' If you do not wish everyone to know you're from Hogwarts, I suggest you do not use that term here."

"We are not accepting you to formally study charms at this time, because to tell the truth, we have little to teach you. Over your study here, we will have you learn the advanced theory, but we will be concentrating on the languages and symbols. You may take the Master's exam later."

"We also do not feel you would benefit from studying at SUNO. We will help you go directly to the major university here, Tulane. You already know enough languages to study for their classics degree. You may then wish to study anthropology, archeology, or even continue with classics while you finish with us."

The Master looked expectantly at the young man. Edward suddenly smiled. "Sounds good!"

October, 1982

Dear Remus:

Technically, I'm not supposed to tell anyone where I am, although Dumbledore won't tell me exactly why. Still, since I told you anyway, I just won't repeat myself. As far as I know, you, Flitwick, and probably Dumbledore are the only ones besides my house elf who knows where I am. I'm giving this to the elf, who says she can get it to Potter Place. Give any responses to them whenever you see any of the elves. I hope you're still at the cottage; let me know if there are any problems!

Life is busy here. Not as busy as Seventh year, but close. I'm carrying a full class schedule at the Muggle university. My languages and Muggle studies background helped me skip over a 1/4 of the classes, so, by going to summer school as well, I should get the Muggle undergraduate degree in August 1984. I'll decide before then if I want to get some graduate degrees as well.

The work here in ancient symbols and languages (they make fun of me if I just say runes) is also going well. Still, I basically am doing runes -- the symbols and ancient languages of Western Europe. I hadn't really realized that most of these are still secret from the Muggle scholars!

What about charms? you might say, since that's what I was supposed to be studying. Well, between my natural talent and brilliance (he said modestly) and Flitwick's excellent teaching, I actually had a greater level of knowledge and ability than they usually graduate. I'm doing some reading on advanced theory, and will be tutored next summer. I should get my Master's licence next summer.

I've also joined the International Confederation and have been talking to the Sorcerers and the Warlocks. The International and the Sorcerers have agreed to accept me both under my assumed name and my real one. So, when the next list of apprentice sorcerers comes out, I should be on it! The Warlocks have me under consideration, but probably won't accept me for a while.

While I don't really live as a Muggle (I have a house elf, after all), I come fairly close. I rent a Muggle house in a Muggle neighborhood. I drive a Muggle motorcycle and just bought an old Muggle car called a Beetle. Everything runs by electricity (poor Linnie, trying to figure out how to cook and clean by electricity! I actually do most of the cooking now, while she does the cleaning. She almost flooded the garage with water and bubbles using the washing

machine the first time!) and I eat Muggle produce. No butterbeer available in this part of the States, alas. Muggle soft drinks are too sweet for my taste. They have a good grocery store with an excellent wine and beer selection in the Muggle suburb I live in, thank goodness!

Other than butterbeer, I was afraid I'd miss flying the most. Can't really fly in a city! Fortunately, the community and the magical school have constant port-keys set up to take people to an isolated area not too far away, where we can fly to our hearts' content. Strange to say, since I'm not playing beater anymore, flying isn't that much fun. I still go every weekend when it's not raining, though, just to stay in practice.

I hope this finds you well. If you ever get news of Harry, please let me know.

Ted

PS -- forgot to say that I'm not called Ted anymore. I introduced myself as Edward, so the Americans all call me Ed (better than Eddie I guess!)

12 February, 1983

Dear Moony

Thank you for your Christmas letter; sorry I only had time to send you a card. Enclosed is a flyer; they're recruiting Apparation teachers for a big workshop this August at the Ysgol in Maine. I know that's one of the few ways you're working, so please consider it. If it costs too much to go, please, please, for James', Lily's, and Harry's sake, swallow your pride and let me pay for it. I already checked; the three weeks are between full moons. I wish you'd let me do a little more, but take this and I won't bother you about money the rest of this year. Remember, I somehow hit one of Dumbledore's few sore spots, and am banned from meeting with Harry before 1996 or 1997. (Why won't he simply tell me why he wants me to stay away from Harry!) If anything happens, Dumbledore will have to turn to you for help. You're Harry's uncle in every way but blood (just as I consider myself Harry's uncle, not 1st cousin 1 time removed). All feelings of friendship aside, I want you there, healthy and able, since Dumbledore won't accept me.

My Muggle classes are pretty easy, now that I'm in the right mind-set. It's mostly about memorization so far, and most of us have much better memories than Muggles. Too bad it doesn't also apply to logical thought! The language work is coming along nicely, too. I may study Muggle archeology in graduate school; their techniques and methodology look useful.

To answer your question about Gringotts, no, they don't have underground vaults here. There isn't even a goblin in sight! They have some sort of special long-distance port-key system. Except for a few of the major Eastern cities (New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Toronto, and Chicago have the vault system like London), these high-speed port-keys whisk you from where ever you are to wherever the main Gringotts bank is (best guess? someplace in the Great Plains near the foothills of the Rockies). It is HUGE! It's also one of the main depositories of Goblin wealth.

Take care,

Ted

14 May, 1983

Dear Moony:

No, I'm not just writing to you; I'm also writing to Professor Flitwick and exchanged Christmas cards with Hagrid. No one else; I was rather abandoned after those events, just as you were. Everyone preferred remembering my friendship with Sirius to my relationship to James and Lily. Maybe that's the difference between brother/uncle and cousin? Once I gave up Quidditch and being Head Boy, I was dropped by the few others that still had uses for me.

I haven't made any real friends. The 'secret place' I'm studying at doesn't have many students; and although there are a LOT of cute girls at the university, I haven't gotten close to any yet. In large part, it's because I have too much at home that would need explaining (like a house elf!) I am reorganizing things to make things a little less obvious.

I'm glad you're coming to America in August. I'll send tickets if you'll come and visit me for a few days. It looks like it would be better timing if it's after the workshop.

your friend

Ted

July 4, 1983

Dear Moony:

Don't be an idiot. Both schools are out in August, so there will be NO stray nude girls. Or were you hoping there'd be a plethora to choose from? Or, if the rumours were true about which team the Marauders played for, you can troll the French Quarter on your own. I've seen a number of people that look like they tried to do the sex-shift spell and only made it half-way!

Actually, I have created/uncovered a scandal here. It seems a number of young wizards and witches here have small houses or even flats and have to find some place for their house elf to live. A number of old New Orleans' families have set up quarters for us to rent for our house elves. They were quite shocked when I wanted to inspect them before paying for them. You know how little the most vocal elf would complain about bad treatment. It was a system just waiting for abuse, and about a third were abusing it. So, I'm quite popular with the general community, and rather disliked by some of the small number of Old Families. God, I hate "Old Families." Yes, I know the Potters are about the oldest around Britain these days, but while it's interesting to be able to trace it back, it really doesn't make me who I am (at least I hope not!). I wish I could stop making people care that much about their "family heritage!" I know; not possible.

As for my house, it's pretty small. No cellar -- very high water table here, in fact, we're technically below sea level. Three small bedrooms, one with what they call a 1/2 bath and what we might call a WC. Bathroom (more of a shower room, the tub is tiny), 'living room,' kitchen, attached garage (with a Muggle washer and dryer). There's also another room that was built on later off the kitchen. I use the large bedroom as a study and the 'living room' as a library. The extra room is my sitting room. The tiniest bedroom is the guest room. Well, it was a box room, but I moved the boxes out to the rafters in the garage and got you a nice cot.

See you soon!

Ted

August, 1983

Remus Lupin was tired, worried, and embarrassed. Tired, because the 18 day advanced Apparation techniques workshop had been hard work; worried, because once he got back home he'd only have two days before the full moon. He hoped nothing would delay his trips back.

Lupin was embarrassed because he was flying first class. 'Ted shouldn't have spent this much on me,' Remus thought. 'Actually, Ted shouldn't have spent anything, but he especially shouldn't have spent this much.'

'Still,' Remus mused, 'that is Ted.' James had spent exactly what he needed to spend from the small part of the wealth the Potter trust automatically granted him. The rest had piled up in a vault in Gringotts, where it would sit earning interest until Harry turned 11. Edward wasn't a spendthrift, but he wasn't a thrifty as his cousin had been, either.

As the plane came in for a landing, Remus vowed this would be his last overseas trip. Port-keying from London to New Orleans would have been a two-stop jump, and most long-distance port-keys really upset most people's digestion. Apparation would have been a 6 stage trip, and would leave even a wizard as powerful and expert as Lupin dead tired for days. Traveling by Muggle plane, however, was just too crowded and uncomfortable to be a comfortable alternative. Lupin smiled however, as he wondered how those wizards used to wearing gowns and robes would feel confined to Muggle trousers in the back of a crowded airplane.

Walking off the plane, Lupin saw the stocky figure of Ted Potter, his hair cut short and dyed brown but still as wild as ever.

"Was the flight horrible or just uncomfortable?" Edward said after they'd embraced. Both felt a little awkward, as they had realized the other was the only man left alive that they could embrace under any circumstance.

"Uncomfortable. This is all the luggage I have," Lupin said, holding up his large rucksack.

"Cool. Let's buzz out and get you a cool, sweet drink, and I'll take ya home." Remus smiled as the attempted Americanisms were spoiled by such an obvious 'posh' British accent.

It was even hotter than Remus had imagined. Sweat broke out within seconds of leaving the terminal for the parking lot. Edward led him to a small auto, and within minutes, they were heading into a very urbanized development via a short highway. The wind blew off the sweat, which reformed as soon as the car slowed for any traffic or traffic light.

Lupin had never really seen anything like it. No doubt parts of Greater London were similar, but not the parts he ever traveled in. Remus had thought they might be heading to a pub, but instead they drove through to a small garish building, and Edward ordered him something through a window.

"Not having anything?" Remus asked.

"No, these are too strong for safe driving." He handed Remus a tall iced drink in a plastic cup.

Remus took a cautious sip through the straw -- ice, alcohol, and chocolate hit his mouth (in that order and intensity). "Wow!"

"Thought you'd like it," Edward said, and drove on towards his house. Lupin laughed.

A short drive through the developed area and a quick turn took them into a neighborhood whose houses confused Remus. Some were nearly mansions while others were cottages, with everything in-between.

Edward pulled into the driveway of the smallest house on the street. He stopped in front of the attached garage, but did not drive into it. The little house was faux-stone, surrounded by a steel-mesh fence and a well-kept yard. Rose and holly bushes, defying the withering heat, were set around the raised foundation. A motorcycle sat under a tarp between the garage and the fence.

"I started using the garage for other stuff," Edward said simply as they walked to the front door. Edward picked up the mail and let them in. Inside was deliciously cool. Edward took Remus around to the little 8x10 foot bedroom across from the bathroom.

"These are your spacious accommodations; the Roman bath is across this corridor," Edward joked. The two men nearly filled the length of the 'corridor'.

"Would you mind if I took a quick shower?"

"Go ahead. The white towel is yours."

"So, how are you really doing?" Remus asked twenty minutes later.

Edward frowned in concentration for a few moments. "On one level, I'm doing great. My studies are fun, if time-consuming. I officially got my Master's in Charms license yesterday. . ."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks! I've decided to do a course in charm-breaking, too. The Academy, along with a few of the other associations, are planning on creating a large, joint archeological Institute next year. Gringotts is kicking and screaming, but they've been ruining sites with their damn treasure hunting too long. This would allow the International, the Institute itself, and Gringotts to benefit financially, without ruining the sites."

"So you're going for the Muggle degrees as well?"

"Yeah, I should be totally finished by Eighty-eight or nine." His expression darkened. "It'll give me something to do while waiting to be allowed to see Harry."

"I haven't seen him either," Remus admitted. "I tried to visit, and Arabella Figg nearly scorched me!"

"She's a tougher old squib than I'd imagined at first," Edward admitted. "Anyway, that aspect of my life is on hold, and I really have to admit it's even festering a little. I hope Harry comes out without too many emotional scars -- if there are, or if there're any physical ones, I'll skin the pair of them alive."

The air conditioning wasn't set too low, but Remus shuddered. When James, Harold, or Edward used that tone of voice, they meant what they said.

Edward saw it. "I told them that, too. Dursley nearly shit his pants when I told him I'd make a vest out of him."

"You'd go to Azkaban," Remus said simply.

"You know, I found an interesting set of charms in the restricted section of the Hogwarts library. It peels the skin off, and then restores it perfectly. Healers use it, while the patient is unconscious, to take care of certain types of scaring. It was especially useful for small-pox survivors."

"Don't talk like that Ted. That's the first step. . . ."

". . . Down the road to Darkness. We're always dancing on that first step. Sirius' baiting of Snape wasn't an irrevocable step, assuming he really was guilty, it was a couple of steps further that kept him going."

Remus looked like he had been punched. "Do you still doubt he was guilty?"

"I do. If I was certain he wasn't guilty, I'd still be there fighting for him, but I'm not certain." Edward and Remus both looked torn. "I just have doubts."

"If he wasn't. . . ."

"Then he must have switched with Peter, making a double-bluff, and Peter was either a traitor, or had been under the Imperius curse."

"Possible, but do you really think it likely?"

"It would be more characteristic of Sirius than betraying James!" Edward fell back in his chair in the living room. "But I admit, I don't see Peter, even under the Imperius, having the power to blow up that street."

"Exactly. I wish you were right." Remus sipped on the huge once-frozen drink. "Damn, I'm going to be pissed from this!"

"Remember, you're in America. 'Pissed' means angry, not drunk. And I've got a nice big, early dinner for us. Jambalaya, red beans and rice, and jumbo. Welcome ta N'Awlins, Moony."

Christmas, 1988

Remus Lupin looked up from the woodpile. It was cool, but not cold, on the Potter estate that December.

The estate was very large, although not vast (nothing is 'vast' in Western Europe). And it was old; so old it didn't figure on any Muggle map, so old it was not clear on any Magical map. Nearly a third of it was more heavily protected than anything else in Britain except Hogwarts. A tenth of it was more protected than any place in Western Europe.

Lupin was in the heavily-protected area. He had lived in the smallest of the six game keeper cottages for over three years full-time, and had lived there part-time since he'd left Hogwarts. It was the only cottage in the protected area. On nights of the full moon, the wolf was confined to this area, and the other humans stayed outside, and the house elves stayed inside the safest area.

It wasn't a perfect system, but it worked.

It wasn't home, for a werewolf wasn't really welcome anywhere.

"Stop that!" Lupin muttered to himself. The people who lived on the Potter estate had been given a clear choice; accept Remus or leave. James and Edward had both been very clear on that point, and no one had left.

They stayed clear of Lupin, but they stayed on.

Lupin turned when he heard a soft 'pop.' There was only one person alive who should be able to Apparate here.

"Ted!"

"Remus!"

"What are you doing here?"

"I own this place, remember?"

"I mean. . . ."

"I came to celebrate Christmas with my foster-brother. Is that okay with you?"

Remus smiled. "It is. When did you get in?"

"To Potter Place? Late last night. I was in London for two days, working with the solicitors."

Most of the time, Remus studied. He read, studied the magical creatures, and even wrote some well-received articles. His house and food were free. He made a little money teaching Apparation and tracking down magical creatures that bothered farmers and such.

It was not such a bad life. Lonely, perhaps, not what he had hoped for, but not such a bad life compared to most werewolves.

And, for the first time in years, he could celebrate Christmas.

Chapter III

*Professor James MacDonald, Master
Glastonbury Magical Association*

*Professor Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry
14 July, 1993*

Dear Albus:

This year, we are really fortunate to have two young master wizards coming to teach special seminars at Glastonbury. Gloria Stephens, renowned herbologist, will offer a series of one week seminars on British fungi and their magical, medicinal, and common uses. These will be open to a limited number of 6th year students as well as people from the magical community. Mistress Stephens, of course attended Hogwarts (Hufflepuff, 9 N.E.W.T.s and 11 O.W.L.s) in 1970. Since then, she has become perhaps the outstanding authority on the magical uses of common British flora, as well as earning advanced training and both Muggle and (where available) magical degrees throughout Europe.

The other young scholar is Doctor Edward Harold. While he was independently educated as a young student, he has earned advanced Muggle degrees in archeology and advanced magical training in Runes and Charms at the Vieux Carre. You are undoubtedly aware of his recent work in Egypt, with both Muggle and magical archeological teams. He will be giving alternating weekly seminars in primitive magical practice and on current theories of the origins of magical practices from October through mid-February. Dr. Harold is also already both a Sorcerer and a Warlock, quite amazing at his early age! The seminars on the origins of magic are open to 6th & 7th years, while the ones on primitive magic will also be open to 5th years (the first time to my knowledge our seminars have included 5th years!).

*your friend and former pupil
James MacDonald*

'Subtle,' Dumbledore thought. 'I wonder if I should send some students, or keep them away from him? Is he actually after some of next year's Fifth years, or just fishing in a larger pool?' His thoughts were halted from Fawkes singing a few notes that sounded like a scolding.

"Ah," Dumbledore spoke to the bird, "I see you still favor young Mister, or rather Doctor, Potter." The bird now sang happier notes in agreement. "And do you have any opinions on whom I should recommend to study under the erstwhile young Potter?"

The bird fluttered over to Dumbledore's desk and stood on the pile of the 3th students' final report folders. He pulled two out of the neighboring pile of now-former 4th years' folders. Dumbledore sighed. He should have guessed those would be the two new 5th years Fawkes would choose. "Mixing Potter and the Weasleys? Why am I not surprised? Very well, I shall suggest it to Filius and Minerva. Even Merlin might shudder to think what Master Edward might teach them! I should have given Black a month of detentions for helping that boy master that Muggle slight-of-hand!"

Dumbledore was struck by that thought. "I wonder why I thought about Black? I haven't thought of him in a very long time." Fawkes just looked at him in reply.

A few weeks later, Dumbledore wondered if that thought had been a premonition of some sort. With Sirius Black escaped, and possibly either targeting Harry or restarting Voldemort's organization or planning His reanimation, great care would have to be taken in choosing the next DADA professor, and in protecting Harry until he could arrive safely at school.

Two days after the announcement of Sirius Black's escape, Dumbledore received a visit from the senior (living) staff member after himself.

"Filius! I'm surprised to see you back so soon."

The little wizard hopped up onto the footstool he favored in Dumbledore's office. "I hadn't planned on coming back for a fortnight, but I received a letter with a suggestion, which I thought I should bring to your attention."

"I see." It was unusual for Flitwick to be so indirect. "And will I dislike the sender or the suggestion?"

"Well, to be blunt, it's from the best charms student in Hogwarts' history, concerning the Defense post for next year."

Dumbledore flushed. "I will NOT offer the post to Master Edward! He should stay hidden. Few people know he's even alive."

Flitwick looked at his mentor. "Really, Albus? We never talk about such things, but I am willing to wager that whomever has been leading the remnants of the Death Eaters is well aware of Edward's continued existence, and perhaps even his current whereabouts. There have been six attempts on his life since he left here, you know."

"I knew there'd been at least three. . . ." Dumbledore muttered. He straighten up in his chair. "There could be other reasons for the four attempts after his assumed his new identity."

"Still, ignoring your stubbornness, he did not limit himself to one suggestion."

That surprised Dumbledore a bit. "The second?"

"Remus Lupin."

"Don't you think a werewolf as a professor would cause some trouble?" Dumbledore asked mildly.

"Now that you have gotten Lucius Malfoy off the Board of Governors, no," Flitwick responded. "We probably shouldn't make it common knowledge at first, however. Still, he is employable according to the Ministry, and if Severus won't make him that new Wolfsbane Potion, then we will purchase it. If you don't have the budget, Edward said he would foot the bill." Flitwick became more serious than he usually showed himself. "If Sirius Black really did turn Dark, and if he really is after Harry, we need someone of Remus or Edward's power, not those weak ninnies we've had recently. And we need someone who has some idea of how

Black thinks, and someone who will not be afraid of Black's power or reputation. If you won't hire Edward, hire Remus Lupin."

Dumbledore sighed. "I have thought of his name several times over the years, in fact he even turned it down once, and I have been trying to think if there was anyone else better for the last two days. I don't think there is. And you may assure Doctor Potter we will have the budget for the potion. You may also thank him for paying Harry's fees."

Flitwick was surprised. "Did those Muggles waste all of Harry's inheritance?"

"No, they know nothing of it. Harry is only aware of the Gringotts current account vault, since the Potter Trust won't pay money into it until Harry reaches seventeen. I gather he doesn't take much out, in any event. The Trust solicitor was rather evasive with me, but he finally admitted that Master Edward was paying the fees, so that Harry needn't worry."

"Lupin is an excellent choice," Flitwick said, "perhaps the second best in the world."

"If he'll come."

"Remus will come for Harry's sake. I never saw Remus happier than when he was holding Harry. I really wish he could have cared for Harry instead of his guardians." Dumbledore frowned. Flitwick defended himself. "You know I have no prejudices against those who aren't pure-born -- how could I have? -- but I haven't heard anything good about these people."

Dumbledore shrugged. "If the Dursleys weren't the type of people they are, Remus might have stayed with them and helped raise Harry. But they wouldn't have accepted even a Muggle-born who really fit into their petty-minded world. If I'd thought Voldemort's movement had died, even if Voldemort himself wasn't totally dead, then I might have allowed Arabella to care for Harry for a year or two and then let Edward take care of him. Remus would have helped. But of course, that wasn't the situation."

"I know, Albus. However, unless something happens to Edward, Harry will have to learn the truth."

"I know," Dumbledore said in return. "Secrets have the tendency either to come out, or twist into deeper conundrums. I fear all of this has already twisted out of my control."

Monday, August 30, 1993

"You shouldn't be here today, Teddy." Remus' eyes were bloodshot, and he was agitated.

"I'm not here to upset you further, Moony, but I know I can't see you right before you leave to go to Hogwarts."

"Albus made it a condition of my employment not to tell Harry about you, or the Marauders for that matter."

Edward's face tightened. "I see. Well, I won't add to your burdens by asking you to break your word. I know you too well for that. I wrote and offered my services, through Flitwick, but asked him to mention you were at least as good a candidate."

"Really?" Remus looked surprised.

"Of course. I know as much, if not more, about Defense against Dark Wizards as anyone on Earth, but you know a lot more about creatures than I do."

"Thank you."

"I'll be quick. Remus, the cottage will still be here for you, for vacations if nothing else, for as long as you can use it. I know you'll watch out for Harry. If you need anything, for yourself or Harry, contact the Trust."

"I will."

Remus was shocked when the very self-contained young man hugged him. "You're the only brother I have now," Edward said softly. "Take care of our honorary nephew."

It was a very much less angry Remus Lupin who transformed in the cellar that night.

Thursday, October 14, 1993

Fred and George Weasley stared at the wizard sitting across the table from them. They had been impressed with him the previous Friday evening, when they and four more senior Ravenclaws had been port-keyed to Glastonbury. The pair had not been certain how they had been selected, or if they were really interested, but 15 minutes with Edward Harold had convinced them that here was a wizard after their own tricky hearts.

The first lessons on primitive magic the next morning had confirmed their impressions. And, to their surprise, primitive magic was just what they needed to help their 'Great Project' along. No one, not their two oldest brothers, not nosey Percy, not their teammates, not even their best friend Lee, knew the pair were not just pranksters, but hoped one day to open their own joke shop.

For that, they needed really fantastic items, not just simple pranks. They had confessed their desires to Dr. Harold over hot chocolate that very night.

Edward of course wanted to pump them for information about Harry. He was a little ashamed about using the pair, but quickly decided he liked them. So, in return for their unwitting information, he supplied them with some practical ideas for the Great Project.

Some of what they had told him on Sunday night had made him wonder about the pair, and he had kept probing them throughout the week. Tonight, he had gotten them to confess that they not only possessed the Marauder's Map, but had it with them. He had just performed the password.

"How. . . how. . . ."

". . . did you know?" George managed to complete Fred's question. "I mean, according to the announcement we saw, you didn't go to Hogwarts! So you couldn't have known about this before!"

"Can you both really keep a secret?" Edward asked, doubt in his voice.

The twins glared at him.

"I went to Hogwarts. I was in Gryffindor. I even played your position."

"You're Ted Potter, aren't you?" George demanded. Ted Potter was the most famous beater of Bill's era at Hogwarts, and Bill and even Charlie had told some great stories about him.

"George! Are you. . . wait a sec, you're right. Black his hair and change his eyes, and he does look a lot like Harry!"

"Yes, I was Ted Potter. I'm in semi-hiding. Dumbledore seems to think it best for now."

"So you were more interested in our stories about Harry than all the others, huh?" Fred asked.

"Afraid so."

"That still doesn't tell us how you know about the Map," Fred reminded him.

"Unless he was one of the Marauders," George said.

"I wasn't. I can tell you who one of the last ones to have the Map was, though, although not if he was a Marauder."

"Why not?" George asked.

"That's part of some information Dumbledore is suppressing for at least a year, maybe longer. Anyway, James was one of the group that lost the Map in his last year." Edward grimaced.

"Two weeks before they were going to give it to me!"

"James as in your cousin, Harry's father?" Fred demanded.

"That's right."

George and Fred looked at each other, and then at the map. They looked back, and nodded.

"We need to give this to Harry," Fred admitted.

"And we won't tell him about you, or that his father used to have it."

Edward smiled. "How would you like to learn how to capture an engorgement charm in a sweet?"

The twins grinned. "Sounds like fair payment," Fred said.

Sunday, November 1, 1993

"You should not be here," Dumbledore stated.

"Do you really want to test that statement in Wizard's Court?" Edward Potter, looking every inch the powerful, influential, and famous wizard he now was as Edward Harold, paused. "I thought not. We both know that I would win, and that in the current climate, it might even force you out of here. Neither of us want that, of course, but don't force my hand. Now tell me, honestly, do you still think Sirius sane?"

"I would imagine he is at least a bit off-balance," Dumbledore said carefully, "but why do you ask that?"

"Because if he's really out to get Harry, why try to break into the Tower that time of night? He couldn't hope to hide there long enough to ambush anyone."

"And he should have known he couldn't get past the guardian."

"The Fat Lady?" Edward gave a twisted smile. "To tell you the truth, we always assumed it wouldn't be all that difficult to break through. You know; we thought her and the other guardians more for show."

Dumbledore smiled. "You all assumed wrong. It would take several very powerful wizards working together to break the enchantments. It is a much greater concern how he managed to gain entrance to the grounds and the castle itself."

"If some one let him in, it's easy. You know that's the one big hole in Hogwarts security. And Sirius and James knew every secret entrance, or at least a large number of them. They might not have let Remus in on all of them." "Too bad I can't tell Dumbledore about the Map," Edward thought, "that would have helped. But Harry needs to be able to use it. And this proves, to me, that whatever Sirius is up to, he's not going to harm Harry."

Dumbledore's head turned towards the door. "That should be Remus now."

It wasn't.

"Potter!"

Edward was on his feet and had his wand pointed before the second syllable of his name was uttered. "Snake!"

"That's Snape, boy! And you are advised not to point a wand at a teacher while here."

"You, a teacher? I didn't know the requirements were so low." Both men were snarling at each other.

"Well, we have your friend on staff, don't we?" Snape said with a sneer. He partially turned to Dumbledore. "Speaking of whom, we finished searching the grounds. We saw nothing to report." He gestured at Edward. "Has he come to withdraw his annoying relative?"

"Snake, I'm not 'an ickle Firstie' anymore. You never impressed me, and you can't bully me."

"Silence, the pair of you! Why is it none of you can act like adults?" Dumbledore snapped.

"Because we bring out the worst aspects of our childhood in each other?" Remus suggested from the door.

"Speak for yourself!" Snape nearly snarled. He turned to Dumbledore. "I hope this jackanapes won't be joining us as well. Between Lupin and that irritating, no-good, junior Potter we have enough. . . ."

Snape said nothing else, as he found himself pinned two feet in the air and his back pressed firmly against the door frame. Snape was shocked to see that Edward Potter was holding him there with just his left hand around Snape's neck, while his wand was pointing between Snape's eyes. Potter's eyes were coldly furious, but he wasn't even breathing hard from the effort of holding a man nearly his own weight off the floor. "If I learn you've been mistreating Harry, in class or out, I'll make you wish for the Dark Lord's torture," Edward said in a voice that not only sent shudders through Lupin and Dumbledore, but even through the calloused soul of Severus Snape.

"Put him down," Dumbledore said. "Severus has already saved Harry's life once. While he must show hostility towards Harry for some very sound tactical reasons I am not going to inform you of, he will not actually harm him. Now, put him down!"

Edward dropped Snape to the floor. Dumbledore frowned at the young warlock. "Edward, we have nothing more to say to each other at this time. Good day to you!"

Edward looked at Dumbledore for a few moments. "Very well," he finally said, "for the moment. Good evening, Headmaster, Remus . . . Professor Snake."

"Are you alright, Severus?" Dumbledore inquired after Edward left.

Snape stretched a little, making certain everything was in working order. "Yes, I am. Quite a temper that one has."

"You never dealt with an adult Potter," Remus told his old enemy. "You've never seen the raw power some have, either. I once saw James in a foul mood explode a small boulder into dust by accident. If you keep harassing Harry, that might be you some day. And if Harry doesn't, Ted just might. And if either of them said you pulled a wand on them and they got the drop on you without witnesses and killed you, I don't think there's any chance they would be convicted."

"And that wouldn't be Dark?" Snape managed to weakly sneer.

"Not after decades of harassment, no."

"Enough of this. Our concern is Sirius Black. Thank you for your reports."

Monday, February 28, 1994

"We're supposed to be under maximum security; how exactly did you get in!"

"I walked in."

Dumbledore frowned deeply. "You can't just 'walk in' to Hogwarts or my office, Edward!"

"Of course I can! Wards can be avoided if your intentions are not hostile and if you take your time. If you knew how much Gringotts have offered me to stop saving treasures and start stealing them for the bank as a curse-breaker, you'd know I'm the best in the world at avoiding curses, including wards."

"Did Lupin owl you. . . ?"

Edward broke in. "No, he didn't. I did talk with him before I came up here, but he didn't contact me." He didn't need Remus to tell him anything, he had two Weasleys.

"If any student saw you. . . ." Dumbledore was getting angry.

"They can no more see me when I don't want to be seen than they can see you! Now, you can sit there and bicker with me or we can have a useful and intelligent conversation! It's your choice!"

Dumbledore sat back and took deep breaths. Why did this man exasperate him more than anyone else? 'No,' Dumbledore thought, 'exasperate is the wrong word. Fudge exasperates me; Malfoy annoys me; Voldemort angers me. Provoke; that's it, provoke.' As he looked at the young warlock, Dumbledore realized at least partially why -- Edward Potter was on his side, shared his same goals (even if he no doubt ordered them with different priorities). Unlike the many others of whom that could be said, Edward Potter was not a follower, or at least not a very obedient one. Few people who totally agreed with Dumbledore's aims had given him serious arguments since the defeat of Grindelwald. 'Perhaps,' Dumbledore thought, 'it's a good thing Edward is around. Hubris is a dangerous thing.'

"On what subject shall we converse, Doctor Potter?"

"Sirius Black. Either he's totally insane, or he's not after Harry."

Dumbledore stared at the young man. "Expound."

"You know how the Death Eaters operated even better than I. Can you really believe one would hesitate to kill Ron Weasley just because he'd chosen the wrong bed? Or Sirius losing his nerve, period? Besides, Sirius must have been spying on Hogwarts somehow, and if he's really Voldemort's number one man, then there are no doubt a few Slytherins, and maybe even a few others, who have filled him in on Harry and his school mates."

"So?"

"So, give me a good thumbnail description of each boy in Harry's dorm just as some of their school mates would give, put me in that room, and I'll tell you which bed belonged to whom. So, first of all, it's hard to believe Sirius would make that basic of a mistake, and it's even harder to believe any Death Eater wouldn't have just killed or at least silenced the Weasley boy before he had a chance to make so much as peep, then either attacked Harry or fled, most likely the former."

Dumbledore stood up. "Let us see. The Third year Hufflepuffs have a free period. Miss Bones and Mister Macmillan shall be your informants. You are an agent of the MLES, reconstructing the crime. The Gryffindors will be in class for some time yet."

Forty minutes later, Edward entered the artificially darkened dorm room. A quick survey, and he walked over to the far bed and said, "Harry's." He then pointed. "Weasley, Thomas, Finnigan, Longbottom."

Dumbledore looked at the house elf he had summoned. "Is that correct, Twicky?"

"Yes, Master Dumbledore, sir." At a signal from Dumbledore, the elf disappeared, leaving them alone.

There were only a few personal items around each bed, but they'd obviously been enough. "How. . . ?"

"Two new Hogwarts trunks, three old. A Muggle-born, a Muggle-raised, a half-blood, and two Pure Bloods, Wizard-raised, one rich and one poor -- and you know we always like taking a family trunk if possible. James took his dad's, you know, which had been Grandfather's and Great-grandfather's. Harold had our Dad's." He paused and smiled. "Mum's was charmed to show shades of purple to any magical person, so I couldn't have hers. I had the first new trunk in several generations, because the others were too banged up for our standards, although most were in slightly better shape than Weasley's here. Weasley's was a give-away; Finnigan's obviously belonged to at least two witches -- you can just detect the various places where they had those flashing heart stickers or whatever at some point; Longbottom's is at least a hundred years old and in mint condition." Edward grinned. "I slugged Ethelbert Lockhart on the train that first day for asking me if I was a mud-blood because of my new trunk."

"Ah, Gilderoy's younger brother. A year ahead of you, I believe?"

"Ethelbert? Yes; Gilderoy was three years ahead of me. Twits, the whole family, and Slytherin to the core without being Dark."

"Ethelbert was indeed silly, but he was killed by Death Eaters for marrying a Ravenclaw of mixed parentage."

"Shame to be killed for one of the few right things he ever did," Edward said, embarrassed. "Anyway, Harry owned very little, apparently, until he came here. He takes the best care of everything, and has the least here. The owl cage helps. The rat cage also gives Weasley away, along with the cared-for yet totally banged-up condition of the trunk. The soccer posters give away the Muggle-born, the Irish national Quidditch team gives away Finnigan. Longbottom, infamous for his bad memory? Look at that jumble -- nothing noticeably out of place, yet no real order."

"And you saw all that in just a few seconds. You should have been a detective, Edward."

"Thank you. I did do some of the course work for Auror training, and some in Muggle criminal investigation as well. Anyway, you see my point. Sirius, if he was sane, was either after something Ron Weasley had, after Weasley himself, or was after something here."

"What could he be after, other than a current student?"

Edward shrugged. "Remember, this room was the Marauders' for seven years as well as this group of Gryffindors'. I'm not saying Sirius or James hid something here, but I am saying those two are about the only people who could have and gotten away with it."

"Do you remember how the beds were situated?" Dumbledore asked, knowing Edward was correct about James and Sirius' abilities.

"Of course. James' was between where Harry and Weasley's beds are, then Sirius, Remus, and Peter. It could just be a coincidence that Weasley's bed is about where Sirius' was."

"Let us return to my office."

As they moved through the corridors, the Headmaster asked a question he'd been pondering. "Did you by any chance buy Harry a broomstick this past Christmas?"

"What happened to the one I helped buy him two years ago?"

Dumbledore was surprised. "You knew about that?"

"Filius and Hagrid both wrote to me, saying some of the professors were taking up a collection. I told them to buy the best broom there was, and to charge the difference to me. I suppose they might have done it again; Hagrid and Remus both have the authority to ask my solicitor for the money. What happened?"

As they moved back to the office, Dumbledore explained what had happened. The Firebolt remained a mystery. After Edward Potter had left, Dumbledore was confronted with more mysteries than he cared to contemplate.

Master Edward, even more than Remus Lupin, had been unsure of Sirius Black's guilt. Dumbledore now also wondered, really for the first time in years, what the complete story had been.

Saturday, June 26, 1993

"I wish you'd stop violating our security! I just hope none of the students saw you before the train left."

Edward Potter just stared at the old man. He looked a bit more mussed than usual, but Dumbledore put that down to how he must have hurried to get there.

"What?" Dumbledore demanded.

"I've talked with Remus. I know the whole story."

"I see. And?"

"I am very disappointed in you, Albus Dumbledore."

Dumbledore was startled. "What?" No one had said that to him since his last year at Hogwarts, when his mother had scolded him for not watching out for his younger brother better.

"You let Remus be fired; you know Harry needs someone here to look out for his interests. . . ."

"I am here. . . ."

"YOU HAVE LITTLE INTEREST IN HARRY AS A PERSON!" Edward roared as he leapt to his feet. He breathed hard for a few seconds, controlling his temper, then sat and spoke more quietly. Somehow, that was equally powerful. "I know you have to look out for the British wizarding community, Dumbledore. But you're treating people like tools. Harry is not just a tool, to be trained, used, and discarded. Remus is not just a tool -- use him to guard against Sirius, then dump him when he no longer has a use. Is that why you never tried to help Sirius? Because he and James had their own plan? Because James dumped you as the secret keeper?"

"How dare you!"

"How dare I? **How dare I! HOW DARE I WHAT?**" The voice then quieted again. "Point out that, in your struggle to preserve Light magic you're in danger of using people like objects? You are, you know. I even understand why you might have to do that. But that doesn't mean that others can't remind you of what you're doing, and what those tools need."

"So, you don't think I'm totally gone over to Dark, boy?"

"No. I doubt you could go all the way over. But it's tinting you."

Dumbledore slumped down in his seat. 'Have I been so afraid of being too sympathetic that I've gone too far in the wrong direction?' Dumbledore sighed and changed the subject. "I was shocked to learn how James, Sirius, and Peter became animagi. Why didn't you or Remus tell me?"

"I think because, deep down, we didn't think Sirius was Dark, I guess. We couldn't risk his being caught and killed. Our hubris was not realizing this consciously. If we had, we either would have told you anyway, or perhaps figured out that if Sirius really wasn't Dark, then Peter was alive somewhere." Edward slumped in his chair as well and shook his head. "A boy's pet rat. Who'd have thought Peter was just a few feet away from us both last February?" A thought occurred to him. "Since when can students have rats?"

Dumbledore shrugged, deciding not to correct Edward's misconception of Peter's location. "We've always allowed the odd non-usual pet, if they're small, quiet, and harmless. I don't recall any in Gryffindor while you . . . no, wait, Georgina Bredon, five years ahead of you, and Carole Weasley, six years behind you, both had puffskeins. This year, we also had three pet mice, a hamster, and six puffskeins distributed between the three Houses that allow non-traditional pets."

"Let me guess, Slytherin?"

"Owls only, except for cats and kneazles for witches."

Edward sighed. "Figures. Thank you for helping Harry rescue Sirius, by-the-way -- one reason why I don't think you're in danger of becoming really Dark. But you knew when you hired Remus that people would find out; you let him go, flagellating himself."

"True, alas," Dumbledore acknowledged. "However, he will now be in a position to help Sirius."

"I imagine he'll go underground in some Muggle area. I'll arrange for Remus to have access to American dollars, so that he can supply Sirius."

"I believe we still have at least a year, if not two, before we need worry about Voldemort having a good chance at returning. You can go on your expedition with, I think, a clear conscience. If anything happens, I'll expect you early. If nothing happens, we have a luncheon date."

"Once we go in, we can't come out until a solstice." Edward stood up. "Still, I think I have to go, although I don't know why. Barring emergencies, I'll see you in just about two years, then."

'I wonder why he didn't rail on about Severus?' Dumbledore thought as Edward Potter left. 'Perhaps Remus didn't fill him in?'

Six minutes later, Professor McGonagall ran into his office. "Albus! We just found Severus on the back lawn; it looks like he was attacked about an hour ago!"

"Ah. That explains a great deal. Hexes or fisticuffs?"

"Hexes."

"I think you will find, not that Severus will ever admit it, that a defender of Remus Lupin challenged him to a duel."

"But Severus is an excellent dueler!"

"Not when he knows he was in the wrong, and the challenger had righteousness and a lot more power and experience on his side. I shall talk with Severus and make certain he is alright."

Chapter IV

Tuesday, June 18, 1996

Chad

"And I'm saying we should stay for at least another year! The opportunities here have hardly been exhausted! We've barely started to discover what there is to find here!"

Five other voices were raised in immediate protest. Thomas Umbridge ignored them. There were six wizards and six witches on this expedition. Two were allied to him. The healer generally stayed neutral in these discussions. One of the scholars would no doubt want to stay no matter what. That left two voices that were currently quiet: the two most powerful voices.

When the shouting quieted down, one of those voices was finally heard. "Thomas, we could stay here a hundred years and not exhaust the possibilities. We were not sent here to exhaust them. We were sent to see if there was anything really worth exploring, or if it was just a natural magical glitch or a site so decayed that little could really be learned. Well, you are right; there is a lot to learn here, more than we ever dreamed there could be."

The man stood, impressing them with his natural authority. "We have accomplished a great deal in two years. We have mapped what turned out to be out to be three ancient magical towns; we have linked them to the pre-dynastic Lower Kingdom and to the early Old Kingdom of Egypt -- that's over a thousand years older than anything that's been found to date anywhere, and on a scale larger than any site ever found before. We now have a working knowledge of their written language, plus over fifty thousand catalogued inscriptions to translate, including the oldest magical charms ever found."

The tall powerfully-built wizard turned and faced all his colleagues one at a time. "We should return on the solstice and announce our findings. No one can come back until the equinox, so nothing can be looted. I for one will be signing up for that return trip, and I hope all of you will as well. Thomas has talked us into extending twice, and as much as we've accomplished, I believe more would have been done in the long run if we'd gone back when we were supposed to and then mounted a real, major expedition back. We," he concluded with an air of finality, "are returning."

"Are we?" Umbridge sneered.

"We are," came the second voice. This wizard was also powerfully built, although not along the same huge lines as the previous speaker, and was of average height. "I am leaving on the solstice, and I don't care if anyone else leaves with me or not. I have a prior commitment in two weeks. . . ."

"And what is so important, Edward Harold?" Paula Parkinson snapped.

"You know perfectly well, Paula. You, Umbridge, and Vole all know." Edward's wand was suddenly in his hand, and it started to play back a conversation.

Parkinson: "Why don't we just kill him?"

Vole: "You got us nearly caught when you tried to kill Johnson! Why do we even have to stop him? If our Master's plan unfolded last year, he's already back and waiting to hear from us!"

We can take this information back and earn our reward. Turning 'Master Edward' over will be another bonus! There's no reason to stay."

Umbridge: "I told you before, never call him that! Those two idiot Gryffindors might finally recognize him! The Dark Lord would have sent us a message with the supplies on one of the equinoxes if He wanted us back!"

Vole: "I didn't recognize him, and neither did Paula!"

Parkinson: "I was a year ahead of his brother, not to mention his cousin and those those Marauding lunatics in Gryffindor. Of course I didn't recognize Potter."

Umbridge: "Now, there will be no more mentioning of the name! Or talk of murder! We are staying, and we need to get the others to agree to stay as well."

Parkinson: "You just don't want to go back and face your little sister! You couldn't keep a straight face as she praises Fudge and claims the Master can never return!"

The trio suddenly found themselves covered by nine wands, and Edward Potter was holding their own wands. The expedition leader, the quarter-giant Hugh Johnson, spoke first. "I wondered if that was really an accident. I should skin the three of you right now."

"I know a good few good spells for that," Edward said. "I'm sure we could make it look like an accident."

George Posy gave a big sigh. "I had hoped to stay, even if most of the rest of you went back, but I guess I shouldn't now." He looked at Edward. "Ed, are you really Ted Potter?"

Edward smiled grimly. "You were three years ahead of me, a Ravenclaw prefect and Head Boy. You gave me a detention my Fourth year when you caught me snogging Georgia Spinnet, and you gave it to me because you wanted to sneak Joyce here in with you to do the same thing on the cushions in the Charms classroom!"

Joyce Weasley (a first cousin to the seven Weasley siblings) and George's lover for the last fifteen months, blushed. They had rediscovered each other on the expedition and had finally become serious about each other. "I can't believe I didn't recognize you! It's so obvious, even with that brown hair -- dye job?"

Edward nodded.

"I'll say," Carole Weasley, Joyce's younger sister, added. She had been six years behind Edward at Hogwarts, but had had a major crush on the handsome Head Boy her First year. "I should have known it from the Muggle magic tricks if nothing else! You've got some explaining to do." They had become almost a couple over the previous eight months. Carole now understood his reticence to commit to a relationship.

"I thought Edward Potter was lost to those dark followers or something," John Perry, an American wizard said. "Disappeared after his, err, your, cousin's death and the disappearance of that dark wizard."

"I disappeared to the Vieux Carre," Edward answered. "For some very complicated reasons, it was decided I had to disappear until next month. It looks like the Other Side had the same idea, except they wanted to extend my absence."

Edward Potter took two steps closer to the Slytherin trio. "Talk. If Voldemort" (half the group shuddered, just as they had when the recording said the name) "is back, telling us won't really hurt you. If you keep anything back from me, and I decide that it's harmed Harry, or if Harry has been really hurt because you kept us here an extra year . . . you will know fear, then you will know pain, and then, you shall die." No one there had ever heard that tone of voice before, and none would have expected it from Ed Harold, slight-of-hand humorist and general entertainer. No one doubted Edward Potter would carry out his threat. There was no doubt this man was a true warlock.

"You can't do this!" Umbridge cried out.

"Don't kill them," Clara Pomfrey, the healer and second-youngest member of the group said suddenly. "Anything else you do, make certain it's something I can fix quickly." The brief blossom of hope died out in the three Slytherins' hearts.

Wednesday, June 19, 1996

"So, do I call you Ed or Ted?" Carole Weasley asked her lover shortly after midnight.

"How angry are you with me?"

"Would you ever have told me?" Carole returned.

"Yes," Edward said simply. "Remember, I said we would talk after we got back?"

Carole nodded.

Edward shrugged. "I need to see what's happened before I can commit to anything, even with you. I know we've been here too long; it's just a feeling, but it's very strong now. Harry is in danger; how much, I don't know. If he has . . . been harmed, or if Voldemort is back, then I have a duty. As much as I care for you, as much as I love you, that duty would have to come first, at least in the short-run."

Carole turned her back on him. "I wouldn't have understood Ed Harold saying something like that. Edward Potter, though . . . that I understand." She turned to him. "Ed . . . Ted, I talked with my cousins, you know -- Ron, Ginny, and George -- several times about Harry before we left. I understand some of why Harry is in danger, and I know why you need to help protect him. Can I help at all?"

"Maybe. . . ." Edward mused. "Shall we discuss the possibilities?"

Carole smiled. "There are only three possibilities. Would thee accept the Witch's Pledge from me, Edward Harold Potter?"

Edward stumbled and sat on his cot in shock. "Are you serious?"

"Totally."

"Carole Anne Weasley, I would accept thy Witch's Pledge." Edward extinguished the lights, except for the one prescribed candle.

Carole stripped off her clothes, knelt before Edward and put her hand, palm up, over his palm. Edward took a knife, and nicked the flesh under their thumbs. Carole turned her hand over, and mixed their blood. A murmured spell healed the cuts. Their blood glowed, showing the pledges had been freely given between adults, and the pledges accepted. Carole leaned forward and licked the blood from his hand. He took hers and did the same.

"I am thy servant and thy mistress, Master Edward Harold Potter; with our blood mingled, I am thine to command until thy death." It was a marriage and more than a marriage. It could never be requested or commanded or bargained for. It could only be offered freely, with no price or strings attached, and it gave the wizard total control over the witch's life, and pledged the wizard to love and protect the witch and her family.

"I accept thy Pledge, Carole Anne Potter."

"Then there is no need to discuss the other two options I would have entertained, my Master, my Lord, my. . . ."

"Your husband, my love, my life, my wife."

"Do you have a command for me, my Husband?"

"Two."

Carole was a little startled. "What . . . what are your commands, my Husband?"

"I ask you to swear to protect Harry with all your life and will."

"I swear both, my Master. And your other command?"

"A request, my love; from now on, they are requests. Please stay tonight, my wife?"

Carole smiled, blushing as only Weasleys can. "As you wish, my husband." 'About bloody time,' she thought.

Monday, July 1, 1996

"Hagrid," the bar-keep of the Hog's Head pub nodded. "Tha usual, mate?"

"Aye, Jack, thank ye." Hagrid stepped up to the bar and surveyed the pub. It was totally empty, being only 3:30 in the afternoon.

"Looking fer ma border?" Jack asked.

"Huh?"

Jack rolled his eyes. Normally, he kept his eyes open and his mouth shut. Hagrid was about the only regular customer he opened up to at all, and then only when they were alone. "Looks like yer lookin' fer someone; only got tha one man stayin' here."

"Ar," Hagrid said non-committedly.

"Thar be he now," Jack said, jerking his head towards the stairs.

Hagrid looked at the powerfully-built wizard. Only a little over average height at best, he still exuded confidence and power. Hagrid might not have guessed who it was if he had met the man casually. Despite wanting to call out a greeting, Hagrid restrained himself.

Hagrid was of course hard to miss in any room. Edward smiled to himself; Hagrid was as loyal a friend as anyone could want. Subtle, however, he wasn't. Giving himself a mental shrug, Edward walked over.

"Professor Hagrid, I believe?" Hagrid flushed. "I'm Doctor Edward Harold. My friends call me Ed."

"Really? Err, pleased ta meet yer, Doctor, err Ed."

"Two pints of that nice Scottish stout I had last night, please, and a second of whatever Professor Hagrid's having."

Jack gave a rough laugh. "Yer the politest damn customer I've had stay here in a longish while, lad! Sure you wouldn't prefer ta stay at tha Three Broomsticks?"

"I'm sure." Edward led Hagrid over to a secluded corner.

"Ed?" Hagrid asked.

"At least until after I meet with Dumbledore tomorrow," Edward replied.

"I'm sorry. . . ." Hagrid started, but Edward stopped him.

"Hagrid, I know you've done the best you could. I was worried that the sort of things that have happened over the last thirteen months might happen ever since James died. I don't know how I can fix things, but unless Dumbledore can give me some amazingly brilliant and compelling reasons, I'll be around, and I mean by that around for Harry, from now on. Now, I don't know if I'll be doing that as Ed Harold or as . . . my old self. For that sort of thing I'm more likely to rely on the Headmaster's judgements."

"Edward," Hagrid said very very softly, "that's not what I meant. I'm sorry about Sirius."

Edward's eyes filled with tears, but he didn't cry.

"I'm sorry I misdoubted him."

Edward patted Hagrid on a massive arm. "I know. We'll all be dealing with these feelings of guilt for a while."

"He was a good man, he were," Hagrid said, almost sniffing.

"He was." Edward's eyes looked up to the ceiling. "I never even got a chance to see him after . . . after he escaped. We exchanged a few notes, that's all."

"I didn't see him either," Hagrid admitted. "I wish I knew how Harry was takin' all this."

"I know" Edward frowned. "Does this mean"

"I don't know what prophecy Professor Dumbledore told Harry about, but he told me to tell you . . . that Harry was told all about it, but that everything else is up to you." It was hard for the adoring Hagrid to say that, since he knew that it meant, somehow, Dumbledore had miscalculated something.

Edward closed his eyes in pain for a moment. "Do I still have an appointment with him tomorrow?"

"That you do," Hagrid said eagerly. His face fell, "Less you don't want ta meet with him?"

"No," Edward said with something like a sigh, "I'll talk with him. It's time to build, not tear apart."

"I understand, err, Ed."

"What have you been doing to yourself? You weren't at the Ministry, too, were you?" Hagrid had several old bruises on his face, and was sitting very stiffly.

"No; no -- well, it's sort of hard ta explain. Tell Harry he an' Hermione can tell you, if'n they want ta. Anyways, I brought you this ta look at." Hagrid laid a large, very thick, book on the table.

Edward looked at it, puzzled. He shrugged, and opened the book -- it was a photo album -- and saw James. 'No,' he realized, 'not James -- Harry.' Harry, growing up. "How?" he gestured at the first photos.

"Ari took these in secret over tha years." They were Muggle photos for the most part, but Edward didn't care. "Ari said she knew you'd be back. She wanted you ta have these when you were ready. She sent 'em to me right after Harry came here. Told me ta fill up the rest for yer as best I could."

"Bless her bitter old heart," Edward said, hoping he wouldn't tear up. "God, he looks so much like James, except for his eyes."

"Aye, he's got Lily's eyes. He's himself, of course, but I've seen him with a look of Lily on his face as much as I've seen James. He's certainly got that same streak of, well, honorable nobility that you 'n' James an' Harold an' your dads all had at his age, maybe even more so than all of ye. An' he's got that gentleness with his friends, and those students who're weaker than him, that Lily always had. Not arrogant at all, and you know that were James' occasional failing. Smart, of course, but not as bookish as you folks were." Hagrid made an irritated noise. "Probably bad environment."

"Petunia never read anything beyond cheap romance novels, and I doubt Vernon has read a book since he left school," Edward growled softly.

Edward looked at the photos slowly, drinking in the sight of his nephew. He suddenly smiled some minutes later. "How did you get this?" It was Harry with the sorting hat on.

Hagrid almost blushed. "Well, that's supposed to be a secret that is."

"All right. Harry looks too thin in these, not like that Dursley pig of an uncle."

Hagrid snorted.

"What?"

"Well, seein' how it's you. . . ." Hagrid told Edward the story of delivering Harry's letter. Edward laughed heartily at the thought of a Dursley with a pig's tail.

Wizarding photos now showed up for Harry's second year. "I take it there's a photo fanatic a year behind Harry?"

"Aye, Colin Creevey."

"Who's the girl? The boy looks like a Weasley."

"That's Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger -- she's tha smartest witch we've had through here in many a year. Maybe since McGonagall, or maybe afor that, I don't know." He'd known the Hogwarts students for over fifty-five years, and McGonagall was the only one who came close to his beloved Hermione. "Muggle-born, good girl all-around. Powerful, too, if not in your league. Thought for a bit that she and Harry might become more than friends, but I think she and Ron Weasley there are closer these days. Harry might fancy Hermione, or he might fancy Ron's sister. Thought he was sweet on that Ravenclaw seeker, but that died out after Valentine's Day from what I heard. Not totally sure. Hard to keep up with the rumors, less you actually hear of someone caught snoggin'.

"Harry's not been caught?"

Hagrid grinned. "Not one to shop, not that anything's happened. If any of that bunch been snoggin', they've not been caught."

Edward went through the rest of the album, then shrunk it down and put it in a pocket.

"Hagrid . . . thank you for everything. I wish I could do something for you. . . ."

"Now don't you think such things! I've seen near sixty years of students come and go, I 'ave, and many I've liked and some I still think should 'ave been drowned at birth. Yer family's been some o' the best, so's all yer friends, with that one exception." Hagrid stood up. "Now I'll be collectin' ya at Eleven sharp, so's that Professor Flitwick can have a word with ya afor you meet with tha Headmaster instead o' afterwards. All right?"

"All right, Professor Hagrid." Edward stood, saw they were still alone, and shocked Hagrid by embracing him.

Hagrid was touched. He knew, better than most, how reserved the Potter boys were. He'd known six of them now, Harold and his two sons Harold and Edward, Jamie and his son James, and of course Harry. Brave, powerful, and noble to the core, each had a well-hidden stream of sentimentalism. Somehow, to Hagrid's amazement, he had touched that in all six of them. It was because of his own bravery, nobility, and above all his great heart, but he didn't recognize those qualities in himself.

Disengaging himself, Edward looked up and showed he had caught up on most of the gossip by saying, "If you and Olympe are free for Harry's birthday, he's getting a party, no matter where he's staying. I know he'd want you there."

"Thanks. I do me best."

'He always does,' Edward thought as he left.

Chapter V

Wednesday, July 3, 1996

"Answer the door, Boy! And send who ever it is away!"

"Yes, Aunt Petunia," Harry said in a dispirited voice.

"Then get out and work on that garden!"

"Alright," Harry grumbled. Before he had left Hogwarts, Dumbledore had called him to his office yet again. Harry wasn't certain how he felt about the Headmaster since the events at the Ministry and the morning afterwards, especially when he was reminded he would have to go to Privet Drive. With the protection he had there, and Sirius dead, where else could he go? Dumbledore promised him he would get an answer to questions like that within two weeks. That meant sometime later that week, he would have some more answers and, almost equally as important, would learn when he could leave Privet Drive. Until then, he had to put up with his relatives.

He pulled open the door, and stared. He knew this man. He knew every face in the photos of his parents, and here was a face from several group shots, including his parents' wedding and the group scene of his parents showing off himself as a new-born. Although the man was dressed as a Muggle, in an expensive blazer and slacks rather than robes, and was very tan and of course much older, there was no mistaking him. Even to Harry's eyes, the only clue the man was a wizard was the dragon-hide combat boots.

'One of these days, I really have got to sit down with Hagrid and get him to tell me who all those people are,' Harry thought. 'People from my parents' past are always popping up.' Hope swelled in his mind, that this might be the wizard who would fulfill the Headmaster's promises, but Harry quashed it. More likely, he either had some message that more explanations would be delayed yet again or was just a member of the Order checking up on him. The man would then no doubt launch into a spiel about how much Harry looked like his father.

"Do you recognize me, Harry?" The strong baritone voice matched the powerful body.

"You're in . . . some photos with my parents?"

"Very good. Are Petunia or Dudley here?"

"My aunt is, Dudley just went out. Who exactly are you?"

The man sighed. "That will be complicated."

"Who is it?" Petunia demanded, coming into the entrance foyer. She stared out the door for a moment, her jaw dropping open.

"Hello, Petunia," the man said in a not-so-nice voice -- Harry thought the man, who had sounded rather friendly a moment before, now sounded like the movie character Hannibal Lecter. "I told you I'd likely be allowed to come back this summer."

From the look on her face, Petunia apparently thought he sounded dangerous as well. She said nothing, but swallowed nervously several times. Harry stood back, and looked on, fascinated.

"What, nothing to say to the man who paid off your mortgage? Although I've learned you've had to take out a new one. What have you been spending the money on? It certainly hasn't been food or clothes for Harry." The man strode in, and Harry shut the door while still staring in amazement.

"It wasn't on Harry's education either, because I paid all the few costs of his primary school, and all the costs for Hogwarts except for Harry's supplies." Harry's eyes flew open in surprise. He'd thought the money for Hogwarts was simply taken out of his vault somehow, and the Dursleys had claimed to have had to pay for his school fees before that. "I am very disappointed in how you and Vernon have treated your nephew; our relative deserves better than that!" Harry was now nearly in shock. He should have realized, from the hair, if nothing else (even if it was light brown), that his father must have had either a younger brother or other male relative of some sort. Then Harry remembered that in the photos, the hair was black.

Harry kicked himself mentally for not asking Hagrid about those photos yet again.

"Get out of this house!" Petunia hissed.

"No."

"Get out, or I'll call the police!" she shrieked.

"And tell them what? That your nephew's paternal first cousin, who has been paying for his support, is here to check to see how well you've taken care of him? Oh, that will play really well with your neighbors, especially if they find out about the mortgages."

Harry was torn. Being surprised by having a new relative was more upsetting than anything else -- it raised a number of questions as well -- but this man certainly had Aunt Petunia figured out. Harry realized he should have been angry, but he wasn't. In part, it was because it was satisfying to see Petunia taken down a few notches.

Petunia had been abashed for a moment, but tried fighting back. "This isn't your house! Get out!"

"Really? You didn't agree to the bank's selling your mortgage nearly three years ago to a financial investment company, when you learned they would charge one per cent less interest? You did, you know, and the holding company is owned by the Potter Trust. In short, Petunia, Harry and I do own this house. Three payments have been late, and last month's payment hasn't been received, let alone this one. If we don't have both payments cleared by Two o'clock, we might just foreclose. And I know you won't have enough money to pay either until Friday."

Petunia was about to explode screaming, until she froze.

"Petrified?" Harry asked, merely curious.

"Yes. She can hear everything, but can't say anything; very awkward for her." The man grinned. "Even more so than most people."

Harry nearly returned the grin, but fought it. "So, you're my cousin?" The skepticism was overt, although Harry remembered what Sirius had said about old wizarding families being related. He knew he must have some cousins somewhere, but none had seemed interested in making themselves known before.

"Edward Harold Potter."

"Really?"

"Really. My grandfathers were named Edward and Harold -- Harold is the most popular name in the Potter family. Your father had an older brother, who died a few weeks after he was born named Harold. I also had an older brother Harold who was James' age, who . . . died young. James was James Harold. James was going to name you Harold James, but Lily thought it sounded too stuffy, and there was a Muggle musician from the late Nineteen Thirties that she liked called Harry James as well." Edward Potter took a half-step towards the sitting room. "I need to explain a number of things to you, of course, and then you have to decide what you want to do about them."

"I decide?" Harry was obviously surprised.

"You decide." He levitated Petunia ahead of them, and then moved into the front room. "First of all, I was called Ted or Edward by everyone until I left Britain, except the Marauders and my parents; since then most people have called me Ed or Edward."

"What did they call you?"

Edward nearly grimaced, "The Marauders called me Master Edward, because Sirius Black could be a real pain in the arse at times. My parents called me Teddy. I'd prefer Ted."

"Alright . . . Ted. Talk."

"You want to know where I've been and why I didn't take care of you, while you were stuck here, right?"

"Sounds like a good place to start, anyway." Harry sat on the sofa, crossed his arms, and stared as only a teen can.

"Your father was born in Fifty-eight; I was born in Sixty-four. I was in my last year at Hogwarts when they were killed. Sirius was supposed to be your guardian, since I hadn't graduated yet. Petunia was the least preferred of the original sixteen choices. . . ."

"Sixteen!"

Edward nodded. "However, eight of the sixteen had already been killed by Death Eaters -- all the rest of the Potter clan was wiped out in the massacre in August of Nineteen Seventy-eight, of course. James was taking me on a walking tour around Britain and we were a hour late, and so survived. We thought Pettigrew was dead, too." Harry shuddered a little at the idea of Peter Pettigrew raising him -- there were worse alternatives to Aunt Petunia. "Sirius, of course, was

framed for his murder. Remus and I thought that possible, but just couldn't believe Peter had the brains or the power to pull it off."

"So you didn't help him?" Harry was shocked.

"What could we have done against the Ministry with no evidence, even if we'd been sure? -- which we weren't. Anyway, Remus, their original fourth choice, was disallowed by the Ministry, and while I was the first choice, that would have only after I left Hogwarts. Dumbledore was on the list, and he talked the other ones still living into giving you over to Petunia." He turned and sneered at Petunia.

"At the time, I totally disagreed with him. He knew that you and I would always be targets of the Death Eaters, like the rest of the Potters. . . ."

"Why?"

"I promise I'll tell you, Harry, before I leave today. But let me tell it my way, okay?"

Harry agreed, reluctantly.

"In fact, the summer after I left Hogwarts, there were two attempts on my life. That's also when the Longbottoms were attacked . . . do you know about that?" Edward remembered that the Longbottom boy was in Harry's dorm.

Harry nodded. He thought he understood where this was going.

"I decided Dumbledore was right, and a bad parent as Petunia obviously was and is, under her care at least you wouldn't be killed. There was a better chance we would be hunted down together than if we were apart. I changed my name by dropping the 'Potter' and went to America, where I worked on magical and Muggle credentials." Edward smiled and turned to face Petunia. "Hey, Petunia! I have a PhD and am received in the highest Muggle social and intellectual circles of the United States, Britain, and the rest of Europe! Did you catch that BBC special I was in three years ago?"

He turned back to Harry. "I really am a well-known Muggle archeologist and Egyptologist, although I'm much more famous in the magical world now, under the name of Edward Harold."

"Hermione has some book by you; she was raving about it one week a few years ago. Something about how it was a more complete version than the Muggle one?"

"That's what I have been most famous for, until a few days from now. Girl friend?"

"One of my best friends, but not my girlfriend," Harry said firmly.

'Hagrid was right about that, at least,' Edward thought. "Sorry, vulgar curiosity. Anyway, I think that explains why I was missing, or at least what I was doing, during your nearly ten-year incarceration here. Dumbledore kept the magical community away, and Petunia and Vernon made it clear I was to stay away, too." He again turned to Petunia. "You tried to renege on the deal to send Harry to Hogwarts, though, didn't you? That's another thing I'll discuss with you and Vernon later," he almost snarled. Harry was rather startled at how the

man could be so friendly and nice to him, while so angry and stern with Petunia without any seeming break. While not as abrupt as Sirius' changes had been at times, they were still startling.

He turned back to Harry. "Now, in my last year at Hogwarts, Dumbledore and I had some severe, if polite, disagreements. I resigned as Head Boy and captain of the Quidditch team. . . ."

"What!"

"Surprised I'd give up Head Boy or Quidditch?"

"You quit the team, too!"

"Well, that answers that question!" Edward thought. "I was learning how fickle popularity at school could be. It seemed as if a third of the people already hated me. . . ."

"Slytherins?"

Edward smiled a little. "Mostly. There are some good people in Slytherin, but most only show it after they leave school. Anyway, another third seemed to prefer remembering how close I was to Sirius, and gossiped that I had helped him find and kill James and then tried to kill you for the family money. I was mad at them, Dumbledore, and the world. I quit everything except school work, and learned that most of the remaining third had little use for me, either." He smiled a little again, remembering one little First year girl who had stayed nice. "I was determined to become a Warlock. I made it, too. I'm both a Sorcerer and a Warlock, but only gained the titles when my outlook became a bit more . . . balanced."

"Anyway, I guess I needed Dumbledore one too many times. He forbade me to see you until you were seventeen. We finally reached a compromise by agreeing I could meet with him over the matter yesterday."

"But that was. . . ."

"An appointment made fourteen years ago. I actually talked with him and Remus several times during your Third year. I didn't know what Sirius was up to, but I couldn't believe he was trying to kill you. I'm glad I was right."

"And two years ago?" Harry demanded. "And last June? AND LAST MONTH?"

Edward turned away for a second. Although his face was lowered when he turned back, Harry could see tears were nearly falling. "I was made an offer I couldn't refuse, in part because we all thought your Fourth year would be calm." Harry snorted at that. "Yes, I know -- we were wrong. And I was wrong; it wasn't that I just took Dumbledore's outlook. I agreed with it. I was wrong." Harry saw the man was obviously very angry with himself, and was wiping away some genuine tears.

"Anyways, a very large, very ancient, hidden area was located in what today is called Chad. Teams had been trying to get in for decades, and we finally found a way. To get in, we had to go in on an equinox, and we could only leave on a solstice. No word could be easily sent in or out. We left in September, Nineteen ninety-four, and were supposed to come back in June of

Ninety-five. It was so important and interesting, I was the only one willing to leave, and the others talked me into staying. In December of Ninety-five, the same thing happened, but I got them to all agree to leave the following June, that is two weeks ago. By then, I was suspicious of three or four of my colleagues. Sure enough, three tried to stop us from going again, but I had proof they were trying to sabotage me, not support the project. If I'd heard about that entry in the Triwizard, I would have come back in June of Ninety-five, honestly, even though I made some discoveries that will make me famous, and made some other that are highly important, and secret."

Edward leaned back in the chair he'd sat in, his eyes still red. "I imagine you want, even need, to partition blame for why you had to suffer here. Well, most goes to Voldemort, of course. Next would be Wormtail, then Dumbledore. After that, either Petunia or me. After us, Vernon. I could probably have fought Dumbledore harder once you were in school. No, strike that; I should have fought harder once you were in school, and I didn't. I was wrong. Of course, Petunia could have mentioned me; she knew me and I know Dumbledore wouldn't have told her not to mention me. Try not to blame Remus, Sirius, or Hagrid too much. I know Sirius and especially Remus each had more than one fight with Dumbledore on the subject, and so did Flitwick. Hagrid hero-worships Dumbledore more than anyone else; he wouldn't tell you, not directly, anyway."

Edward got a stern look on his face. "Of course indirectly . . . you did recognize me from that photo album Hagrid put together, right?"

Harry could only nod.

"Well, more than half of those photos came from myself and Remus. I know I was in more than a few -- never asked anyone who I was, did you?"

"No," Harry said in a small voice.

"Dumbledore told the staff at Hogwarts that no one was to tell you about me, but that if you ever asked, they were to direct you to him and he would tell you. So, it's mostly a lot of other people's fault, but if you really had wanted to know about your father's family, you could have found out -- we're in any number of reference books, you know." Harry blushed, remembering how many times Hermione had tried to get him to look at those reference books. "Never looked at the plaque that goes with the Quidditch Cup, did you?" Edward went on.

"Of course I did! My dad's name's on it as captain. . . ."

"That's right, Nineteen seventy-five and Seventy-six. And mine's there for Eighty-one, at least -- I doubt they put in on for Eight-two, even if we and Hufflepuff tied for the Cup and I captained the team for the first game. Edward H. Potter. It's on the little bronze plaques of the team Quidditch players in the Gryffindor stairway, too. And I wouldn't be surprised if they erased my name from the Head Boy's list, but it might be there. Now, I'm not saying all this to make you feel bad or stupid, but you can't rely on people giving you information before they think you need it if you don't ask for it and look for it."

Harry flushed.

"Of course, you still have every right to be upset, and even angry, about this situation, Harry," the man continued, "and that includes being angry with me. But before we get into that, and

your questions, let's talk protection. I'm sure you've figured out by now why you're stuck here at the Dursley's every summer?"

Harry reluctantly answered, "Because my mum died for me, that gave me some sort of protection."

"Right, it gave you several layers of protection. When Voldemort was resurrected using your blood, that canceled some, but left others intact. In short, until you're over eighteen, you cannot be harmed while you live with Petunia. And, while you live here, your enemies can't hurt the Dursleys, either."

"Really?" Harry hadn't been certain of the latter.

"Really. And because you work around the house, it quickens the protection. If you were to, say, paint the outside trim of the house, we might be able to pull you out in a few weeks and still leave the Dursleys protected. As nasty as this bunch are, I doubt you want to see Dudley and Vernon tortured and killed."

"No, I don't! I hate seeing anyone . . . hurt." Harry thought a moment. "What about her?" He gestured toward Petunia.

"Oh, they'd torture and kill Vernon and Dudley for fun. Petunia they would just torture, and then try to lure you out to protect her. Then they'd kill her."

"Oh," Harry said, again in a very small voice.

Edward stood up and walked over to the still-petrified Petunia. "Now, you should have heard all that. As you know, some truly evil people are after Harry, and you're his protection, and he is yours. If Harry stays a little longer this summer, and a short part of next summer, and can come back to spend his other vacations if he needs to, he's protected here and you're protected while he's gone. Behave yourselves, and you should get out of all this not only alive, but never really even seeing the effects of a war you need not know about. And, on top of that, on Harry's eighteenth birthday, if you three have behaved yourselves, we'll pay off your mortgage -- again. But don't expect it a third time. Understand?" Edward pulled out his wand and muttered the counter-curse.

Petunia gave a squeak, and then sat on the floor.

"Did you understand all that, Petunia?" Edward asked, fairly gently.

"I understand, Ted," she muttered.

"Harry and I will be up in his room, talking. We might like a good lunch in about two hours. Harry needs feeding up, and I'm hungry, too. All right?"

Petunia stared at him, resentful but, Harry noted, not hatefully. She even took Edward's hand when he offered to help her up. "Oh, by the way, here," Edward said, handing her an envelope.

"What's this?"

"A hundred pounds, towards expenses. I might be here for any number of meals this month, and while I expect you to feed and house Harry, I don't expect you to feed me for free."

"Thank you," she said quietly. Petunia finally looked him in the eye. "You'll be here to talk to Vernon?"

"Of course. I'm sorry you got dragged into what turned out to be a dangerous situation. And no, I won't hurt Vernon, unless he's stupid enough to take a swing at me or Harry."

"Thank you," she repeated, and left the room.

"Let's go talk in your room, Harry. We can get more detailed there, and I can try to answer your questions."

"You have a lot more stuff than I thought they'd have given you," Edward remarked.

"This is all Dudley's surplus, not mine," Harry said resentfully.

"Ah, sorry."

"I'm surprised I haven't gotten an owl, blaming me for your hexes," Harry muttered.

"They know that I, or at least Edward Harold, is here. And I doubt anyone at the Ministry wants to tangle with you right now."

"Well, that's good. I don't need any more problems."

"How angry are you right now?"

Harry sat on his bed and thought. He really should be angry, but he wasn't. "I guess I'm not really angry," Harry admitted, honest as he usually was. "I probably should be, but at least you admitted that you were wrong, or at least partly wrong. Dumbledore and Ministry officials and people like that keep telling me they're acting for my own good, but they never really tell me why it's for my own good!"

"Dumbledore does play things too close to his chest. He is brilliant, but that doesn't mean he's always right."

"You paid for Hogwarts?"

"There's a Trust that could easily support two dozen people in lives of workless luxury. However, it only pays a half share to adult witches until their marriage and to adult wizards, and right now I'm the only person eligible. Why make you take money out of James' old current account when I have plenty?"

"That's not all the money I have?"

"It's all the money you have until you're seventeen."

"Wow." Harry thought a moment. "If I paint the trim I can leave?"

"Before your birthday if you do some of the other chores I understand they impose on you; I won't swear as to how much before."

"Where would I go?"

"Two, maybe three, choices that I know of -- Remus' is now a real possibility. Your great great grandparents' places are still there -- I inherited my father's father's rather large estate, the Potter family estate, in fact. My father was older than James', although he married later. Remus lives in a small cabin that's technically on the estate, but it's outside the most powerful wards -- Potter Place is one of the dozen most secure private wizarding homes in the world and has been for over 900 years. My great grandmother's parents' place was Godric's Hollow, by the way. My grandparents both died a few years before James married, and Lily liked it a lot more than Potter Place, which is another reason I inherited Potter Place, although James had, and you have, some rights there."

"Anyway, the house in Godric's Hollow was rebuilt, and belongs totally to you, although the Trust is renting it out. That money has been placed in your current account vault every month, along with the interest." He shrugged. "Anyway, I'll be at home after you leave here. We'd like it if you came there, too. It might technically belong to me, but it's your heritage as well."

Harry gave up trying to keep the generations straight. "And the third?"

"The Weasleys, if they would host you."

"Sounds good to me."

"If that's what you really want to do, then I'll help you. However, your friends would be welcome at my, our, place. You can spend part of the time with Remus, if Dumbledore doesn't have him out on missions."

"And if you go on one?" Harry demanded.

"I'm not planning on going anywhere, Harry. How close I am to you is up to you, but I'll be there for you if I can. If I'm not, then Remus will be. In fact, I just signed a three year contract to teach Runes at Hogwarts and Remus will likely come back as the Defense teacher. It's mostly up to you if I'm there as Edward Harold or Edward Potter."

"Why do I get to decide?" Harry wasn't sure how to deal with this much honesty from an adult.

"Because I've been out of your life for as long as you can remember. I can't just show up and force myself intimately into your life. You're stuck with me in the periphery of your life, somewhat closer than I imagine Petunia will be, but that's as far as I can make you go. And, as Dumbledore often reminded me, even though James and I thought of each other as brothers, we weren't. I'm not your uncle, I'm your first cousin once removed. I can't take over your life."

'Why couldn't the others treat me with this much respect?' Harry wondered. "Can I ask more questions?"

Edward looked at his watch. "It's still only a little after Ten. Why don't we go clothes shopping for you. If you want, we can eat in the village and let Petunia off of fixing us lunch if she hasn't started and get her started on dinner instead."

Harry grinned. "Cool." He was glad his cousin hadn't remarked on his poorly fitting clothes, although Harry hadn't missed his look of disapproval.

Harry enjoyed riding into the center of the small town, since his cousin had a small vintage Astin Martin convertible. It also turned out he had both his own and Sirius' motorcycles back on the estate.

Harry kept his purchases reasonable, buying six pairs of slacks and jeans, trainers, and two dozen shirts of various types. Edward had also insisted he buy one blazer and a tie. Harry also bought a small supply of Muggle writing paper -- he'd noticed that while the supplies sold in the magical world were of much higher quality, they were also of much higher price. It just didn't seem right to use high quality parchment as scratch paper.

"Do you think Aunt Petunia can really be trusted?" Harry asked as they packed away his purchases in the car's small boot.

"Probably, since she now knows we can take away the house and has enough knowledge of the situation to appreciate it. I'm less sure how Vernon will react. Of course, over the years, I met Petunia a few more times than Vernon, and heard James and especially Lily talk about her. You know her better than I do; I take it you're concerned?"

"A little. I . . . I guess I have no reason to trust them." Harry frowned as they started walking towards a small but expensive restaurant that Harry knew had booted the Dursleys out of two years before because of Dudley's fussing. Harry was now wearing new clothes, including the blazer and tie, and felt he should be able to fit in. "Couldn't they just borrow the money, or are they really strapped?"

"While the Dursleys don't live too extravagantly, they don't stint themselves, either. Dudley's school is quite an expense, although not totally out of their financial realm. That second mortgage should have taken care of everything, except that silly drill business isn't doing very well. Give Vernon his due, it would have gone under a few years ago if it weren't for him. Still, it's not making that much money. Vernon sunk their credit into buying further into the company. He now owns about thirty-six percent, more than any other person or group."

Harry wondered for a moment why Edward knew so much about Vernon's finances. "Do we own any?" he then asked.

Edward smiled. Harry was smart. "Fifteen percent. Anyway, Vernon would either have to give up on the house, give up on Dudley's school, or give up his share of the business. If he gives up the first two, he loses status; if he gives up the third, there's a good chance the company would go under and he'd lose his job. Anyways, he always struck me as the type to keep bulling his way through, until the walls collapse around him."

"That's him."

"Well, between the mortgage and offering him proxy rights over our share of his business, especially with you going away in a few weeks, and likely only coming back for a few weeks next summer, plus the fact that he knows I'll skin him alive and turn it into a vest if he hurts you, I think he'll come around."

"Is that what you threatened him with?"

"Yes. I meant it, at the time. Tell me about growing up there, if you don't mind."

"Why?"

Edward's expression darkened. "I knew it wouldn't be very good; I gather it was downright bad. If it was, I'm the person to take it out of them."

Harry thought about it. "Alright. We can trade stories. Tell me about some of your archeological finds."

"Deal."

They made it back, arms laden, around 3:30. Dudley took one look at the happy Harry and his muscular relative, and fled to his room, locking the door.

Edward gave Petunia a cheery greeting, and went up with Harry to the smallest bedroom.

"Why doesn't Petunia hate you?" Harry asked. "Considering her general . . . opinion of wizards, and my parents, she should really be showing . . . more hate, or at least be more angry."

"Of the dozen or so witches and wizards Lily brought home over the years that I know of, probably only Remus and I treated Petunia as a person with feelings. James was never mean to her, but he always laughed when Sirius played jokes on her or her and Vernon, and he played some nasty ones on them. The other girls were pretty snotty to her, I must say. Wormtail wasn't mean to her, but of course was always sucking up to the others. Your mum was never mean to her either, but, like any sibling, wasn't above some petty behavior. And to Petunia, your mum was the pretty, smart, younger sister stealing her parents' affection long before Lily found out about magic. To make things worse, it turned out both sets of Lily's grandparents were squibs or near-squibs, and they were ecstatic that Lily turned out not just magical, but bright and talented, too. Her parents were even more ecstatic that one of their daughters could join the world they'd heard about but could have no real part in."

"That explains a lot! If she wasn't so mean to me, I'd feel sorry for her."

"At least you understand her better."

"I guess." Harry looked at his cousin. "Can I ask you something about my father?"

"Of course!"

"I saw . . . I saw, in a pensieve, how he treated Snape. . . ."

Edward laughed. "God, those two hated each other from the time they met on the Hogwarts Express! Snape and Sirius were cousins, and they hated each other since they were in the same crib together -- there used to be a photo of the two pulling each other's hair when they were about a year old! They were only two weeks apart in age."

"Anyway, back to the train, as told by Remus, so you know it's fairly reliable. Snake was with a bunch of older Slytherins, harassing some young Muggle-borns, and trying to get Sirius to join in with their bigotry. Snake became the leader of the Muggle-haters in his year, and James and Harold wouldn't stand for it. Sirius didn't care much for Muggles at the time, but he was already tired of his family. James really helped bring Sirius out of his family's shadow."

"Really?" Harry paused. "Snake? Not Snivellus?"

"We called him Snake; only Sirius and James dared call him Snivellus." Edward thought a moment. "Was this memory from their Fifth or Sixth year?"

"Fifth; during their O.W.L.s. Why?"

"Most of the nastier Slytherins of the period were two to four years ahead of them; Malfoy, Lestrangle, Nott, Macnair, Bellatrix Black, people like that, or a few years behind them, like Sirius' brother. As Snape became slightly more isolated, the Marauders really upped their attacks. The end of their Fifth years until Sirius nearly got Snape killed in their Sixth, they really made Snape's life a living hell."

Edward looked into Harry's eyes. "If Snape told you anything, remember that they hated each other, and that the Snake gave the Marauders and others as much grief as they gave him, except for those few months. James and Sirius weren't saints by any means, and for all I know they went over the line, but don't think the man a wounded innocent -- coming from his family, he didn't have much of a chance."

"Sirius came from a nasty family, too," Harry reminded his cousin.

"Nasty? Sirius' mother was about the nastiest, most evil woman I've ever met! But she wasn't a Black, she was Snape's mother's twin sister."

"Really? I didn't see any Snapes on that tapestry. . . ."

"Never saw it myself; you'll have to tell me how you saw it some time." Harry paled. Had he revealed something he shouldn't have?"

"I know you were at Sirius' house a few times, and yes, I'm now a member of the Order," Edward assured him. "I just figured Sirius would have burned it off the wall if they couldn't tear it down."

"Does the Order still meet there?" Harry asked.

"Dumbledore arranged for Tonks to inherit it," Edward said. "Anyway, the Blacks were nasty, the Snapes and some associated families, like the Malfoys, Notts, Macnairs, Goyles, and Lestranges, are downright evil! The two sisters were Lestranges, by the way."

Edward thought a moment. "Considering his background, I guess Snake turned out almost decent."

"He helped get Sirius killed!"

Edward looked at Harry. "Did he really?"

Harry opened his mouth to spell out the damage, but couldn't. Snape had stopped his lessons, but he'd been almost as much at fault. Snape had insulted and taunted Sirius, but Dumbledore had confined him. Kreacher had manipulated Harry and Sirius both.

"Yes," he said, "but I guess there's plenty of blame to go around for that." Harry looked at his cousin and decided to change the subject. "Are you going to explain why Voldemort is after me now?"

"I thought Dumbledore told you about the Prophecy?" Edward knew Harry would need to talk about Sirius, but it obviously wasn't time yet.

"He did," Harry agreed. "I think you're going to give me a better explanation about why Voldemort decided I was the one it meant."

"Alright." Edward sat in the desk chair and leaned back. "The short version. In magical families, heirs are counted in several different ways. The first is by magical blood and gender. The magical son of a powerful wizard in a primary heir, a magical daughter is a secondary heir. If it's a powerful witch, then the opposite is true. Both are magical heirs. A break in the gender line also turns a primary into a secondary. If a squib is born to a witch and wizard, but then has magical descendants, that's a general heir. Now, as I'm told you know, Tom Riddle. . ."

"Voldemort is the last heir of Slytherin."

"He's the last known secondary magical heir of Slytherin's second marriage, which for the purposes of Dark magic is the one that matters," Edward amended. "There are no primary heirs of either marriage left. There are numerous general heirs, thousands in fact, including the Evans', by the way. And the Potters are. . . ?"

"Heirs of Gryffindor?"

"Very good. We're the last known primary heirs of Gryffindor, heirs of the seventh son of his seventh son, named, believe it or not, Harold the Potterer."

Harry stared, and then burst out laughing. When he recovered, he said, "That explains a lot." He paused. "Why couldn't Dumbledore just tell me that part at the end of my first year? Or at least after the second?"

"Because he thought that responsibility would a little over-whelming to a twelve or even thirteen year old. It wasn't a real secret, but it isn't really generally known. Dumbledore planned from the beginning on telling you everything at Christmas during your fourth year. However, he felt that, with the pressures on you from the Triwizard and since then, you didn't need one more thing to think about."

"That's what he told me about the Prophecy, too. I guess I was just hoping there was a better reason," Harry said in a complaining manner.

"If the Tournament hadn't ended in such a disaster, he would have told you all about it then. He wanted to give you time to recover, but the events of last year certainly didn't help. I think he was waiting for you to return to Hogwarts this year to tell you this part, if I'd been delayed again."

"And all this means what?"

"There are lots of reasons why it works out this way, but in a nutshell, it means that our magic will trump Riddle's, given any kind of even chance. If James had met Him in a real fight, instead of being surprised by Him when he thought he was safe, Voldemort should have been destroyed that night. The Prophecy implies there's some reason that what held for Tom Riddle no longer holds for Voldemort, but so far as I know, we don't know why. Most likely, it has to do with what Riddle did to himself to make himself Voldemort -- you are the only Potter born since the transformations became complete. Voldemort can't win against you in an open fight if we keep our heads -- just as your wand over-powered his after his resurrection, and his having a body based partially on your blood hasn't changed that, unless it's made him weaker. He has sent the magical world out of balance, and you have the power to counter Voldemort because we had the power to counter Tom Marvolo Riddle. Not to counter everyone, but specifically him -- you're very powerful, perhaps you'll be as powerful as James or even myself by the time you're an adult, but you could more easily lose to another very powerful wizard who wasn't a descendent of Slytherin if you aren't careful."

Edward hesitated, and then put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "That doesn't mean you're just a tool or a pawn, Harry, although it's understandable that you might feel that way at times. Voldemort can lose to a very powerful wizard who's not a descendent of Gryffindor. The difference is, Voldemort believes that he's so powerful that only a descendent of Gryffindor could pose any sort of threat -- plus Dumbledore, of course."

"But even if Dumbledore, and maybe you, can defeat him, only I can kill him, right? And if I don't kill him, he'll kill me?"

"Yes. I can defeat Voldemort, but I can't kill the bastard. You can."

"Thanks for telling me." He thought a moment. "Do I need to keep it a secret?"

"Probably, except from your closest friends, if you're sure they can keep a secret."

"And Sirius and Remus couldn't tell me?"

"Because they knew there was more to it than they knew, and they were forced to promise not to tell what parts they did know. And they didn't know the details of the Prophecy in any event, they just knew there was one that predicted you would lead to Voldemort's death."

"And the rest is?" Harry asked, worriedly.

"The details of the Prophecy itself, and that Gryffindor, and therefore the Potters, was also a secondary heir of Merlin -- descended from one of his granddaughters -- Dumbledore is a primary heir, by the way. We're also descended from just about every important Light and

general magical family there has been in Western Europe over the last thousand years and more."

"Shit."

"It's a burden, being special, isn't it?"

Harry sighed. "I guess you would know, too."

The pair talked until nearly 6:00, which was when a roar was heard. "WHO IS HERE?"

Vernon was home.

Edward smiled grimly. "I think I'll go speak with dear Vernon." Harry decided his presence would just make the conference even nastier.

It was a very strange dinner at the Dursleys. In terms of quality and quantity of food allowed him, it was the best meal Harry ever remembered eating there. Petunia and Vernon were on their best behavior. Dudley was fairly nervous, but he tried to be fairly polite. When Edward left for the night, however, Vernon rounded on Harry.

"Think you've got us over a barrel, do you, boy?"

"Uncle Vernon, in less than two years I'll be out of your life one way or another, if that's what you really want. Can't we get along for the little time I have to be here between now and then?"

Vernon looked at the young freak. He huffed into his moustache, but then said, "Very well, boy. If you're going to paint the house, you'd better get to bed earlier than usual." Harry merely said goodnight, and left.

"Daddy?" Dudley asked when Harry was safely gone.

"Remember something, son," Vernon said quietly, almost to himself, "'he who has the gold makes the rules.' Freaks or not, they have the gold. It's to our advantage to keep this up for two more years, even if we don't like it much. And after all, he is a freak, but he's still related to you and your mother. We don't like him, but we don't want him to be killed, either. Just stay away from him."

"Yes, Daddy," Dudley responded. He left puzzled; still, at least this wizard hadn't transformed any part of him -- yet.

Chapter VI

Thursday, July 4, 1996

"How did you learn the Mu . . . the right way to paint a house?" Harry asked Edward the next morning.

"I did my advanced training in New Orleans. I rented, and then bought, a small house. While I had some help on the inside, I took care of the outside. It was fairly interesting. I could have hired it done of course, but I thought it better that I learned." He lowered his voice. "Most Dark Wizards in the last two hundred years have been similar to Tom Riddle -- what most people would call racial supremacists. Over the last few years, though, a new type of criminal has started growing up; more like your typical Muggle crime families. I heard Riddle has been having some problems with them; many don't have the prejudices against Muggle-born, and the ones who do don't like coming in second to Riddle. They don't like having Aurors snooping into their business, either."

"I don't see the connection."

"You're learning survival skills; being able to live in the regular world gives you lots of options. Even something as simple as painting a house is something that most Pure Bloods would mess up. You may be hiding, you may be tracking down the new criminals, you may just be fleeing fame. No matter what, you can fit in."

"True. I hadn't thought of that."

"No one can think of everything, Harry. That's why, unless we're unfeeling or extraordinarily selfish, we feel guilty."

"Knowing we shouldn't feel guilty doesn't make it easier to live with," Harry said, thinking back to his own feelings.

Edward helped Harry move the ladder to the next upper storey window. "True. I have lots of regrets myself. I wish I could at least go back to the day before . . . I don't know how I could have convinced James, but I would have tried. I wish I could have been here for you this last year. I wish I had been with you and Sirius last month." Edward's face hardened. "There are even more scores to settle now."

"I know. If we could have . . . destroyed Voldemort a year ago June if not before, so much would have been better."

"Of course, there still would have been lots of evil in the world," Edward mused, "but I have a hard time believing it would have been worse."

"And if we could have stopped him Eighty-one, Sirius would still be alive, maybe never would have been sent to Azkaban, even if Mum and Dad were still killed."

"True."

"I wish we could have met before this," Harry said.

"I know. I'm sorry, Harry. I should have been here for you. Even if you were still stuck here for part of every summer; even if we had to keep it secret -- I should have been here. I am sorry."

"I know." Harry sighed and stepped on the ladder. "I'm sorry I didn't ask about you."

"Well, we Potters are a sorry lot. I'm sure Petunia would agree, wouldn't you?" he called out suddenly.

Harry heard a window close abruptly. Then another noise distracted him.

"Have any of the enemy been seen?" Harry knew it was Edward's voice, but it sounded stranger than the question. Looking, Harry realized his uncle was talking to a grass snake.

"No adders have been seen," replied the soft hiss. "All others are clear."

"Thank you. Be careful of the owls."

"You're . . . you're a Parselmouth!"

"Of course. All Potter men are; or at least most of us. I understand you are, too."

"Dumbledore thought . . . it was a power Voldemort . . . well, that He somehow shared with me."

"Dumbledore doesn't know everything about us, Harry. Since many people mistakenly believe it's a Dark Gift, we tend not to reveal it. It's possible Voldemort's powers reinforced yours, but that's all." Edward looked at his cousin. "If you're willing to take it seriously now, I can work with you on your Occlumency this summer."

Harry flushed. "Yes, sir; this time I'll really work on it."

"You've had a rough thirteen months, Harry. No need to be ashamed."

Harry decided to change the subject again. "Are you an animagus?"

"No. I thought about it, but decided not to. Self-transfiguration will have to do."

"I thought those weren't too difficult to detect."

Edward shrugged. "The more powerful the wizard, the harder it is to detect." In rapid succession, he turned into a bird bath, a bird feeder, three types of sun dial, and finally a small flag pole waving both the Union Jack and Gryffindor pennant. He popped back. "The real key is to fit into your surroundings. If you do, only a slight aura can give you away, which most wizards can't see without casting a spell, and which most others who can see it won't notice unless they really take notice of little things around them. It's also harder to detect in sunlight. If you blend in, they probably won't notice." He turned into a very out-of-place Louis XV love seat for a few seconds. "See?"

Harry laughed. "Can most wizards do all that?"

Edward looked at his nephew, suddenly very serious. "Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno. I've never really seen many adult wizards outside of school, except the Weasleys. I don't know how adult wizards act in private. Maybe that's a type of wizard parlor game."

Edward laughed. "It might be a fun game at that!" He sighed. "Harry, in our society, the position you hold is dependent on many factors. In rising order: your aptitudes; your friends and associates; your job and/or wealth; your character and personality; your family; and your power. Arthur Weasley is considered a crank, because of his obsessions with Muggle technology -- he should have been transferred out of his job and gone on to higher rank, but he loves it too much. His friends are odder than he is. His personality and character are of the highest order." Harry had felt himself getting angry; this last statement appeased him a little.

Edward went on. "However, he's so friendly that people forget he's also a very strong-minded individual. He has no money and his current position is in one of the lowest ranking parts of the Ministry, even if he's the Head of the Department and therefore outranks 99% of all Ministry officials. The Weasleys are, however, a fairly old family -- more than a thousand years old. And most Weasleys are fairly powerful wizards. The Malfoys, on the other hand, are a few hundred years younger than the Weasleys and generally a pretty nasty lot. And that nasty, bullying manner doesn't win them friends, but it does bring them a somewhat fearful respect. They're one of the wealthiest Wizard families in Britain, and they generally produce equally strong wizards as the Weasleys -- with wizarding families of a few generations, you can generally predict the range of power anyone born into them will fall into, although there are always exceptions in either direction. Potters are richer than Malfoys, although we don't flaunt it. We're more powerful, and we sometimes flaunt that. But you, James, and I are three of the ten or so most powerful wizards in Western Europe in at least the last two hundred years, Harry, maybe the last thousand. Dumbledore and Voldemort are the only two that could nearly equal you and me in terms of raw power."

"Nearly equal?"

"Nearly equal. Now, remember, there's more to magic than mere power. Power is not the same as talent. Dumbledore's also a bloody genius at every branch of magic, so far as I've heard, and Voldemort was, too. I fought my way to twelve O.W.L.s and twelve N.E.W.T.s, and just barely made four of the N.E.W.T.s, the same as your Dad. On the other hand, James probably was the second best Transfiguration student in the last two hundred years, after Dumbledore, and I was the best Charms student in Hogwarts history. We were pretty great in Defense, too, and I think you might end up out-stripping us both there. To answer your question, no, most wizards couldn't do what I did as well as I did it, in the time span I did it in."

Edward took a deep breath. "Don't think I don't have much respect for Arthur Weasley, or Weasleys in general. I . . . well, I'm . . . I've secretly married Carole Weasley, one of Arthur's cousins. We still have to tell the Weasleys, so don't tell anyone yet."

"Warlocks are allowed to marry?"

Edward smiled. "Once we're full-fledged warlocks, we can date and even marry. What we can't do is torture, use major magic for personal gain, or participate in pure government work. We can work with Aurors, or as a temporary Auror, but can't be Aurors, for example."

"But Dumbledore was removed as the Chief Warlock by the Ministry. . . ."

"Being a Chief Warlock is much like being an Ambassador. Both the Warlocks and the national Ministry have to agree to it. When the British Ministry removed Dumbledore, the Warlocks refused to appoint anyone else. He's back now, of course."

"And does this mean you couldn't have skinned Uncle Vernon, right?"

Edward made some exaggerated facial expressions, pretending to think about it. "Well . . . that wouldn't be torture for pleasure, profit, or information. We can torture as punishment, but it's frowned upon."

"You said the range of power a wizard will fall into can be pretty well predicted by who their parents were. How about Muggle-borns or mixed-bloods?"

"We don't know exactly how Magical powers are passed on. It almost has to be genetic, of course, but beyond that?" He shrugged. "Usually in wizarding families the genes match up; sometimes they don't and you get a squib. Most Muggles probably don't have any genetic disposition towards magic. Those that do are most likely descended from squibs -- less than one out of every 1,500 people are born with powerful enough magic to be trained, maybe five million to maybe five an a quarter million world wide at the moment. You'd need to match up squib-descended Muggles to get a Muggle-born, and even the Muggles can't identify the genes responsible. Most Muggle-borns have pretty weak powers; most so weak they are never even informed of about our world. Most of the time, their powers lie in things like Divination and the abilities to see auras, ghosts, and magical plants and animals. Still, sometimes you get people like your dorm-mate Dean Thomas; a Muggle-born with moderate powers." Harry frowned.

Edward carried on. "Marrying a pure-Muggle is chancy; you don't know for certain that they have squib-genetics, and it might not match up. Most mixed marriages produce squibs."

"How do you explain Hermione Granger, then? She's a Muggle-born, not a witch or wizard known in her family, and she's more powerful than I am!"

"She's more talented, Harry, not more powerful," Edward corrected, "just as I'm more powerful than Dumbledore, but he's much more talented. Remus, Filius, and Dumbledore have all mentioned her. She's obviously a genius, and she's fairly powerful. Statistically, she's a fluke -- she's the second most powerful Muggle-born at Hogwarts in the last sixty years or so. Lily was almost as bright, equally talented, but slightly more powerful."

"But she had magical great-grand parents; Hermione didn't."

"They're somewhere back in her ancestry on all sides, but who can tell how far back?"

"So Malfoy's right? Blood matters?"

"Hereditry matters, but it's not the over-whelming, decisive characteristic that people like the Malfoys like to pretend it is. If it was, they wouldn't be following a half-breed like Tom Riddle."

"True," Harry admitted. He smiled. "I told them all He was a half-breed; I wonder if any of His followers are wondering about that!" He climbed down the ladder and Edward and he moved the ladder on to the last of the four upper-windows.

"Probably not; they're a pretty gullible lot." Edward shrugged. "What else can I tell you?"

"Tell me about Carole."

"Carole is six years younger than me; she apparently had a major crush on me her first year, when I was Head Boy. That makes her . . . ten years older than you, a year younger than her first cousin Charlie."

"You knew Bill and Charlie?"

"Bill was a Fourth year, Charlie a Second in my last year. I only knew them fairly well because they both played Quidditch. Carole and her older sister Joyce were two of the three children who survived childhood of Arthur's older brother, Bilius. Bilius Junior was a year ahead of James, and was killed the summer of 1981."

"Survived childhood?" Harry was puzzled.

"The Weasleys of Arthur's parent's generation were even poorer than Arthur's family are now. There were eight sons, four who died young. Jacob, the oldest, and his only son raise puffskeins for sale. Not a very lucrative profession, but one that the Weasley's have followed for several generations. Bilius. . . ."

"Died after seeing a Grim."

Edward shrugged. "That's the belief anyway. I still think it was the train that hit him after he got drunk because he'd seen the Grim, but I'll never say that to a Weasley, and neither should you."

"I won't!"

"Arthur was the seventh son, and the youngest, Ronald, married a Muggle. They and their children were both killed by Death Eaters in 1980."

Harry's hand shook a little. "Did they all have red hair?" Harry asked, mostly for something to say.

"Remember when I talked a little about genetics yesterday and today?"

"Yes."

"Some wizarding families do seem to defy the laws of genetics as we know them. Male Weasleys always breed red-haired male children; not all the girls have red hair unless their Mum's were red-heads as well. Male Potters have this stupidly wild black hair. Malfoys have light blond hair. Dumbledores always have blue eyes. Crabbes and Goyles. . . ."

"Are always big and stupid?"

"Big anyway. Only the last three generations have been rather . . . dim. Anyway, Joyce and Carole are both tall and slim, maybe 165 centimeters or so. . . ."

"How tall?"

"A little over 5 foot 6. Joyce has rich auburn hair, and Carole has copper hair and blue eyes. Carole won some scholarships to a Muggle red-brick University, just like Joyce. They both studied archeology, and were junior members of the expedition to Chad. Joyce was two years ahead of me, and restarted a relationship with George Posy, a Ravenclaw who was Head Boy three years ahead of me."

"Where does Carole live? It doesn't sound like she lives with you."

"They're both at Jacob's. We need to wait until you decide if I come back as Edward Potter or not to announce our marriage."

"Voldemort knows who you are, right?"

"Right. Only the press doesn't know yet."

"Then I'd like my adoptive uncle back, please." Harry started climbing down the ladder.

"Really?"

"I've lost Sirius, I need you and Remus." Harry looked up at his 'uncle,' his brown thatch so much like his own. "Get rid of that brown hair, though. You're not Hermione's cousin, you're mine."

"Thank you, Harry. We might not make the official announcement of who I am until September First, but we'll have to meet with Carole soon."

"Babysitting me sort of interrupted your honeymoon, huh?"

"Sort of," Edward admitted. "You're worth it." Harry and Edward exchanged the extension ladder for a step-ladder. Dudley, finally out of bed and dressed, came out the front door and took off down the street.

"Poor boy," Edward muttered.

"In what way?"

"It's one thing to be overweight -- over a quarter of all the Muggle children are overweight in many industrialized countries any more. It's another to be obese when you're an adult. Hard to slim down. But to be that obese at his age, boxing or no! If he makes it to forty-five, it'll be a miracle."

Harry went back to painting, while Edward talked of Carole and Potter Place.

4 July

Dear Luna, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny:

I didn't really think I'd be writing so soon. I met someone yesterday I didn't know of -- Edward H. Potter, my first cousin once removed. Maybe you three heard of him (if so, why didn't you mention him?), but I hadn't (I know, Hermione, I'm sure he was in those books you kept telling me about). It turns out he's been living under an alias; Edward Harold. Yes, Hermione, that Edward Harold, the archeologist. That might have to stay secret until school starts -- he'll be the new Runes teacher. Don't get a crush on him, Hermione (just teasing).

He showed up yesterday morning. We spent yesterday talking and doing some clothes shopping. We spent today talking while I painted the trim (he claims it will reinforce the magical protection here faster, and that I can leave after it reaches a certain strength, hopefully before my birthday). I'll be weeding the lawn by hand tomorrow.

The Dursleys weren't too happy to see him. However, it turns out he paid off their mortgage and paid the money for my Muggle schooling and Hogwarts. Uncle Vernon's business isn't doing very well (Ted claims it would have gone under if it wasn't for Vernon's hard work, guess the git is good for something besides yelling at me), and so he also managed to buy a little bit of the business. When Uncle Vernon needed money to invest in the business, Ted's agents gave him another mortgage on the house here. Uncle Vernon understands money, and that Uncle Ted has it.

Apparently the Potter family has a family estate (Remus Lupin lives in a game keeper's cottage there). Whenever I'm freed from here, I can go to Potter Place, Remus' cottage, or the Burrow (if your parents will have me, Ron and Ginny) -- Ted told me that 'the club' where we stayed last summer is off-limits to non-members. If it's either of the first two, all four of you are, and Neville, welcome to stay all or part of August with me.

Ted knows the twins of course, and of course Carole and Joyce Weasley were on that last expedition with him. I gather he's rather taken with Carole. Can either of you (Ron or Ginny) tell me anything about her?

He gave me this duplicating quill, so I only have to write this once.

Harry

4 July

Dear Professor Dumbledore:

As I am certain you are aware, my cousin is visiting me daily at the Dursleys. I really wish he'd been able to be in my life sooner, although I am aware you believed otherwise, and prevented him from being available to help me.

He asked that I inform you that he will be teaching under his full name, and if you have any objections to the press releases for the expedition using it as well to let him know. I hope to

spend August either at Potter Place with my two remaining adoptive uncles Ted and Remus (and if possible with Ron, Hermione, and perhaps Neville, Ginny, and Luna for part of that time) or at the Burrow (or both).

I shall be visiting Jacob Weasley's puffskein farm on Sunday, but will return here Sunday evening. Edward stated that this might be a good time for have the wards tested to see how soon I might leave, and what types of chores might further strengthen them.

*yours
Harry Potter*

Chapter VII

Sunday, July 7, 1996

"Tell me again what happens if I leave?"

Edward rolled his eyes. Dudley was indeed an idiot. "If we don't notice, evil wizards will come and kill you and your father." That didn't seem to have much effect. Harry rolled his eyes. Draco had been right; most of the Death Eaters had disappeared from Azkaban, including Lucius Malfoy. The few remaining Dementors had left with them. The human guards, appointed by Dolores Umbridge, had left with the Death Eaters. Harry had shown Dudley the articles, but Harry wasn't sure if Dudley's reading level was at the Daily Prophet's low level. Vernon had sworn at him and at the articles. Aunt Petunia preferred reading his Quibbler.

Edward tried again. "If we do notice, then Harry stays here until at least his birthday, and a very large number of wizards will come here to celebrate that birthday. At the end of the month," he added, since from the expression on his face it was clear that Dudley had no idea when Harry's birthday was. Edward's face and voice hardened. "We'll play 'pin the tail on the donkey.' You've been a pig; do you want to try for donkey?"

That finally got through. Dudley squealed and fled to his room and locked the door.

"Poor Vernon," Edward muttered.

"Why?" Harry asked, surprised.

"He's trying to establish a business empire; he may even succeed. However, you know as well as I that as soon as Dudley takes control, it will fall apart."

Harry merely nodded his understanding, as he really didn't care. He slipped his dress robes over his head, and his cousin did the same. They were going to make a surprise visit to Carole and her family. Edward held out a piece of rope he had turned into a two-way port key. Harry grabbed a hold of the other end, and Edward touched it with his wand.

They landed in an apple and pear orchard. A large, slightly run-down Tudor farm house was about thirty yards away. To Muggle eyes it would have appeared near-collapse, but Harry could see how it was magically reinforced.

Pain suddenly hit Harry.

"What's wrong," Edward demanded, pulling Harry down behind the shade of an old apple tree.

"Voldemort's here," Harry gasped.

"Shit." Edward looked around, and said, "Can you get up?"

"Yes." Harry stood, a little shaky. He exerted control, like Snape had taught him the year before. The pain almost disappeared.

"We're going around back, towards the barn. I think something's going on there." Harry could hear noises from that direction, now that Edward had called his attention to them.

They moved through the orchard towards the open farmyard. They quickly saw there were two masked figures holding wands on six people, five with red hair. Harry figured they were Jacob Senior, Jacob Junior and his wife and two daughters, and Carole. A third Death Eater had two full baskets of fur balls and a nearly empty third one near him. Harry watched that third person pick a puffskein out of the nearly empty basket, toss it in the air, and explode it. The two little girls were crying as they were forced to watch.

"Still no comment?" Harry recognized the third man as Macnair.

Edward waved his wand, then whispered to Harry. "A silencing spell. Since Voldemort's here, I will have to deal with these three quickly and . . . harshly. We can't be merciful and capture them. We need to drive Voldemort and his followers out, before he realizes you're here."

Harry nodded his understanding and agreement, although he was a little afraid of what 'harshly' might mean. "The two holding them look like the senior Crabbe and Goyle. They're nasty but stupid. It also means there's a good chance Malfoy's here, as well as Voldemort. The one killing the puffskeins is Walden Macnair; he executes unsafe animals for the Ministry," Harry told his cousin.

Three figures came out of the house. Harry knew them by their walk. "Crabbe and Goyle juniors; my year. The other is almost certainly Marcus Flint; he was the Slytherin Quidditch captain and a chaser a few years ago. Flint's nasty, good reaction time, not many brains, except compared to the other two."

Edward was obviously impressed. "Right. If anyone comes at us, 'stupefy,' understand? What I'll have to do is bad enough without you doing anything similar."

Harry swallowed; he hoped he would never have to use another Unforgivable. His cousin was unlikely to use an Unforgivable, but Harry knew there were many other ways of killing. "Yes, sir." Harry wished he could shut his eyes, but he didn't think it would be a wise move.

Edward took a deep breath and waved his wand just as Macnair tossed another puffskein in the air.

Then Macnair's head rolled on the ground; the squealing puffskein landed next to the head.

To the startled Harry, it looked like a Muggle cartoon. There was no blood, and the body actually reached for where the head had been for an instant. Then it keeled over, convulsing. Harry could see there was skin over both ends of the severed neck and no blood. There had been no flash to give them away. Just death.

The senior Crabbe, and then Goyle, lost their heads a few moments later. Flint was already sprinting back towards the house, and the younger Crabbe and Goyle, staring at their fathers, blocked any shot at him. The younger Crabbe and Goyle collapsed a few seconds later, although their heads were at least still attached.

Meanwhile, Carole had gathered up her uncle and cousins and was pushing them out towards the barn.

Two other Death Eaters suddenly ran out of the farm house, moving towards the bodies. The larger one tripped as his head also came off.

"Wormtail!" Harry breathed, seeing who the second one was. He had already popped into rat form by the time Harry finished, and was scurrying back towards the house. The tall grass hid his escape.

"Voldemort seems to be gone," Harry said, starting to stand. Edward silently grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him down. Sure enough, Voldemort and then seven other Death Eaters popped into existence in the orchard. Edward grabbed Harry more firmly, and Disapparated.

They popped into the barn, where they found themselves covered by four wands. "Wait!" a feminine voice said. "Edward!"

"Carole. We were coming to visit."

"Edward who?" Jacob Weasley demanded.

"Edward Potter. This is my cousin, Harry Potter. Harry, help Carole. Now, if you'll excuse me." Edward apparated to the farm yard.

He stood there proudly. "Anything to say to me, Tom Riddle!"

Voldemort stepped out of the trees. "Edward Potter, I presume?"

"Exactly. Ready to meet a Potter on equal terms?" Edward's wand flashed, and three Death Eaters who had been coming through the trees lost their heads. "I mean it. Send your little fish away and fight, or go with them."

Voldemort seemed to think about that. "I wondered what was special about that girl. Now I know. She carries the next male Potter. That completes my mission."

"Was it worth nine of your followers?"

"Perhaps." Voldemort Disapparated. Three of the four remaining Death Eaters Disapparated., but Edward noticed the fourth, the slightest, port-keyed.

The Weasleys and Harry came out of the barn. Mrs. Weasley hurried the two little girls into the house, while her husband went to see to the remaining puffskeins. Jacob Senior and Carole approached them.

"You got something to tell me, missy?" Jacob demanded, turning on Carole when they got to Edward.

"Uncle Jacob, this is my husband, Edward Potter. Edward, my guardian Jacob Weasley."

The two men shook hands. "That One and his men came about half an hour ago," Jacob said in a slow drawl. "Said he was drawn here, didn't know why. Guess we know why, now."

Edward still looked a bit surprised, as he had since Voldemort's pronouncement. "You're pregnant?"

Carole shrugged. "Could be. If so, it's only a few weeks." She allowed Edward to hold her close.

"Where's Joyce?" he asked.

"Off with her fella," Jacob said. "'Bout time those two got married, same as you."

"They'll likely be back, with or without their Master. For hostages, if nothing else," Edward managed to say. Carole was now hugging him very tightly.

The farmer looked around. "This land's been ours for over a thousand years. But we can rebuild if we have to. Any suggestions?"

"I have a spare cottage for you and your son's family. There should be someplace for the puffskeins and any other farm animals, if you don't mind getting them a bit mixed."

Three Aurors apparated. "Sounds good," Jacob said.

"Let me talk to these fellows, then contact my steward."

"Ted, what did you do to them?"

"You saw what I did to them, Harry. I killed them."

Harry, Carole, and Edward were in Remus Lupin's cottage. The Potter tenants were helping to move Jacob and his family and belongings to a small farmstead, leaving the Potters to sort out their own problems. Edward was sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, while Carole was trying to comfort him. Remus, as he often did when he was nervous, was making tea, while Harry was pacing a bit.

"I know that. . . ."

"There were too many to take out all of them. . . ."

"You didn't kill the two Harry's age," Carole pointed out.

"I really should have, but I just couldn't kill someone underage."

"I never heard of that kind of hex," Remus mused, then flushed. "Sorry."

"That's alright." Edward sat up. "I had to do it, but it doesn't make things any easier."

"I'm sure the Ministry's not very happy," Remus said with a frown.

"No, but there's not much they can say with the Weasleys' evidence," Edward said. "Old Fudge still hasn't understood all the ramifications of the Dark Lord's return. And he certainly sent the wrong person to gather the statements for the Ministry!"

"Why?" Remus said puzzled. "Who did they send?"

"Percy," Harry spat.

"Oh -- still acting the jackass?"

"Still as pompous as ever," Harry said, "and almost as patronizing as he's been all year. You'd think, after having been proven totally wrong, he'd at least have the decency to be ashamed!"

"I thought your uncle was going to stick a pitchfork in him," Edward said with a slight smile.

"The little prick would have deserved it! Talking to Uncle Jacob like he was a ignorant peasant!" Carole shook off her distaste for her cousin. "I'm sorry you had to do that, Teddy, but you did have to. We're grateful."

"I know," Edward admitted. "It's not easy to kill, even when you're not using the Killing Curse." He paused. "Actually, that's a more humane way of killing than most. . . ."

"It's NOT," Remus stated firmly. "It causes less pain and suffering than most other ways to die, but it affects the caster, as you very well know. It's addictive."

"Addictive?" Harry asked.

"Addictive," Remus confirmed. "It gives the caster a feedback of a feeling of power and even omnipotence. Many find it very addictive."

"Which is why I was . . . less merciful. To answer your unasked question, Moony, I used a very old medical severing charm. For almost any powerful medi-wizard or healer, it would sever a partially damaged limb while healing the wound. Few could get it to do what I did. It was used a long time ago, before they discovered how to heal serious injuries with potion/charm combinations. Only specialized severing charms are used now, like for docking a crup's tail. This was the generalized spell that preceded those modern charms. Less accurate, unless used by a Master."

Remus frowned. "That must have been a long time ago." He already knew that Edward was one of the very few wizards of their generation who operated on that high a level.

"Millennia, to be exact." Edward looked up. "I found . . . no, that's not accurate. I was revealed a cache of knowledge. Some of it is Dark, but most Light or neutral. Voldemort was very lucky he ran. I'm not just more powerful than he is, I'm much more knowledgeable, except in some Dark areas. I may not be able to kill him, but I can defeat him and I can cripple him, and he knows it."

"And I'm your weakness," Carole said.

"You are my strength and center," Edward said. He turned and put his arm around her waist and leaned his head against her arm.

"Why did you kill those last three Death Eaters?" Harry asked. "Why not Voldemort?"

"It's just a medical spell, Harry," Edward replied. "I'm sure Voldemort could have dodged or blocked it. If he'd blocked it, then he would have realized how weak a spell it actually is, in terms of real power. Right now, his bunch are probably pissing themselves in terror."

"Oh, that makes sense. What will happen to Crabbe and Goyle?" Harry asked.

"Since they're underage, it's hard to tell," Remus said. "There are some non-Dementor wizarding prisons, but I doubt they'd take them. Best guess, expulsion from Hogwarts and barring them from the N.E.W.T.s, and probably having their wands snapped and barred from legally using wands for a time. They both scored the minimum O.W.L.s, so they won't be disenfranchised permanently."

"I wonder if Draco was there with Daddy and friends," Harry mused.

"Shortish, slight git with the usual Malfoy white-blond hair, rather girlish in length?"

"Yeah."

Edward nodded. "He was there. Port-keyed out. I hope the Aurors catch up to them with the younger Crabbe and Goyle's port keys, but I doubt it."

Edward sighed and stood up. "Sorry, Harry, but we need to get you back to Privet Drive."

"I know." He turned to Carole. "Sorry we didn't meet under better circumstances, Carole." Carole hugged him, as did Remus.

Edward took out the port key.

Three hours later, Severus Snape was a very worried man. He'd thought he had Voldemort's organization well-mapped. He also had thought he knew where he stood with the other Death Eaters, even if his own position with Voldemort was still very shaky. He had thought he stood second in the personal power scheme, if rather distant in terms of closeness to the Dark Lord Himself, but it turned out there were more supporters than he'd known about, and one of them was perhaps equal, if not superior, to the elder Malfoy.

Another of the newcomers was also interesting. Snape didn't know the man's name, but he knew the man worked in the Ministry's museum and records division. He also finally knew the powerful Dark Wizard that he'd just seen actually existed (something he'd been trying to find out for months; he'd hoped he'd been wrong in his deductions), as the two were put in charge of researching whatever spell Potter had used to behead some six or seven Death Eaters.

Snape almost shivered at the power of the hex described. And at how it had probably taken the heads thirty seconds or so to really lose consciousness.

"Now what should we do with young Goyle and Crabbe," Voldemort mused. "What say you, my dear Professor?"

"Do they really know anything worth saying, my Lord?" Snape asked. "If not, they may yet be handy muscle in the future. They are likely to only suffer having their wands snapped."

"Lucius, even though you are now exposed, they do know something you do not wish revealed, do they not?"

"Yes, my Lord."

'I was afraid of that,' Snape thought.

"It is of no concern of mine if the boy's position is revealed; he has shown himself unequal to the task of acting on his own at this time, except for intelligence gathering. The young men might be useful as extra muscle. Still, if you wish to incur a debt to my associate here, and lose the closeness with your two late associates' families, feel free to do so." Voldemort turned away. "Wormtail! Come! You must retell me all you know of Edward Potter. The rest are dismissed."

Lucius Malfoy sighed, and went to ask a favor that Snape knew he could not stop being . . . executed. Snape merely hoped the unknown Dark Wizard would want a price higher than Malfoy was willing to pay.

And worst of all, the Dark Lord had called this new wizard his 'associate' -- not a term he would have used lightly in this gathering.

THE DAILY PROPHET
Tuesday, July 9, 1996
AMAZING DISCOVERIES IN CHAD!
AN AMAZING RETURN!

A research team, led by American archeologist Hugh Johnson, spent 21 months in Chad, exploring the ruins of a series of previously unplotted ancient cities.

These ruins pre-date ancient known cities and sites in Africa by nearly 1000 years, nearly equaling the ruins in ancient Mesopotamia. More importantly, these are the oldest known magical urban sites so far discovered, dating from between 6,500 to 4,000 years ago.

The team was able to fully plot the sites and do preliminary field work. The sites are only accessible at equinoxes, and returns are only possible on solstices. A full expedition will be mounted in September. Professor Johnson will again lead the team, drawn from members of the American Magical Archeological Institute and associated institutions.

Perhaps equally astounding, the expedition's #2 wizard, up-and-coming archeological star Edward Harold, has been revealed to be none other than Edward Harold Potter, the younger cousin of the late James H. Potter and of Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived. Edward Potter, last heard from at his leaving Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in 1982 (where he had resigned as Head Boy shortly after the death of Lily and James Potter), is rumoured to

have had many disagreements with Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who has had his own troubles these past months.

Dr. Potter has announced both his marriage to Miss Carole Weasley, also a member of the expedition to Chad, and his appointment as Professor of Runes at Hogwarts. When asked to comment about his appointment, his cousin, and his marriage, Dr. Potter merely said that he expected to have a professional relationship with Headmaster Dumbledore, that he would use this opportunity to finally get to know his cousin, and that his wife and he were happy. There has been no comment from Dumbledore, Harry Potter, or Mrs. Potter.

Monday, July 29, 1996

Severus Snape marched angrily towards the old Black house. He wasn't sure why it was still being used, now that Black was . . . gone.

Snape had disliked Sirius Black for as long as he could remember. When they'd gone to Hogwarts, he'd quickly come to hate Black and his sidekick James Potter.

Yet, despite what many (probably most) of his students thought of him, Snape got no pleasure over the fact that either man was dead. He had seen too much death, and as much as he had hated both men he would have preferred them alive and helping in the struggle with the Dark Lord.

In a very real sense, both men had died from their flaws, especially Black's flaws. It had been Black who had thought of the double-bluff that failed to protect Potter and his wife. It had been Black who had refused to stay where he should have stayed, getting himself swept behind the Veil.

Snape very much wished he could totally convince himself that the second was all Black's fault, instead of mostly Black's fault. That he didn't share at least some small share of the blame.

So far, he hadn't succeeded.

Snape went up, and started to ring the bell of #12, Grimmauld Place. The door opened before he could, for which he was grateful. He hated hearing his aunt rave on.

At least Snape was grateful until he saw who opened the door. "Potter," he snarled softly.

"Snape," Edward replied simply. He escorted Snape into the dining room.

"Why was I ordered here, and why are you here?" Snape asked in a more normal-volume sneer. 'At least the bastard isn't still calling me Snake!' he thought.

"There are several reasons," Edward replied. "Shall we go over the nasty things we have to do first, or the things we'll really hate?"

"As you will. Who else is here?"

"Remus and Arabella will be here in about three hours."

"What do we have to do?" Snape was puzzled.

"For the nasty things? We have to dispose of six items. You're here, because you have the last say in the disposal of five of them. Only you and I have the nerve to deal with the last."

"That sounds ominous."

Edwards ignored the sardonic tone. "Here we have three of the six items."

"My Aunt's and parents' double wedding photo, and two framed photos of them? Black didn't throw them out?"

"Sirius hadn't thrown them out, he set them aside for you to decide."

Snape destroyed them with a flick of his wand. "I think I can guess what the other items might be." Snape nearly smiled at the thought. He followed Edward into the drawing room.

"Ah, that damn tapestry. Black never destroyed it, hey? I wonder why? I know he couldn't have been sentimental about it."

"He tried. He and Remus would have destroyed it . . . well, later that week, if he hadn't died. It will take precision reductor curses from two powerful wizards. Unless you want it?"

"Hell, no! My Aunt merely married into the family, I'm not closely enough related to be on it!"

"You can if you want to claim it. It's a simple charm."

Snape got a sick look on his face. "Do you think I would want to be? My mother was a drunk and my aunt was one of the nastiest women I have ever met!"

"That says a lot, considering what Harry says the school went through with Umbridge."

"Umbridge would have needed a few more decades of marinating in her own poisons to match Black's mother!"

"Shall we, then?"

Snape hesitated. "Shouldn't Tonks do it? It's hers, isn't it?"

"Do you want to stand opposite her while she tries to be precise?"

Snape sighed. "Good point. Let's do it."

"Care to count it off?"

"Three. . .two. . .one. . .Reducto!"

They had the tapestry reduced to ash in a matter of seconds.

"What are the blood traitors doing! How dare. . . ." A flip of Edward's wand froze Kreacher in place.

"I didn't think elves could be petrified," Snape commented.

"They can't be with a human spell. I know some elfish magic, too." Edward levitated the elf and took him to the front hall.

"May I?" Snape asked.

"Who is there!" Mrs. Black demanded from behind the curtains that kept her hidden.

Edward gestured, and Snape whisked the curtains aside.

"Well, two blood traitors, I take it. I know you, you sniveling little bastard! I wish my sister had taken to drink earlier; maybe you would never have been born!" She turned to Edward. "Who are you?"

"I am Edward Potter. Shall we?"

"Three. . .two. . .one. . .Reducto!"

Sirius Black's mother managed one more curse, before she disappeared.

"I always wanted to silence that woman," Snape admitted, while Edward broke the charred frame. "What's the last item."

Edward pointed at Kreacher.

Snape paled. "What? You mean that Dumbledore. . . ."

"He will want to serve Narcissa Malfoy, since no other family member will show up by the time the House Mourning ends that he would consider his owner. He certainly won't obey Tonks! We can't keep him here; we can't free him. Even though the Headquarters is partially compromised, it may still be useful. Like I said, you and I are perhaps the only two who could do this."

"I can't," Snape said. "How can you?"

"I can, because he helped lure Harry and those other students to the Ministry; because he helped kill Sirius. And because he is as much a threat to the Order and our fight as any active Death Eater. The first two probably aren't major items for you, but they are for me."

"Then kill it."

Kreacher's head fell to the floor. The body couldn't convulse, since it was petrified.

"That's how you killed. . . ."

"Your former colleagues? Yes."

"That should be an Unforgivable!"

Edward shrugged. "Perhaps. Only Voldemort, Dumbledore, Harry, and I have the power to get it to do that, and they don't know the spell."

"Good! I'm glad your nephew doesn't!" The thought terrified Snape.

"He's too young."

"I heard he flung one Unforgivable already!"

"Against Sirius' murderer? Yes, he did. Do you blame him?"

"No," Snape admitted slowly, "no I really can't. He partially blames me, doesn't he?"

"For telling Sirius to stay, when doing so was the one thing that would drive Sirius to go?" Snape winced. "Yes; and for actually making him more open to Voldemort's influence with the Occlumency lessons as well."

The blood drained from Snape's usually pale face, then flushed back. "Damn! Why didn't the little whelp tell me that! I was trying the fastest methods! We could have done it in other ways if he'd opened his mouth and admitted what was going on!"

"Because he was fifteen!" Edward yelled back. "Do you think he can show any weakness to you! Be honest! Could he really? Not as an academic exercise in logic; could he really dare show any weakness around you? You of all people?"

"No," Snape hated to say it, but he did. "No, he could not. But there was no one else who could teach him, under the circumstances."

"I know that, but I wouldn't have believed it at fifteen, and you wouldn't have, either." Snape looked doubtful. "Would you want a child of yours to show weakness to James or Sirius?"

"No."

"Now, I'm going to surprise us both, and say 'thank you.'"

Snape's eyebrows went up at that. "Why?"

"Because you did teach Harry the basics. It took me less than thirty minutes to get it working, and that couldn't have happened without you."

"I . . . thank you."

"You'll have to test him sometime in August, to make certain."

Snape grimaced. "That will be fun."

"Now, we're never going to like each other, but do we work together or fight?"

Snape made a face like he'd tasted a particularly foul potion. "Work together. You were right, none of the others could have killed the elf, but he needed killing. I would have done it, if Dumbledore asked. Are you going to mount it with the others?"

Edward shuddered. "No. Remus will get rid of the other heads. I'll dispose of this."

"Since your cousin just scrapped his O.W.L. in Potions, Minerva has prevailed upon me to take him on for the N.E.W.T. I expect you to help him understand how to behave. Is that too much to ask?"

"If you'll just ride him for the mistakes he makes in class, not for every one James and Sirius made in their dealings with you, yes."

Snape's face hardened. "What did he tell you?"

"That during your training, he got a glimpse of James treating you very badly, but he won't say what."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That you were in a nasty bunch that harassed weaker students, Muggle-borns in general, and even the half-bloods in your own House. That you and Sirius disliked each other at birth and you and James hated each other from the first time you met. That James and Sirius fought you for bullying those other students, and when your older protectors graduated, they made your life hell in return until Sirius went too far."

"Well, I wouldn't say that was totally accurate, but there's some truth to that." Snape shook his head. "That's another reason he loathed me so much at the end of the term -- I'd finally blasted that image he had of his father as a saint."

"James was a good man, but no, he was almost as far from a saint as you or I."

"Alright, Potter. Edward?"

"Severus," Edward agreed.

"I'll take that," Snape pointed at the body. "I need it for some potions."

"You're welcome to it."

Snape looked at his colleague. "That was hard for you, wasn't it?"

"Very."

"Good. Killing should never be easy, just as we shouldn't hesitate when we need to."

Chapter VIII

Wednesday, July 31, 1996

The Drs. Granger looked at the piece of black rope their daughter held in her hands. She'd told them about port keys, but they weren't sure they were ready to let their daughter simply disappear. They knew some of the stories of where her friend Harry had disappeared to. Granted, the idea of a port key wasn't as bad as watching their only child step into a roaring fire and disappear that way. Still, even leaving aside the issue of a Dark Wizard and his followers, when one's attractive daughter leaves for a summer visit where there will be an abundance of teenage boys, and one doesn't really understand how the leaving works or have any idea of where she is going. . . .

They also weren't sure if knowing about Edward Harold Potter made things easier or not. Hermione's father followed archeological theories and stories, and so knew the name Edward Harold very well. Dr. Granger had been surprised that Harold was part of his daughter's world, and was even more surprised at the recent revelations. Somehow, knowing a man who'd been on television was really a famous wizard fighting an evil wizard who was threatening your home and family made the whole thing even more real.

Hermione was looking at the clock. The port key was tuned for 11:05. She had her backpack on, filled with enough clothes to spend four nights away from home. Yielding to pleadings from Ron (aided by Edward Potter's promise that there was a library with thousands of books far in advance of those at Hogwarts to explore), Hermione hadn't packed any books to study. She had packed two of Edward Harold's books (Muggle and Magical editions) for him to sign for her father.

Other than her clothes and the two books, she only had her wand. Her invitation had been very clear -- the only present desired was her presence. Hermione had understood; what Harry had wanted more than anything was a family. Remus Lupin, the Weasleys, herself, and the late Sirius Black had partially fulfilled that need. Now, however, Harry had a cousin and a heritage to show off. She was ready to let him.

"See you Sunday at. . . ." Hermione felt the tug of the port key, and disappeared before she could finish. She wondered if it was her watch or the port key that was nearly a minute off.

She appeared on the grass verge of a very old looking road. Hermione recognized the construction as Roman. The air was cooler, yet the sky less cloudy, than her home south-west of Cambridge. Turning around, she saw she was a few dozen meters from what was obviously a gatekeeper's cottage. A more standard two lane road was perhaps 20 meters beyond a gate and fence on the far side of the cottage.

A pleasant-looking woman was watching her. She held out a rolled-up scroll. "Name please?" Hermione noticed there were five other people now surrounding her who didn't look quite as pleasant, two with wands and two with shotguns. "Hermione Granger."

"Please touch the scroll with your wand while saying your name and keeping a hold on your port key with your other hand." Hermione hesitated. "Don't worry, dear; you won't get a notice about underage magic."

Hermione shrugged and did as she was told. This time, she reappeared near a smaller cottage, and was surrounded by woods.

"Hermione! Welcome!"

Hermione smiled, and hurried to greet one of her favorite professors. As pleased as she'd been about her O.W.L.s, she'd been made even happier when she saw the notice attached to them stating that he would be returning to Hogwarts. "Professor Lupin!"

"It's still just Remus here, Hermione," he said, shaking her hand. "Ready to move on to the party?"

"Where is the party?" Hermione asked.

"You have the rare privilege to be deep inside the middle circle of Potter Place. I'm sending you to a crossing between the middle and inner circles. The actual party is in the middle circle, but you, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna Lovegood will be staying at Potter Place itself. Don't mention that to anyone else. Now, why don't you go before the next group port-keys in?" He held out another scroll.

Hermione smiled. "Alright." She repeated her previous actions.

And landed near a bridge.

"Harry!" She would have moved to hug him, except she recognized the pure Saxon stone bridge behind him as a perfect example of its kind. She stared at it for a moment.

"Hi, Hermione! There are still a few people coming, so why don't you leave your knapsack here and go over to the pavilion. I'll be there in twenty minutes at the most."

"Alright. . . ." she said, not moving. She never seen such a wonderful specimen, but she wasn't sure what the inscriptions said.

"Hermione, if you don't move in some direction, someone will land on you," Harry teased.

"Oh! Right!"

Hermione finally gave Harry a hug, and hurried over to the pavilion. The woods were thinner here than around Lupin's cottage. Hermione could see the pavilion was simply a log roof over an open area on three sides. She guessed (rightly) that the enclosed area had restrooms and an area for food preparation.

Hermione recognized nearly everyone, which was hardly surprising. Hagrid and Madame Maxime were hard to miss. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, and Madams Pomfrey and Hooch, were sitting at a table, enjoying the cool breeze and the shade. Neville, Seamus, and Dean were standing around another table that obviously held trays of food. George and Fred Weasley were lurking nearby, probably hoping to hex the food. Eight other members of

Harry's DA group were milling about, looking at Harry's birthday cake. Luna was apparently finding something interesting about one of the trees. 'At least she's not talking to it,' Hermione thought, rather uncharitably.

Three other people were standing closer, however. The woman was obviously a Weasley, and Hermione guessed the third person was Hugh Johnson, the quarter giant. The other man was already walking towards her, and there was even less doubt about who he was.

"Ms Granger!"

"Dr. Potter, thank you for allowing me. . . ."

"Nonsense! We just need a few more Weasleys, and we can start the party."

"Ron and Ginny, you mean?"

"And Arthur and Molly. Had to pull a few strings to get Arthur some time off."

"I take it all these steps are some sort of security precaution?"

"Exactly," Edward agreed. "I am the only person that can Apparate into what we call the middle circle, although Harry should be able to next year. We are also the only people who can create a port key to this area as well. Right now, there are just four people who can enter Potter Place itself, and two of the others are conditional."

"So Harry would have been safer there than at the Dursleys?"

"Possibly," Edward said with a shrug. "At least as safe, shall we say. However, growing up with fawning elves and family retainers would hardly have prepared Harry for the kind of life he's had to lead."

"I don't think he'd ever have turned into a Malfoy," Hermione protested, somewhat offended.

"True, but Dumbledore didn't know that fifteen years ago." He shrugged again. "Even though I never thought much of Vernon or Petunia, I never thought they'd turn out as bad as they have. But today, we start making new memories for Harry. Right?"

She smiled. "Right." Her smile grew even bigger as she heard Ron and Ginny arrive.

After the party had been going on for nearly an hour, Remus arrived, with a blonde witch following him.

"What's she doing here?" Hermione asked before anyone else could.

It was Rita Skeeter.

Edward motioned Hermione, Harry, Luna, and Carole to join him in meeting the unlikely pair. "Ms Skeeter is in need of employment. I find my self in need of a . . . publicist."

"A what?" Carole asked.

"Some one to help with your public relations?" Hermione queried. "What do you need. . . ."

"Going to try and ruin this for me, too," Skeeter complained.

Edward addressed Hermione. "Ms Skeeter is, as I've been told you know, an unregistered animagus, and most recently famous for her poison quill. Since you are using the first to prevent her from using the second, she has met with some hard times."

"You didn't think of that, did you, or didn't you care?" Rita snipped.

"Now, now, don't be harsh," Edward reproved. "Ms Granger is a very brilliant young woman, but you can hardly imagine that she'd think things like that through in the case of a person who insulted her and hurt her and her friends."

"I try to think everything through," Hermione protested. "Name one time. . . ."

Harry leaned past Luna and whispered in her ear, "None of the house elves will clean Gryffindor Tower anymore, because you kept leaving those caps around, even though you should have known they wouldn't like it. I mean, you don't own them, so the caps wouldn't free them anyway; they just felt insulted. Dobby had to do all the work." Hermione flushed, and was quiet.

"Don't feel upset," Edward told her, "with yourself or anyone else. Now, Ms. Skeeter is going back to work, minus her Quick Quotes Quill I might add! Her job is, in part, to make certain the real story gets out -- The Daily Prophet isn't to be relied upon to care about anything except its bottom line. We'll be feeding her information, and she'll be funneling information back to us. Nothing secret, of course, but there are a lot of sources out there that she can tap into with ease."

"And what does she get out of it?" Hermione asked.

"A paycheck from me as well as any journal who picks up her work, and legalization of her animagus status after the War," Edward said. "And, when everything's over, some status as a serious journalist again."

"Again?"

"She started off as a well-known court reporter," Carole told them.

"It was a good job, but as soon as the trials were over in late Eighty-two, we were all let go," Rita murmured. "Any objections?" she asked Hermione more forcibly.

"No, no I guess not."

"Daddy's started a subscription newsletter," Luna told them in the pause that followed. "There are some other reporters who will be by-passing The Prophet, too. The truth will be out there." She smiled in her absent way. "That's going to be the name -- The Truth -- and the motto is 'The Truth is Out There.'"

"Do you watch Muggle television?" Hermione demanded, which made Harry give a small snort.

"Not much, why?"

"That's the theme of a new Muggle show from America, about a government agent who tries to prove there are space aliens."*

"Of course there are 'space aliens'," Luna said, puzzled. "Why would that be interesting?"

No one wanted to pursue that question. Rita went around, gathering information about Professor Umbridge and her abuses at Hogwarts.

"Do you really trust her?" Hermione asked.

"Of course! But only because she does know it's in her own best interests. If it weren't, I wouldn't trust her an inch!" Edward assured her.

"We all are simply who we are," Luna said. "That's who she really is."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Did you and your father go to Sweden yet? Find any Crumpled-Horn Snorkacks?"

"We came back two weeks ago," Luna said. "And no, not a Crumpled-Horn among them. Maybe we'll try Lappland again next summer."

Hermione shook her head as if to clear it, and went over to get a butterbeer, keeping an eye on Skeeter the whole time.

"She's an interesting one," Edward said to Remus a few moments later, when they were alone.

"Which one?" Remus asked, amused.

"Well, Hermione is very bright, but I meant Luna. Nobody mentioned her to me before Harry asked her to the party and to stay over."

"I gather they met sometime this past year. She was in Harry's DA group, and somehow went with them to the Ministry." Remus thought a moment. "That in itself must have formed a real bond between the six of them."

"True. Is she always so. . . ."

"Off-the-wall honest? Yes, I think so. She wasn't nearly so eccentric at the beginning of her Second year, but she became more and more erratic that whole year, at least in terms of her dress." Today, Luna was wearing a long light green dress with an aqua jumper tied around her neck. She wore a long royal purple sock and a pink sandal on her right foot, and an orange sock of equal length and a medium blue sandal on her left. She was wearing mismatched pewter earrings -- a lion and a raven. "I asked Filius if she was color-blind -- I thought she might just be getting mixed up, which would no doubt amuse most of her fellow students, but it turns out her dorm mates were hiding some of her clothes and charming the colors to mismatch."

"So rather than fight, she just pushed along into eccentricity?"

"In part. She saw her mother die six years ago -- Lori Lovegood, if you remember her."

Edward thought hard. "That's right, she was a charm builder, worked part-time for the Department of Mysteries. Something went wrong with one of her experimental charms and she died." Edward looked at the girl Harry was giving some ice cream to. "And she saw that?" Hermione was trying to distract Harry for some reason.

Remus nodded. "She's very smart, even for a Ravenclaw." The pair started moving back towards Harry -- Luna and Hermione seemed to be nearly arguing. "There's something else about her, though; something really special."

Edward smiled. "That's good to know!" The two girls had stopped their discussion, and Carole was lighting the birthday cake.

Most of the crowd left a little after 3:00. Remus said he was staying to supervise the elves cleaning up. Hermione was very displeased to see that the six elves were all wearing tea-towels. Granted, they all looked as happy as the Hogwarts elves, but she was still disturbed by it.

The five visitors approached the bridge, but Edward stopped them before they could step on it. Hermione and Ron were the closest, Luna and Neville the furthest from it.

"This bridge marks the start of the inner area of Potter Place. Only a true Potter male can have access to it without risking real damage. Even for us, a ritual is necessary." Edward produced a small needle, and pricked the heel of his thumb. He wiped a drop of blood on the low stone pillar that marked end of the bridge. "I, Edward Potter, swear that I am a Potter, true in thought as well as blood." The blood disappeared. Harry did the same, but took the blood from his thumb. Carole drew blood, but swore, "I swear my heart to the House of Potter." While Edward and Carole healed the tiny wounds, Harry said a spell that kept his unsealed.

"So," Edward asked with a grin, "who's first?"

While the others looked at each other, Luna ambled to the front. She extended her right hand to Harry, her pop eyes keeping contact with his, while Edward told her what to say and when to say it. Harry hesitated to prick the heel of her hand.

"It's okay, Harry," Luna said softly, "I know I can trust you." She again laid her hand in Harry's.

Harry jabbed the base of her thumb, mixed his blood with hers, and said, "I, Harry Potter, swear Luna Lovegood is a friend to the House of Potter."

Luna wiped the mixed blood on the stone, and saw that it was partially absorbed. "I, Luna Lovegood, am a friend to the House of Potter." She stuck the wound in her mouth, and as soon as the blood disappeared, she walked on to the bridge. As each teen did the same, they felt the power they were walking through. (Ron, the last to go, teased Harry by mimicking

Luna voice, "Oh, Harry, I know you won't hurt me!" Harry jabbed Ron's more sensitive thumb hard to retaliate.) As they crossed the bridge, the power felt stronger, although they quickly grew used to it.

"Unless you can freely swear, you can't cross," Edward told them. "Not even the Imperius curse would allow anyone over here."

"Why not do the same at Hogwarts or the Ministry?" Ron asked.

"Whose blood could you use?" Hermione asked. "It's real blood magic, isn't it?"

"Exactly! Well spotted. Remind me to give you a point in September. Blood magic, especially when it's been in place for over a thousand years, is incredibly powerful. Harry would have been as physically safe here as with the Dursleys, but he really would have been more confined to this part of the estate than he should have been there. And the elves and other retainers would probably have spoiled him rotten."

"Really?" Ginny asked. "I can't imagine Harry spoiled!"

"Not to the extent of young Malfoy, from what I hear, let alone Dudley," Edward agreed, "but remember, the rest of the family was killed off. Harry would have been everyone's little jewel."

Ginny, Luna, and Ron each gave a small snort at that.

"How big is the island?" Luna asked.

"Island?" Ron demanded. "Who said it's an island?"

"Water makes a powerful barrier," Luna said simply.

"Another point for the autumn!" Edward said, stopping to talk. "The island is a mile and a half long, and a mile wide. Don't try crossing the water itself, just the bridges. The spell will last a week, unless you do something to break the oath of friendship, although if you do cross, you'll have to shed a drop of blood to return."

Edward paused, then went on. "The middle area is about seven miles long by three and a half wide. The estate is some fifteen miles long by nine miles wide. We're technically approaching the back of the Castle. You'll see it right through these trees."

And it was a castle, although nowhere near the size of Hogwarts. It had four rounded corners, with turrets. It looked to be some six storeys tall, with the turrets adding two more floors before the battlements.

"These back two towers are residential. Harry has the left, we have the right," Edward said as they approached the small back gate. "The public rooms are all in the front of course. The kitchens are in the first cellar levels on the right."

"Is this Roman or Romanesque?" Hermione asked.

"The construction was all in the late Romanesque period, but you're right, much of the style is genuine Roman," Edward acknowledged. "The magical builders still knew some of the older techniques."

The back gate opened at Edward's touch. "This will only open for Harry, Carole, and myself. Like access to the island itself, you can open the front gate for a week."

The corridor they entered was wide and fairly high. Magical torches, as at Hogwarts, were set along the walls, although enough light filtered in from windows facing the courtyard they didn't need to be lit yet.

While the architecture was of course medieval, as were the furnishings at and above eye-level (torches and a few tapestries along the long corridor), below that it looked more Victorian, with shelves and small tables filled with odds and ends, as well as flower arrangements.

"None of these things are likely dangerous. There are rooms and corridors upstairs that are off-limits. For that, we have these."

"Maps?" Ron asked. "Like the . . . one. . . ." Ron stopped, not remembering if Luna and Neville knew about the Marauders' Map.

"That's what gave Sirius and James the basic idea, although they recreated some of the spells and charms and created a number of others. These need another drop of blood to activate. As long as they don't leave the island, yours will reactivate any time you touch it."

"What exactly can it do?" Ron asked.

"Once it's activated, it points out exactly where you are, on the island or in the castle, and if you're allowed to go on. Again, not every area is open to you. You can get into some areas if Harry gives you permission, and go into others if Harry is with you. For the others, you would need me."

"Why don't we give them a demonstration, dear?" Carole asked.

Edward smiled. "And I know just where we can go!"

"Was one of your ancestors a vampire?" Ron complained, holding his hand out.

That made all the group smile, except one. "We're all ready to shed our blood for Harry," Luna said seriously. "That's the basis of positive blood magic, isn't it?"

"I never thought of it that way," Hermione mused, as Harry pricked her, "but you're right."

"As you can tell, most of the castle was heavily redecorated in Victorian times," Edward said a few moments later, playing tour guide as they went up to the second floor of his side of the castle. "This sort of display was more popular in Muggle homes, but not unknown in wizarding ones."

The group swept into a large room that stretched the full width of the storey and perhaps a 1/5 of its length. "A trophy room!" Hermione declared.

It was indeed. That floor was marked as 'private,' the lowest security zone other than 'open'. The outside and two other walls were covered with mounted heads. There were also stuffed animals and display cases set up around the room. The courtyard wall was mostly windows.

"Take a look at the head mounted about a third of the way along the far wall," Edward said.

The group looked. "A Crumpled-Horn Snorkack!" Luna cried out happily, rushing towards it.

"It's a pair of reindeer," Hermione stated, as she approached.

"No, the one on the left is the Crumpled-Horn Snorkack," Luna declared.

"So it is," Neville agreed. "I always thought they were a legend."

The other four teens, and Carole, goggled.

"That's what the plaque says," Ginny commented as she took a closer look, a bit in shock.

"That little twist in the one prong makes it a Crumpled-Horn?"

"Yes, that's the sign it's a Snorkack, not a regular reindeer," Edward said. "If Binns ever taught history correctly, you might be encouraged to learn about magical legends. You know," he added seriously, "that's the one complaint the Pure-blood types have some basis for making. In the last century and a half, as we have found all the Muggle-borns of sufficient power, and as more of us make mixed-marriages, many of the old stories die out. It's too bad; we need an introductory course on magical culture for First years, or something."

"That would be great," Hermione agreed.

"I wonder why we never heard of the Snorkacks?" Ginny wondered.

"Shall I tell you the legend, and the basis for it?" Edward asked.

"Please!" Luna almost begged. "I've heard of the Crumpled-Horn Snorkack for years, but never heard the legend!"

Edward smiled, and summoned quill and parchment. "Let me tell it like an article. We'll get a Muggle photo of the two reindeer, and we'll let your father print it."

Luna smiled ecstatically, and sat down on Harry's feet, gazing at Edward almost with worship. Ginny and Neville snorted, but sat down to their left. Harry backed off a bit, and sat down beside Luna. Hermione and Ron stood, mostly looking at the two heads.

Only Carole noticed that the three had made themselves into couples, and that the three girls slowly leaned against their partners, while the three boys then leaned towards them.

Crumpled-Horn Snorkacks are a very rare type of magical reindeer, or caribou, now believed extinct. Most of the year, it appears no different than regular reindeer, except that they cannot be enchanted by magical herders. In the two weeks leading up to the

winter solstice, one prong on either antler will develop a temporary drooping twist, giving the beast its name. In the two weeks after each solstice, however, their real magical power appears, the power to fly.

This of course connects them with the Muggle legends of Father Christmas, Santa Claus, Grandfather Frost, etc. In several Northern European cultures (and later Canada and the United States) Muggle-born children were told of their magical heritage on either Christmas or New Year's Eve by wizards who flew from place to place in sleds pulled by either the rare Crumpled-Horn Snorkacks or their enchanted reindeer relations. Squibs and Muggle-borns with weak powers could see them as well, and so the myths were born. The practice was never wide-spread, but lasted from at least the late 1500s through the early 1920s, when Kris Kringle, who notified Muggle-borns in the vast spaces of the American and Canadian west using enchanted reindeer, retired at age 132, because of the increase in Muggle airplane traffic. (The last European who made such deliveries, Ivana Popova, had actually been shot at by Soviet aircraft near the Urals in 1921, the last year she flew.)

The last verified sighting of a Crumple-Horn in Europe was in 1848 in Lappland. The last in North America (1902) was in the Yukon.

"So that's why they aren't in our text book," Hermione mused.

"And why we never found one in the summer!" Luna almost wailed.

"But why didn't we know about it, I wonder?" Ron asked. Carole didn't answer, but suspected that the poverty-stricken Weasleys of the earlier periods didn't dwell on legends of Father Christmas.

After a tour of the castle, the teens gathered at the sitting room of Harry's tower. A small feast was laid out, and they attacked it with relish.

Harry showed them their rooms -- there were six bedrooms (each with a toilet and sink in a closet) two bathrooms, and a study on the first turret level. Harry's bedroom (with attached bath and dressing room), another bedroom, bath, and a study were on the top turret floor. The battlements were also accessible.

The teens went to their rooms to unpack, but all six were in the guest study a little after 8:00.

"It's still early," Harry said. "Anyone want to do . . . anything?" He had never had the chance to play host before.

"Can we raid the kitchen?" Ron asked.

"We had a huge birthday picnic and a near feast!" Hermione exclaimed. "How can you still be hungry?"

"Just a thought. . . ." Ron muttered.

"I'm going to go look for fwoopers," Luna said. She stood and held out her hand towards Harry. "Want to come along?"

"There are no fwoopers around here!" Hermione stated.

"Won't know until we look," Luna said simply, letting Harry grasp her hand.

Ginny stood up and pulled Neville up with her. "If there aren't any, we can still look at the stars when they come out."

"It was clouding up when we came in," Hermione said, bewildered, wondering what was wrong with everyone.

Neville stared at his hand, still being firmly held by Ginny. "Can we look at the clouds then?"

That floored Hermione. Harry and Ginny rolled their eyes at Hermione. Ron got up and walked over to Hermione. He held out his hand. "Come on, let's go look for fwoopers, or clouds that look like fwoopers."

Hermione suddenly noticed the other two couples, ('Couples,' she thought, 'when did they become couples?') and then Ron, holding out his hand. She flushed, but stood and bravely said, "Alright, Luna, we'll look for fwoopers." She took Ron's hand for the first time in front of Harry. Obviously, Harry wasn't going to mind as much as they had feared.

"You can never go wrong, looking for fwoopers," Luna said serenely. "Even when they're not there, you can always find something else worth seeing."

"That's cute," Carole said. Edward had called her over to the window, and they watched the couples walk through the courtyard towards the front of the castle.

"Even better, it's normal," Edward said. When his wife gave him a questioning look, he went on, "He's been under incredible stress for more than a year and a half, and he carries a burden greater than any one person, let alone a sixteen year old, should carry. He's lost Sirius, learned that his father could be a prick on occasion, was tortured by a teacher, and discovered that Dumbledore makes major errors. After all that, if he can hold a girl's hand and smile like that, instead of pounding his head against the wall, I'm happy."

"He still needs to decompress," Carole agreed. "Do you think we can protect him this year?"

"Not totally," Edward had to admit. "But we're going to try, right?"

"Right!"

Chapter IX

Sunday, August 4, 1996

Harry was looking across the bridge, having just seen his guests off home via port key. Luna had been the last one to leave; she'd kissed him gently on the cheek as she was about to leave. Harry had just enough time to return the gesture before they smiled at each other and she was whisked away.

"So, have a good birthday weekend, Harry?" Edward asked, coming up towards him from across the bridge.

"Oh, yes!" Harry smiled. "Thanks, Ted. Last year was the only time I ever had a party, and considering the circumstances, this was a lot better." The smile faded. "If only Sirius could have been here."

"That's true," Edward admitted.

"I mean, it's great being here, and knowing you. . . ." Harry started. It was obvious he was worried he'd somehow offended his cousin.

"Harry, watch this." A deck of cards materialized in Edward's hands. Despite his return to mourning, Harry was as fascinated as always by his cousin's legerdemain. It had been a big hit at his party. Ron and several others had a difficult time believing it was done without magic, and both Luna and Ginny had had fits of giggles, especially when Edward produced coins from various people's noses and ears.

"The point to all this," Edward said, as he went through various tricks, "is that even though Sirius wasn't very good at slight-of-hand, he helped me along when I wasn't very good, either. He picked on me a lot, but he never complained when James dragged me along, even before . . . everyone was killed. Afterwards, he and Remus adopted me as a little brother, just like James had even before that, when Harold preferred to stick to his friends in Ravenclaw. Sirius taught me how to ride a motorcycle, and how to enchant one, for that matter." Edward gave Harry a slightly sad smile, and the cards disappeared. "He, Lily, and Remus saved James and me after the massacre. I can only guess how much he and Remus meant to you before this summer, since you didn't know about me."

"Even though he wasn't there very much, he tried so hard to be; he risked himself for me so much, not just at the end, but all the time." Harry looked at his cousin, his eyes turning red. "He's really gone?"

"I'm afraid so. Once you pass beyond the Veil, metaphorically or physically like Sirius, you don't come back into our plane of existence."

"And when we die, we go to where the Veil also takes you?"

"That's my understanding."

"So you could be wrong?"

"About what the Veil represents? No, although I won't swear that everyone goes there when we die. About the fact that it has existed, in that spot, from a time long before the Druids, even before the ring at Glastonbury was completed, and that no one has passed back? No. That it might still be possible? It could, but we shouldn't count on it."

"Have you ever studied it?"

Edward shook his head. "No, not directly. It's one of the most famous ancient magical artifacts of all, and people in my field, at my level, know about it." Edward pondered a moment. "I think you understand why I can't make it a priority, Harry; but if you want, I can make it an interest."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Harry took a deep breath. "I . . . Luna and I both heard voices from the other side, although no one else did. Ginny and Neville did seem . . . as mesmerized as I was."

"Luna wasn't?"

Harry frowned. "I'm not certain, but I don't think so. Hermione certainly wasn't, although she was . . . scared of it, I think. She got me moving, with some help from Ron."

"Yes, to answer your unasked question, those were voices of the dead, although, like I said, I can't swear we all go there. Only a very few individuals, perhaps slightly more witches than wizards, can hear them. Hearing a single voice is even rarer, and someone on our side having a conversation with any voice even more so. No particular person has ever been successfully called, to my knowledge."

Edward looked hard at Harry, which made him squirm a little. "Is that why you're so friendly with Luna? Because you hope she can help you with the Veil? You weren't dating her before, were you?"

Harry flushed angrily. "No!" He shook his head. "No, that is to both. We weren't dating before, but we are now, I hope. And I am NOT using her." He paused. "I like her for herself. I know she seems odd at first, but she refuses to worry about other people's opinions, and I think she would rather have people think she's strange rather than act differently than she is. How many people are really like that? Most people would try and conform, not because they want to, but because they think they have to!"

"And you don't mind the oddness?"

"Should I?"

Edward shrugged. "Most boys your age couldn't appreciate a girl like that. And I always thought you wanted to be thought of as normal."

Harry nodded. "That's just it. I thought I did, too, but I don't. I want to be seen, or at least treated, as 'just Harry.' Not as The-Boy-Who-Lived, not The-Boy-Will-Must-Kill-Voldemort. And, I guess, not even as The Great Seeker." He gave a twisted smile at that. "Just me."

Everyone else has made a big deal out of me. Jeez, even Hermione and Colin, Muggle-borns, made a big deal out of it. Luna looked at me and then Neville, and said matter-of-factly, 'You're Harry Potter,' and turned to Neville and said, 'and I don't know you,' or something like that. If she'd known who Neville was, she would have said his name just like mine."

"At the beginning of last year, everyone was talking about me behind my back. Most probably thought I was either crazy or worse, or at least hoped I was. Some supported me, but if they told me it was either like it was a dirty little secret, or, like Ernie, to make a point in some argument he was having with those who doubted me -- which was nice in one way. But Luna simply told me be believed in me." Harry looked Edward directly. "She believed me because she decided she could trust me, not because I had a strange story, or because it suited her."

"I think she has Second Sight," Edward said.

"Really?"

"Really, although that's always a very erratic gift. She knew you were sincere, but the rest must be because she cares for you."

Harry flushed. "I think . . . I think she offered to kiss me under some mistletoe just before Christmas. When I was surprised by seeing it, she made a joke." He smiled. "She is . . . a character. But she's so . . . peaceful."

"I think the term you're looking for is 'serene,'" Edward said. "And yet she's quite capable of functioning in the real world. She's not the ditz I imagine people would take her for."

"No, she's not," Harry agreed. "I was worried she couldn't handle trouble, but she did very well at the Ministry."

"If you date her, she'll become an even bigger target," Edward said.

Harry's face dropped. "You're right." He sighed. "I just hoped, for a minute. . . ."

"Now wait!" Edward broke in. "I'm not saying it would be too dangerous to date her! After her actions at the Ministry, she's already a target. That was her choice. You seem to be her choice, too. Don't push her away. Be a man, and accept the reality of the situation, and we'll point it out her and her father. If they decide you can continue to see her, then see her. You can't be some warrior hermit, taking on the evils of the universe."

"Yes, sir."

Edward cuffed Harry lightly, "Don't be a prat, brat!" Harry grinned back.

"We need to pop up to London tomorrow," Edward went on. "We'll stop by The Quibbler and see if we can talk to Mister Lovegood."

Harry frowned. "Grimmauld Place?"

"Afraid so."

Harry was standing in the drawing room, looking at the slightly charred area where the hated tapestry had been. Harry was glad it and Mrs. Black's portrait were gone. He also wondered where Kreacher was. He knew Hermione wouldn't forgive him, but he was tempted to give it a really good kick the next time he saw it.

Harry suddenly felt a pressure on his mind. He threw it off, as Edward had taught him, and then spun to warn Edward of the attack.

And saw Snape holding his wand against him.

Harry's wand swept up, and if Snape hadn't raised his hands in surrender, Harry would have blasted him.

"Peace, Mister Potter," Snape said. "I had to test you. Your cousin might have been unconsciously pulling his punches."

Harry dropped his wand. "I passed?"

"Brilliantly," Snape admitted, "if at the lowest level." He frowned. "I tried teaching you in the fastest, most effective manner. When I saw that wasn't working, I should have tried some of the other methods. I . . . apologize."

Harry stared at Snape a moment, but his natural politeness and honesty asserted itself. "I should have tried harder, Professor. Sorry."

"My, my, what a sorry pair!"

"Professor!" Harry exclaimed.

"Headmaster," Snape acknowledged.

Harry was glad the Headmaster was still making eye-contact with him.

"I am also impressed by your progress, Harry," Dumbledore said, walking into the room. "We are starting a new position this year; each House will have a security prefect; yourself and Misterys Boot, Macmillan, and Zabini. You may also continue your DA club for selected students. You would also coordinate the Security Prefects and the DA with the Head Girl."

Harry thought a moment. "Thank you, Professor. Is my ban on Quidditch lifted?"

"Of course, Harry!"

"Then, could you. . . ." Harry took a big breath, "could you make Neville the Security Prefect?"

Snape looked shocked, but Dumbledore and Edward merely looked interested. "But . . . why, Potter?" Snape finally asked.

"I don't need the position for my ego, and I'll have enough to do with Quidditch and the DA. Neville has turned out to be very good, and he could use the ego boost." Snape looked slightly impressed.

"I had thought you would say that," Dumbledore said. "I would still like you to coordinate."

"Very well, Professor. I accept."

"Your title is Student Security Coordinator," Dumbledore said, handing Harry a badge with the Hogwarts crest and 'S.S.C.' in raised letters on the top. "I will have a pamphlet sent to you, outlining the duties -- it will be very different than the Inquisitorial Squad last year, I can assure you! Edward mentioned you will be stopping in at the Ministry today. They will also take your wand off the Juvenile list. Considering the circumstances, you may use magic as if you were an adult wizard. We all trust you will not abuse the situation."

"I won't, sir!"

"Well done, Potter," Snape murmured, who then quickly turned and left."

"Yes, Harry; well done." Dumbledore then left as well.

Harry was stunned. "Why would Snape say that?" Harry finally asked.

"Because he was largely responsible for teaching you Occlumency, and because you earned it. Don't hate the git, Harry. Save it for more worthy candidates. Dislike him for being the greasy bastard he is, but learn to appreciate his worth." Edward gave a large, theatrical sigh. "I have."

Edward escorted Harry into the M.L.E. offices at the Ministry. Harry had been shocked when he'd remembered he hadn't notified the Ministry that Umbridge had set the two Dementors on him the previous summer and had mentioned it to Edward the week before. Harry was very happy to swear out a complaint. Even better was signing the paperwork that allowed him to do underage magic. No one wanted him to be unprotected (or at least would admit to it).

The complaint required someone from the Minister's Office to co-sign. Edward insisted that it be Percy Weasley.

Percy came in, angry and tight-lipped. He had been in trouble the year before, when his superior had been thought mad and then missing. He had chosen to back what had just been proven to be the wrong side again and again over the previous year. He had alienated and insulted his family, and Harry, in the process.

The higher members of the Ministry, politicians all, were in the process of covering their arses by shifting the blame that collectively belonged to almost all of them onto a few select scapegoats, primarily Dolores Umbridge. Harry's complaint was the final nail in her political coffin. It turned out Dolores was the one who had arranged Percy's promotion. He should be falling with her.

He wasn't, however -- he was staying in place. The only reason that was happening, as everyone 'in the know' was well-aware, was because he was Arthur Weasley's son -- who's reputation was now riding high within the Ministry -- and all the adult Weasley siblings, except Percy, were now acknowledged as leaders in the opposition to Voldemort. Even young

Fred and George, with their joke shop, were turning out items that could be used against Voldemort's forces as well as joke and prank items.

Percy owed his career from now on to the family he had abandoned and insulted, and on Harry, whom he had tried to destroy. Percy hated their charity, but knew he didn't deserve it. He was still upset, in part with himself but mostly at the cruelty of fate -- he still couldn't quite reconcile his errors in judgement with his view of himself.

Since, at least so far, his anger hadn't turned him even more against his family or Harry, he still had a job. Edward had hoped Percy would have the manners, or at least the political savvy, to apologize to Harry. Percy had neither, and had insured that he was unlikely to be promoted quickly again in the foreseeable future.

The pair's next stop were the offices of the Potter Trust, in a luxurious building not too far from the Ministry. While Harry wasn't legally entitled to a full share in the Trust until his 17th birthday, Edward felt that his being allowed to do underage magic should entitle Harry to at least a half-share, and since Edward was the only adult Potter left, he could authorize it fairly easily. Most of the money would go into investments and into Gringotts, but small part also would be sent into a Muggle account. A trip to the bank next door set Harry up with a current account and a set of checks, as well as a deposit account.

Harry grinned to himself. He didn't think much of material goods as such, but it was nice having more money available to spend every month than Dudley had had in his entire life. He made three quick stops in some nearby Muggle stores before he took a taxi with his cousin to go to the Leaky Cauldron.

Tom greeted Edward and Harry, and Harry gravely acknowledged a few toasts as they passed through the pub. Harry performed the ritual that allowed them into Diagon Alley. Their first stop was Gringotts, where they turned over the Trust documentation and set up the equivalent of a current (checking) account. Their second stop was Ollivander's.

"It is very unlikely that we will find another wand nearly as good as Master Potter's current wand," Ollivander protested.

"We are well aware of that," Edward said. "Still, Harry needs some reserve wands. You are aware of the circumstances, are you not?"

Ollivander heaved a sigh. "Yes; yes I am."

"We want to get him at least three, preferably under seven and a half inches."

"Yes, much easier to conceal," Ollivander agreed. "Let's see what we can find, shall we?"

It took nearly forty minutes, but Ollivander finally matched Harry to four short wands. Two were holly and phoenix feather (although not Fawkes'). One was holly and dragon heart-string, the other hazelnut and phoenix feather. Edward bought himself a small oak and dragon heart-string.

"You can never have too many wands," Harry said, smiling at the sing-song quality of his statement, which made him sound like Luna.

"Yes, Harry," Edward acknowledged with a grin, "we'll go see her in a moment. Mister Ollivander, Ron and Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, and Luna Lovegood will also be in for at least two spare wands like this before they go back to Hogwarts."

Ollivander nodded. "Any idea what Miss Weasley's wand is?" he asked Harry.

"Cherry and a hair from a unicorn's mane," Harry answered.

"Ah, her great-aunt's wand before she married, no doubt. I'll have some prepared for them to try."

"Charge them to me," Edward said.

"Has Neville come to replace his primary wand yet?" Harry asked.

"No; he lost it in the battle, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," Harry nodded. "When he comes, could you please charge it to my account?"

Harry didn't see Edward nod behind him. "Very good, Mister Potter."

Three doors down from Ollivander's was an office building. The second-to-top floor housed The Quibbler. Harry was surprised to see Luna sitting at the reception desk, reading her potions book.

"Hi, Harry," she said without looking up, "Doctor Potter. I was hoping to see you soon."

The inner door opened, and Edward noticed Mr. Lovegood standing there, looking out. Neither Harry nor Luna noticed him, however. Luna had looked up, and the teens only had eyes for each other.

Harry walked over towards Luna, who set the book aside and stood up. Harry wasn't certain what to do once he got close, but Luna merely tugged on his jumper collar and kissed him on the cheek. Harry returned the kiss, on her forehead, when he suddenly remembered his cousin was there. He jumped a little when he saw an older man watching as well.

"Daddy," Luna said simply, again not looking over, "this is Doctor Edward Potter and Harry Potter. I think Harry's my partner." Luna looked Harry in the eye. "Aren't I?"

Luna's voice held the first real hint of insecurity Harry had ever heard in her. He knew her hand was still on his jumper, and he covered it with his. "Well, I hope we're . . . a couple." Luna smiled, and stood there holding Harry's hand.

"Well, come on in," Lovegood said simply. "No use talking out here!"

Mr. Lovegood was much more abrupt and straightforward than Harry had anticipated. The editor sat behind his desk while Edward sat across from him. Luna took Harry over to a small loveseat on the side and sat next to him.

"You're here to tell me that Luna and I are in danger. Me because I published that interview with Harry here, and because I'm because I'm drawing up and distributing The Truth, Luna because she helped Harry in June, and now because she's. . . ."

"Harry's partner," Luna said, firmly for her.

"Exactly," Edward agreed. "The real dangers to both of you will start in September, once the newsletter starts coming out every week, and Luna and Harry are seen together."

Lovegood smiled grimly. "I'm used to death threats, even if not from people as . . . ruthless as these. I was an Auror in the last war, Doctor Potter, my wife an Unspeakable. We quit the Ministry when the new Ministry refused to acknowledge that He might come back."

"Yes, I know I print a lot of what seems to be nonsense," Lovegood went on, "but there has been a lot of truth in it, too. I can take care of myself, as long as He doesn't come after me Himself. I'm relying on you two to look out for Luna."

"Are you sure you want to?" Harry asked Luna, "This is a lot more dangerous than. . . ." He was lost for a metaphor.

"Looking for fwoopers?" Luna suggested. "When I sensed the synergy in the train compartment last September, I knew I was to be part of the battle against evil. I will be part of it, no matter if I'm partnering with you or following you. I would prefer being your partner as well as your follower in the crusade."

Harry gave her a rather goofy smile.

"I think we have our answers," Edward said to Lovegood. "She should have some reserve wands. While we hope the students won't get directly involved with a fight with Voldemort or his Death Eaters again, recent history suggests it's a real possibility. I arranged with Ollivander to supply her with two."

"Yes," Lovegood mused, "that's a good idea. I'll take her after we close at Four."

"We're booked for lunch at Rucak's, if you'd care to come," Edward offered.

"After that little article, and the photo, I should take you!" Lovegood proclaimed. "In fact, name a date!"

"We'll be back the afternoon of August thirtieth," Edward said. "Harry will finish any school shopping the next day."

"I could cook dinner that night," Luna offered.

"Good idea!" Lovegood said.

"Alright," Edward agreed after a glance at a smiling Harry, "we'll be there."

"We live on the top floor," Luna said. "Your wife is welcome, too."

"We should be here at?"

"We close at Four; we can eat after Six. Any time in between is fine," Lovegood said.

"I do need to speak with you for a moment about The Truth," Edward said.

Luna led Harry out and shut the door. "I thought everything was coming along?" Lovegood said, surprised.

"I thought Harry and Luna would like a moment." Lovegood smiled, and Edward grinned.

"You didn't tell me your birthday was August First," Harry said as Luna shut the door. "We could have done something special." Edward had found that out for him.

"We did," Luna answered. "We were together. I wanted nothing more than that for my birthday."

"I hope you don't mind," Harry said tentatively. He dug into his pocket, pulled out three small bags, and held them out to her.

"As long as you don't think you ever have to buy me anything." She met his eyes. "I mean that, Harry. I have a little money, and I don't need anything, especially not things to help me believe you care about me. On the other hand, I know you have never had the chance to buy people things, so I won't stop you. Please, just don't over do the presents."

"I won't. I just thought you might not many chances to shop in Muggle London."

Luna smiled gently and dumped the bags out, revealing nine pairs of ear rings, six pairs rather gaudy and the remaining three pairs platinum charms (crescent moons, stars, and small lion's heads). "Harry, they're all lovely!" She reached up and put her left hand on his cheek. Harry leaned forward, and they kissed gently on the lips for the first time.

When Edward and Lovegood came out a few moments later, Luna had already replaced the small wooden owl ear rings she'd been wearing with a platinum lion and a plastic purple star fish.

It would be rare when she did not wear at least one of the platinum lions.

Chapter X

Friday, August 30, 1996

Harry had experienced a very intensive August. Edward, with some help from Remus, had Harry practicing advanced fighting techniques every morning. Every evening, Edward and Carole checked his summer work. Harry had surprised himself by gaining 8 of the 11 O.W.L.s he had tried for ('E' in Defense and Care of Creatures, 'O' in Charms and Transfiguration, 'A' in Herbology, Potions, Astronomy, and one of the two Theoretical areas -- which included Transfiguration, Charms, and part of Defense -- but he received a 'P' in History, Divination, and the other Theoretical area -- which covered Potions, Herbology, and a few related areas of Defense*). He decided his hope of being an Auror was not an empty one after all and had set to work.

He also wrote to Luna and Ron everyday, and alternated every three days writing to Ginny, Hermione, and Neville. Hedwig was completely recovered from her injury of the previous year, and Potter Place had a small owlery of its own, so Harry was never caught short. Everyone except Ron wrote by return owl (Ron wrote nearly everyday, but did miss a few -- Ginny had him tending goal every afternoon).

Luna's letters tended to be three to four pages long, and 80% what Ron would have called nonsense and Hermione, if she felt charitable, would have called stream-of-consciousness. Harry didn't mind, although they were at times hard work to understand. They included excerpts from her dream diary, her meals, lessons, 'interesting' tid-bits that were sent to The Quibbler, observations on life in Diagon Alley and on life in general. As Harry untangled the letters right after breakfast every morning (Luna wrote every night before going to sleep), he understood that he was coming to know Luna in just under four weeks almost as well as he knew Ron and Hermione after five years. And, by trying to respond at least somewhat in kind, he revealed more of himself, to himself as he wrote as well as to Luna, than he'd ever done before.

And, at the end of every one of her letters, there would be a straightforward paragraph or two, answering any fears his own dreams and feelings had brought up and showing Harry an affection that he'd certainly never knew existed before, especially not from Cho.

Harry went to his cousin and inquired if there was any magical parchment that would allow them to continue the exchange at Hogwarts without everyone knowing, as they would if they passed the letters between them or sent them by owl or elf. Edward thought about it, and produced two diaries one day in late August. Whatever was written in one would appear in both. They could not be activated until both wrote passwords into them.

Luna was overjoyed by the idea. She didn't want the letter exchange to stop either. While a very self-sustaining person by nature, she'd been fairly isolated at Hogwarts during her first three years. The previous year had brought her out to a degree, and she now knew she wanted Harry's companionship as well as sharing affection with him.

Luna also sent along a gift to Harry one day. Four dyed leather thongs, in Gryffindor and Ravenclaw colors, had been wrapped around a hair from a lion's mane (since they were both Leos). It had been magically treated to resist wear and washing. Harry wore one, and Luna wore another.

July and August had also seen darker news. Young Crabbe and Goyle had not even made to August; they had been killed the very evening after they'd been taken into custody. Their murderer had not been identified, let alone located.

Four of the five Muggle-borns in the up-coming First year, along with their families, had been attacked in August. Two sets were murdered by Death Eaters leaving the Dark Mark in early August; two sets had been successfully attacked by Dementors in mid-August. The one who was not attacked was a foster child who had been transferred to magical parents in late June.

15 wizarding homes (including the Lovegood cottage outside Ottery St. Catchpole) in Britain and Ireland, all empty at the time, had been wrecked or burned. So far, all the activities were confined to the British Isles. Voldemort's campaign of terror was therefore still in its first stages.

While the known Death Eaters had escaped from arrest in early July, their assets (at least the known legal ones) had been frozen. Both of Draco Malfoy's parents were in hiding, and Draco himself was making himself scarce. Thirty-three additional ministry employees were accused of being Death Eaters, although only six were successfully held. Another sixty were secretly listed as 'suspect,' including Percy Weasley (although he was fairly low on the list).

Control of Hogwarts was securely in the hands of Dumbledore and a slightly revamped Board of Governors. Professor Trelawney was rehired to teach the Third, Fourth, and Fifth years, while Firenze would handle the few Sixth and Seventh year students. Hagrid was of course returning, but Professor Grubbly-Plank was splitting the work. (Edward told Harry it was because Hagrid had been assigned extra work in the Forbidden Forest, which Harry understood to mean dealing with Grawp and the Centaurs). Remus was returning as the Defense teacher, with a special exemption from the Ministry while it tried to undo some of its recent legislation. Edward was therefore the only new faculty member.

Harry, Carole, and Edward arrived at the Leaky Cauldron a little after 4:00. Harry wasn't certain what kind of meal they were likely to get later that evening, but he didn't feel right making any excuses ahead of time.

While Carole and Harry checked in, Edward stepped out to Madam Malkins. Although Harry had had new clothes since early July (robes as well as Muggle), he still often wore his Dudley hand-me-downs when grubbing about the Dursleys in July and on the estate in July and August. The quality of the dress robe Edward brought back amazed Harry. Like his new Hogwarts robes, the dress robe had secret pockets, including space for extra wands (Harry was up to nine spare wands, of various quality).

At 5:15, the trio presented themselves at the private entrance next to The Quibbler. Mister Lovegood opened the door, and they climbed the stairs in the presence of some wonderful odors. Edward presented Mr. Lovegood a bottle of French rosé wine, and Mr. Lovegood gave Edward a copy of the first edition of The Truth.

Dinner, when they got to it an hour or so later, turned out to be a nicely done but, to Harry at least, oddly-seasoned roasted chicken. Harry had already learned that Carole could and would eat nearly anything, and that while Edward was a somewhat fussy eater, he still had a wider tolerance than many people Harry knew. He therefore wouldn't have eaten the under-done asparagus no matter how it was prepared, and Edward complimented Luna on her seasoning of the chicken and seemed to eat the soggy fried potato wedges with gusto. Carole ate as she usually did, and as far as Harry was concerned, it was better-cooking than Aunt Petunia usually achieved, and there was much more of it than he ever got at Privet Drive. The wine certainly didn't hurt, and neither did the ice cream from Fortescue's.

Harry would come pick up Luna at 9:00 the next morning, and they would spend the day together, meeting Harry's other friends back at the Leaky Cauldron around 11:45 for lunch. As the trio made their way back to the Leaky Cauldron after dinner, Harry waited for someone to ask him the question he had been fearing since his birthday . . . why Luna? She'd just sat during the dinner, with her usual semi-detached, dreamy expression on her face. Somehow, when he was with her, it made Harry feel at ease, both with himself and with the world. Out of her presence, he wondered what others thought of them as a couple.

Then Harry remembered Edward had really asked that question, and hadn't thought her weird at all. If anything was strange to Edward, it was that Harry had the good sense to appreciate her. Harry was glad it was dark, because he blushed with shame. Luna was not anyone to be ashamed of; her oddness marked her honesty. In response to his letter where he had mentioned his O.W.L.s and yet generally-bad 5th year marks, she had sent a piece torn off the bottom of his letter saying 'Well done!' and sent her grade sheets, marked, 'if you're curious.' Her grades over four years hadn't been as high as Hermione's (few students' ever were), but all of them had ranged between 90 (usually Potions and History) through as much as 111 (Defense, which didn't surprise him now). She, like Hermione, carried three extra classes (Runes, Divination, and Muggle Studies) rather than two, like most students. She had merely replied to his comment about it that most Ravenclaws carried one more than most students, and then asked about radio frequencies and if it was true they could connect to Muggle dental work.

'No,' Harry thought, 'Luna might have reason to be ashamed of me and the way I act, but I certainly will never have reason to feel that way about her.' Harry remembered the Muggle saying, 'Marching to the beat of a different drummer' -- Luna didn't even hear a drummer, just the stirring of her soul.

"Have you spent much time in Diagon Alley?" Luna asked the next morning.

"I spent about two weeks here three years ago," Harry said. "It was about the nicest two weeks I ever had, before this summer."

"You can't escape the past, but you shouldn't dwell there, either, Harry," Luna said as they walked slowly past Ollivander's. "You have to keep the past and future in perspective, but we dwell in the present."

"That sounds good," Harry admitted, "but with a past and future like mine. . . ."

"You still live in the present, Harry. Even if you found out what that prophecy was, and it was bad, we still live now."

Harry pulled Luna into Flourish and Blotts, and then into a very secluded corner. He spoke very quietly. "The Prophecy says that either I must destroy Voldemort, or he must destroy me."

"Didn't you do that once?" Luna asked.

Harry smiled grimly. "Almost. I should have said 'killed,' not 'destroyed.'"

"Ah," she said, even more quietly. "It doesn't invalidate what I said, Harry." Luna placed her hand over Harry's heart. "I understand why you can't ignore that Prophecy, but you still have to live a life. If you don't, then you merely become a vehicle for the Prophecy and nothing more. I promise you, Harry, you are much more than that." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "You certainly mean more than that to me."

"I might lose, you know."

Luna smiled. "You might lose in life if you live only for the Prophecy, but you will not lose to Evil as long as you don't panic."

"Three people have loved me and died," Harry reminded her. "They died for me."

"They did," Luna agreed. "Someday, I may die for you, too. And you know what? If I do, I shall do so gladly, with love in my heart, even though you will be angry and hurt should that happen. And if you die for me, or live for me, I will still love you unconditionally. We all die, Harry. It's the rule, not the exception."

"I know, but. . . ."

"Did your godfather's death have meaning?"

"Yes, yes it did," Harry admitted. "Not like Cedric's."

"Then miss him and mourn him, but move on. Otherwise, your present will be dark and lonely and your future will be bleak."

"You're an amazing girl," Harry said.

"We're all amazing," she said. "Do you need anything before we move on?" Harry's school books and other supplies had been ordered and delivered earlier that month. He and his friends should be able to enjoy the day.

"Ah! I need to find Hermione a birthday present."

"That's simple, if I know Hermione."

"Really?"

Luna directed him to a counter, where, it turned out, there was a gift registry. Sure enough, Hermione had her name down for some 300 books. Luna pointed out three Rune books that she thought were excellent, and Harry bought two of them, Luna the remaining one.

Harry let Luna lead him to wherever she wanted to go. She finally settled on a shop called Caroban's, which specialized in objects from Eastern and Southern Europe. Harry was immediately attracted to the Pensieves. While Luna agreed with him that using one might ease his mind, the shop assistant reluctantly pointed out that they were for sale to adults over 21; those younger had to have Ministry permission. The assistant agreed to hold one for three weeks in case Harry could get permission to buy it.

Luna looked at the amber scrying jewels and crystal balls. She told Harry that if she managed her O.W.L., her father had promised her a seeing ball. Harry noted the scrying necklace she had particularly liked, and decided he'd ask Carole to pick it up for him, for Luna's Christmas present.

By then, it was already after 11:00. They walked to Gringotts, where Harry made his first serious withdrawal. He rather liked the way Luna hugged him close on the ride.

Edward had reserved the teens a side parlor. Harry managed a quick word with Carole about the amber necklace, and with Edward about the pensieve. Edward thought it was an excellent idea, but wanted to clear it with Dumbledore before approaching the Ministry. After all, some of Harry's thoughts were such that others shouldn't have access to them. Harry, remembering his experience with Snape's memories, agreed.

It was an enjoyable afternoon. As Harry walked back to the Leaky Cauldron without his four friends, having dropped Luna off at 5:00, he wondered about the others. Ginny had obviously decided to keep up her casual relationship with Neville. Even Harry could see that Neville had fallen deeply in love with Ginny. He hoped Ginny really liked Neville, and was not dating him just because they were part of the same group.

Hermione and Ron were also something of an odd couple. Ron obviously wanted to be affectionate in public, and Hermione, just as obviously, was uncomfortable with it as a continuous experience. That is, she would give him a quick hug, or even kiss Ron's cheek, but wasn't comfortable with holding hands or with long hugs in public.

Other than that, though, they had formed a very happy and friendly group. Today had been a happy day, one that Harry could set against all the bad ones. 'If more days were like today,' Harry thought, 'living in the present would be easier.'

Two Muggle vans took Edward and the six teens to the station the next morning. Edward only knew Harry to any degree, and so had observed the other five at dinner the night before and at the late breakfast that morning, just as he had when they were at Potter Place.

He had thought he understood the Weasleys fairly well since he had first met them; he knew the family and he thought he recognized the general types. Both Ron and Ginny were smart, loyal, brave, stubborn, and magically very talented, but Ron was impetuous and undisciplined. Edward had worked very hard on his chess game while in New Orleans, and once held the rank of National Master. He and Ron had played three games after Harry's birthday, Ron playing white twice. Edward had won once as white and once as black. Edward saw that Ron had much more natural talent than he did, but that Ron had no inclination to study the theories behind the game. If Ron didn't change his style, he might be accepted into the Aurors, in part on the strength of his adventures with Harry, but he was likely to fall hard when one of his improvisations failed to work.

Ginny was not quite as brilliant as Ron, but worked much harder and was slightly more talented magically. As stubborn and loyal as her brother was about everything, Ginny was even more so in her personal relationships. It was that stubborn will that had kept her alive the year she'd been possessed. Harry had probably been the only student then at Hogwarts who would have fared any better.

Hermione, of course, was brilliant, talented, and above all, driven. Edward hadn't believed it was possible for a Muggle-born to be that powerful and talented, and he was very glad he hadn't doubted Harry more than he had. While Hermione was a step down from the level of himself or Harry, she was on the level of McGonagall, Sirius, or Remus, which made her slightly stronger than Lily and much stronger than the average Hogwarts student. He understood now why Snape disliked her so much -- Hermione was everything his family had trained him to hate.

Neville had been a pleasant surprise, considering what Edward had been told about the boy over two years before. Whatever Neville's problem had been, he was obviously fighting his way out of it as he was maturing.

Luna, of course, presented her enigmatic, eccentric face to the world. Edward had looked up her records, and had been impressed. She seemed to drift through the world, but proved that she was usually more aware of what was going on around her than most people were. She had obviously decided her life was bound to Harry in some way, and Harry, perhaps amazingly, had decided the same.

Many of the owls exchanged in July and August were about the setting of the Sixth year schedules for Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville. While Third through Fifth years had seven required classes and two additional classes (with a third optional), Sixth and Seventh years carried six to nine classes, two theoretical areas, and, in the final year, Apparation.

Harry and Ron, determined to train as Aurors, were continuing Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions. They would also therefore have Basic Medical Training, another Auror requirement. They didn't have the basics of Runes or Arithmancy, and so had to continue Herbology. Harry went for Muggle Studies and had also been given permission to do Occlumency/Legilimency for his other courses. Ron had little choice but to continue either Divination or Care of Magical Creatures (he decided on Care).

Hermione of course would have loved to have taken everything. She wound up taking Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Runes, Arithmancy, Herbology, Basic Medical Training, and Charm Building. Neville was very happy to drop Potions. He would continue Herbology, Care, Defense, and Charms, and would take the Medical Training with his friends. He was also taking the two botany specialties.

All in all, the four Sixth years would not find it an easy year academically.

* Hermione of course received O.W.L.s in all twelve areas she tried for -- 'E' in Transfiguration, Charms, Care, Arithmancy, and both Theoretical areas; 'O' in Herbology, Runes, Potions, and Defense; and, to her horror, only an 'A' in History (it only comforted Hermione a little to know that few Hogwarts students even achieved that) and Astronomy (she blamed the commotion Umbridge had caused). Ron achieved 6 O.W.L.s -- no 'E's, but 'O's in Care and Defense; and 'A's in Divination (to everyone's surprise), Charms, Herbology, and, to his amazement, Potions. He also received 'P's in Transfiguration, Astronomy, and both Theoretical areas, and a 'D' in History. Neville had received an 'E' in Herbology, 'O's in Care and Defense, and 'A's in Charms and the two Theoretical areas, for a total of 6; and 'P' in all his other subjects.

Chapter XI

The group arrived on Platform 9 3/4 a few minutes before 10:00. All were Prefects or Security Prefects (Hermione had been shocked that Luna had been named a prefect, although she'd long predicted Ginny would be), and they were told to come early this time. Ron and Harry shared a grin when they saw that Draco and Pansy were missing from the group. Katie Bell, the new Head Girl, confirmed that there would be no Sixth year Slytherin prefects -- Blaise Zabini had been the only member of their year who had not joined the Inquisitorial Squad, and he'd been named a Security Prefect.

The prefects got their assignments early this year. Edward, Remus, and Snape would be riding the train, and the prefects would be patrolling it in pairs. Now that the war was on, Dumbledore did not want any attack from, or on, the pro-Pure Blood faction.

The non-Slytherin prefects helped the newer students find their way onto the train. The Slytherins kept the student traffic gently moving along, in their own fashion. ("Come on! Get a move on! You've said your goodbyes and you've got a whole year to gossip! The train will leave right on time!")

Shortly before the train was to move out, Harry, Ron, and Luna heard a drawling voice. "Well, what have we here? Arrogance, poverty, and lunacy!"

"Missing something, are you, Draco?" Ron snarled as he turned.

"Like what?" Draco snapped back.

"Prefect badge, Inquisitorial badge. . . ." Harry taunted.

"Mummy, Daddy, Crabbe, Goyle. . . ." Ron went on.

"Ask his cousin about that!" Draco hissed.

"My cousin captured Crabbe and Goyle," Harry said, "They were alive when they were taken to the Ministry. If someone there didn't kill them for their part in the attack, then your father had them killed to prevent them admitting you were there as well!"

When Draco started to protest, Harry cut in, "Don't say it! I know that was you, right next to your father, the one that port-keyed out. If your mask had slipped enough for one of the others to have recognized you, you certainly wouldn't be here right now!" Harry wasn't about to mention he hadn't been a direct witness; he wanted to see Draco's reaction.

Draco flushed, and his hand twitched near his wand. "That wouldn't be your best move," Luna advised. Harry, and especially Ron, looked like they wouldn't mind Draco going for his wand.

"Draco!" Snape called. "Come here! You three! Split up and do your jobs!"

Snape dragged Draco away from the crowd. "Now look here! You and your friends backed Umbridge last term, despite my warnings. You picked the wrong side in the confrontation. When you take a gamble, sometimes it does NOT pay off. Live with it! Learn from it!" Snape's expression hardened even more. "And Potter was right. Crabbe and Goyle were taken

to the Ministry alive, and your father thought it necessary for you to complete your education if you are to have any chance at taking your proper place in the wizarding world."

"But. . . ." Draco started to protest.

"Be quiet and listen for once!" Snape ordered. "You have this chance at the cost of Crabbe and Goyle. Unless you receive direct orders from the Dark Lord, I suggest you make the most of the chance purchased for you. You are on every 'watch' list there is now. Make one major transgression, and you will be out! Make too many small ones, and you may be out as well. Take care! Your father voluntarily paid a large price to keep you free and in school. Crabbe and Goyle paid a higher price. Do NOT waste it!"

"I didn't . . . I swear I didn't know!"

"I believe you, but many of your House mates will not," Snape reminded Draco. "In any case, stay away from Potter and his friends! That especially goes for Lovegood. She went through that entire firefight at the Ministry, took out some very experienced associates, and didn't get so much as a scratch. She's not nearly as helpless as she appears."

"Very well, sir." Draco went to the train, subdued and thoughtful.

Snape caught up with Harry and Ron just before the train left. "Listen to me, you two. Do NOT harass Mister Malfoy." He held up a hand to stop any protests. "I know, he provokes you at least as much as you provoke him. I know you feel you have scores to settle with him after last year. Don't settle them! Let him have a chance to think. There is still a slight chance he will not follow his father. If you push him, he has no chance. If he pushes, push back, just don't start anything."

"Yes, sir!" Harry said immediately. Ron looked surprised, but agreed as well.

After Snape walked away, Ron turned to Harry. "You figure there's almost no chance Malfoy won't try something, right?"

"Right."

"And then we can hex the hell out of him, right?"

"Right."

"Wicked."

Harry shrugged. Draco Malfoy was the closest of the many people he had to worry about, but he was almost the least important.

Despite the worries of Dumbledore and the staff, there were no real problems on the train during the first part of the trip. A few of the younger Slytherins, who were harassing the remaining Muggle-born First year, were reprimanded, and left the child alone fairly quickly.

A short time later, the prefects were given two hours off, after which they would patrol for the rest of the journey.

The sextet had been assigned a compartment, and they quickly paired off -- Luna and Harry facing backward (with Harry next to the window), and Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville across from them. Luna quickly curled up and fell asleep, her head on Harry's lap and Harry's arm on her shoulders.

"I wish I could do that," Ginny muttered, drawing stares from the others. "Lay down!" she protested quietly. "I meant just lay down!"

"We can wake her up or adjust her in a bit," Hermione said. Ginny shrugged and leaned against Neville, and soon she, Ron, and Harry were napping, too. Neville and Hermione looked at each other, shrugged, and tried to rest as well.

Within five minutes they were also asleep.

Harry winced in pain, and realized, although asleep, that it was his scar. He winced again. "Well, well, who have we here?" Harry heard the voice, but couldn't see anything yet. He fought to put his training to use, and he found himself looking at Voldemort. 'At least we're not inside each other,' Harry thought.

"You seem to have acquired some power over your mind, boy," Voldemort said softly.

"Some," Harry said, thinking quickly, "thanks to you."

"Really?" Voldemort said, trying to hide his surprise.

"Come on, you know Dumbledore would tell me the Prophecy," Harry said, angrily enough to disguise the bluff. "He said you know most, if not all of it."

"Well," Voldemort temporized, "since he hadn't told you before. . . ."

"How else could he explain the jump in my power? Every time you attack me or kill someone close to me, it jumps and I have to learn to control it! Including that diary version of you, you've attacked me with deadly force four times, and you nearly did again in June! You killed my parents, attacked Ginny, attacked Mister Weasley, attacked the Lovegoods, were responsible for Sirius and Cedric getting killed, and you invaded my mind at least twice! I'm already stronger than Dumbledore! Another attack, and I might equal my cousin." Harry grinned nastily. "Since Dumbledore beat you so easily, even more so than I did last year, I guess that means you're toast!"

Voldemort roared with anger. Harry saw Wormtail slinking into the room, which he really saw for the first time. Voldemort was laying on a cot -- obviously both had been asleep, but Harry was now invading Voldemort's space. Torches lit stone walls, and Harry saw a old coat of arms over the fireplace. Dream-Voldemort looked in the same direction, and broke the connection.

Harry woke up with a start, breathing hard. He opened his eyes and saw Luna's silver-blue eyes looking into his, concern obvious in her expression. Her right hand was again over his heart. "You're back," she breathed. "I was worried."

"I was gone?" Harry asked.

"Not physically, but partially mentally," Luna answered, still speaking softly. "We should find your cousin." She pushed herself up and dragged Harry with her. The other four were still asleep.

It didn't take them long to run into a patrolling teacher. Fortunately, it was Remus rather than Snape. A few minutes later, Remus had located the other two teachers, and taken the pair of students to their compartment. It took Harry less than five minutes to tell his tale.

"So," he concluded, "I guess I still have a long way to go."

"You do," Snape agreed, "but you did an adequate job."

"But will Voldemort buy the lie?" Remus asked.

"In the long run, of course not," Snape commented, "but the more distractions the better. I don't see any down side."

"There probably is one, but if so, we'll just hope it's nothing major," Edward said. "It's almost time for you folks to restart the prefect patrols. Why don't you start waking them up as you make a patrol."

"Alright," Harry said.

"And we're not to mention this to anyone?" Luna asked.

"Harry can tell your friends when we have a secure place for Harry to have meetings," Remus told them. "Dumbledore said he would let us know."

The rest of the trip was as quiet for most of the students as the first part. Harry, however, did have one other run-in.

"Potter!" came an insistent whisper from the toilet at the end of one carriage.

Harry turned, and was pulled into the little cubicle. It was a tight fit, because Millicent Bulstrode took up most of the compartment.

"What!" Harry shouted as he was yanked in.

"Quiet!" Millicent hissed quietly. "I'm not going to hurt you, idiot!"

"What, then?"

"Tell me the truth! were Greg and Vinnie really on a Death Eater raid this summer?"

"Them, their fathers, Lucius Malfoy, and I'm pretty certain Draco was there, too," Harry told her. "Vold, err, the Dark Lord was also there. They were ransacking a farmhouse that belongs to Ron's cousins and my cousin's wife -- that's Edward Potter, the new Runes professor."

"And what happened to them?"

"Edward killed Macnair and the senior Crabbe and Goyle, and three or four others, just like The Daily Prophet said. Crabbe, err, Vincent and Gregory, were knocked out. They were killed that night, just before midnight, in the Ministry holding cells. I don't know who did it, or why. It wasn't us, I do know that."

"But it might have been Fudge or the people around him?" Millicent asked.

"I wouldn't put it past some of them, considering some of the things Umbridge did," Harry admitted. "If it wasn't, well, then Malfoy senior was making certain they couldn't put Draco on the spot. At best, that would end his education and get his wand snapped. At worst. . . ." Harry shrugged.

"But you don't know if it was Malfoy, do you?"

"No," Harry said honestly, "I don't." Harry looked up at Millicent. "Why? Does Malfoy claim Edward or I killed them?"

"No," Millicent said, slowly, "not today, anyway. Pansy said that's what he told her, but when Theodore Nott asked him today, he just brushed it aside."

She thought a moment more. "It's not like Draco not to blame you for something if he can, even when it's not your fault."

"That's true," Harry agreed. "Maybe he just found out his father arranged it, or something."

Millicent's face turned blotchy, and she screwed up her face so that she wouldn't cry. "Thank you, Potter. Please, go away."

"I'm sorry, if you were close to them," Harry said, while trying to figure out how to open the door without seeming to molest the young woman.

"You hated both of them!" Millicent stated.

"I disliked both of them," Harry corrected gently. "And, to be honest, considering you and your lot helped Umbridge last year, I don't like any of you. That doesn't mean I want any of you dead."

"I know," Millicent said, a few tears now falling. "It all seemed like a game, until . . . until the Ministry agreed He was back. Us versus them, you . . . we, the good guys, supporting the Old Ways against the people breaking down traditions."

"Maybe you lot should be trying to teach people like me and Hermione some of the Old Ways," Harry said. "Even if we don't follow all the traditions, we should all know what they are. Don't think we hate all the Old Ways."

Millicent was now turned around and leaning over the sink. Harry patted her on the back, and managed to extricate himself without any more unnecessary touching.

A few seconds later, Harry encountered Pansy Parkinson. "Potter!" she spat, "Have you seen Millicent?"

"There's someone crying in the near toilet in the next car," he answered, thumbing back towards it. "That might be her."

Pansy brushed passed him, without another word. "You're welcome!" Harry called to her. Pansy flipped him off without turning around.

"I wonder if she knows that's the Muggle version of the gesture," a feminine voice said.

Harry turned and saw it was Cho. "I doubt it. Have a nice summer?"

Cho shrugged. "Not too bad. We had a hard time explaining things to Marietta's Mum."

"I'm sure she came up with something," Harry said drily.

Cho looked at him, considered saying something, and clearly went on to a different subject. "Will you be playing Quidditch this year?"

"I should be," Harry answered. "I might be getting a little too tall for seeker, but we'll see. If I am, I might make beater."

"No," Cho said, "You still have a few inches and at least twenty pounds before you'd be too big to be a professional seeker. I'm sure you can win your old spot back." Without letting Harry reply, Cho slipped past him and into a compartment.

Harry shrugged and moved on.

Harry rode to the castle with Luna and two of her Dorm mates, Joy and Amber. Both seemed rather amazed that Harry would be interested in Luna, both staring at them holding hands as they went. After they arrived, Harry managed to whisper in Amber's ear while Luna petted one of the thestrals, "Can you do anything about people hiding Luna's stuff this year?"

Amber nodded, her mouth still agape. Luna came up to them, and wrapped her arm around Harry's. As the crowd jostled them into the great hall, Luna whispered, "Thank you, but it wasn't necessary. I always have enough things to wear, and I always get everything back."

"I know," Harry said, not about to make an issue of it, "but since it's mostly your dorm mates who either do it or allow it, why not ask them nicely to stop? It's not like I'm going to hex them if they still do it."

"That's good," Luna said seriously. "Someday, we might have to hex someone to save the other. I wouldn't want us to do it for something trivial."

"You'll never be trivial to me in any way," Harry said, flushing as he realized how pompous he was sounding.

"Don't be silly," Luna told him. Their arms slid apart, they clasped hands, and went off to their tables.

Before the Sorting Hat was allowed to sing, Dumbledore requested that all the students and staff stand to honor the First years who had been killed or Kissed in August, and for Crabbe and Goyle, "who may have been fighting on the wrong side, but who died under such mysterious circumstances"). All the students did so, although Harry noticed Malfoy was rather flushed when he joined in. Bulstrode started crying again, although not loudly.

The Sorting Hat's song, like the year before, pleaded for understanding and cooperation between the Houses. This year's class was much smaller than usual, and not just because of the dead students. There were only thirty First years.

As the Sorting started, Harry whispered his view of Malfoy and Bulstrode, since Hermione and Ginny couldn't see while Ron and Neville had his back to them.

"Malfoy should be embarrassed," Ron whispered. "He probably had them killed."

"I don't think so," Harry answered.

"I have to agree," Hermione said. "His father probably ordered it, though."

"What's the difference?" Ron demanded, making a number of students shush him.

"A lot," Ginny whispered. "Malfoy is a stick, but Crabbe and Goyle have been close to him since he was an infant. He no doubt thought it was their duty to serve him, but to have his father casually order them killed just so Draco could come back to school. . . ."

"I guess," Ron said reluctantly.

"I'd feel just awful," Neville added.

"So would I," Harry agreed, "but I didn't really expect it from Malfoy. I thought he'd twist things around as usual to blame me."

"He will," Ron snarled.

"Well, he probably will," Harry said. "Look, there's almost no chance we can get Malfoy on our side. . . ."

"Why would we want him?" Ron asked.

Harry ignored that. ". . .but if there's any chance, this is probably it. And if he doesn't join us, maybe he will find some way to stay out of it. If he joins them, that's one more soldier for Voldemort. If he stays out, maybe some of the others will follow him. If he joins us, maybe some will join us. That means we cut him some slack. If he runs true to form, he'll come around and start blaming us for everything, and then we'll ride him. Until then, we let him think it through."

Harry turned on Hermione and Ginny. "That also means no being extra-nice, either. He'll see that as weakness and that would be more likely to drive him away than attract him."

"I wouldn't be nice to that . . . that" Ginny sputtered.

Hermione cocked her head and regarded Harry for a moment. "Alright, Harry. You might be right at that."

The Sorting Hat finished, having sent 6 students to Slytherin, 7 to Gryffindor, 8 to Ravenclaw, and 9 to Hufflepuff.

Dumbledore stood up. "As always, the Forbidden Forest is just that, forbidden unless you are given specific permission from a member of the teaching staff. We have four new security prefects, they are to be obeyed as much as your own House prefects. Mister Potter is the student coordinator of security, and his instructions override those of any prefect, the Head Boy or Girl, and any previous command of a member of the teaching staff. We live in perilous times, and so I beg you all to be careful this year."

"Professor Hagrid will be teaching Third and Sixth year Care of Magical Creatures, while Professor Glubbly-Plank shall be doing Fifth and Seventh years. They shall be sharing the Fourth year class. Professor Trelawney shall be teach Third through Fifth year Divination, while Professor Firenze shall be taking the Sixth and Seventh years."

"As you can see, Professor Moody has returned to Hogwarts. He shall act as a security consultant." Moody gave the students a twisted grin.

"As most of you no doubt know, Doctor Edward Potter, the famous archeologist, will be teaching Runes for the next three years." Moderate applause greeted Edward from the Hufflepuffs, but loud applause came from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. Slytherin was mostly silent.

"Finally, returning as our Defense against the Dark Arts instructor is Professor Remus Lupin." Wild applause came from three tables, and some applause and some hissing came from Slytherin. "To inform the younger students, yes, Professor Lupin is a werewolf, but that also means he is safe every day and twenty-seven out of every twenty-eight nights. Secure precautions are in place to make that one night a month safe for all of us. Should Professor Lupin feel ill afterwards, Professor Moody, Professor Potter, or Professor Snape shall substitute for him."

"And now, we shall sing the school song, and then we can tuck in!"

Chapter XII

The first week of class went very quietly for Harry. There were no rampaging pixies, illegal curses, or criminally abusive detentions. Snape had sneered a bit at Harry and Ron in the Advance Potions class (all the Sixth years still taking potions were now in the same class), but had put them in the furthest corner of the lab. Malfoy and Zabini (the only two Slytherins) were kept as far away from Harry and Ron as possible. Hermione and five Ravenclaws were buffers.

Professor McGonagall took similar precautions, except Ron was in the right front seat, with Harry right behind him, and Malfoy four seats away in the front left. Harry and Ron thought these reasonable precautions, and no one bothered to ask Malfoy what he thought.

Sixth year Charms, Defense, and Herbology were all large enough to have two sections each, and none were with the Slytherins (although they shared Herbology with Ravenclaw for the first time). Draco had dropped out of Care of Magical Creatures, to Ron and Hagrid's delight. However, Draco had not dropped out of Runes, which made it the only class one of the Trio had with Draco. (Draco was only taking seven classes; his final one was a special experimental potions class with himself and two Ravenclaws in it).

While the classes were much more difficult than Fourth year had been, things seemed a tad lighter than Fifth.

Hermione had been torn about Runes. She'd loved the previous professor, who had just been appointed Deputy Master of Durmstrang. She hadn't liked sharing the class with Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins, although it (and Arithmancy) did allow her to mix more with the Ravenclaws.

Hermione also knew Edward Potter was a brilliant field archeologist, but wondered what kind of classroom teacher he might be. . . .

"Welcome to your Sixth year of what we like to call 'Runes' here at Hogwarts; what most other places call 'Magical Symbols and Languages.' By now, you should have mastered at least twelve magical languages, five scholarly ones, and nine sets of symbols. As there are, depending on how we define the categories, some eighty-one major magical languages, twenty-seven scholarly ones, hundreds of minor ones, and dozens of symbol sets, we have quite a range to work with yet."

"As you no doubt remember from your own first three years, Sixth and Seventh year students help with the weekend language retreats. If you were not aware, you may win up to ten House points for your helpful participation." Edward stressed 'helpful.' Somehow, two of the three Slytherins present didn't look very helpful, at least at the moment.

Edward passed out a set of handouts. "You will also be learning seven new languages over the next two years, and three new symbolic sets during each year. The first page of the handouts will remind you what the requirements are for the N.E.W.T.s, and which are acceptable individual choices. You will need fifteen magical languages, nine scholarly ones, and at least

a dozen sets of symbols, plus the ability to fuse runes and letters onto certain types of objects. The second through fifth pages lists a series of projects. You will be enchanting three items this year. The basics supplies, charm levels, and runes needed are also listed. You have two weeks to choose. The sixth page is a form you need to fill out once you make the choices. It may be handed-in at any time over the next two weeks. It must be handed-in by the end of class, two weeks from today."

"Unfortunately, last year's temporary head mistress seems to have partially damaged some records, and some of the last professor's records were damaged from damp -- something about a leaking swamp in the area above her office last spring?" Edward shrugged. "Therefore, use the last page to list which languages and symbol sets you know, so I can check it against the damaged records and see if I'm missing any information."

He turned to the chalk board. A wave of his wand, and a paragraph appeared. "For homework, copy this down. Translate it into Latin plus one scholarly and one magical language. Hand it in at the start of class next week."

"When you have copied the paragraph and turned in page seven, you may go. Are there any questions?"

Draco and Hermione both raised their hands. To Hermione's surprise, he called on Draco.

"Mister Malfoy?"

"Are you going to be offering a weekend on the languages you worked on the last two years in Chad?"

"South-West Nilic is not yet classified as a major magical, or even minor, language, and so is not one of the nine that might be scheduled. However, if at least nine Sixth and Seventh years are interested, we'll try and add another. If any of you are interested," Hermione's hand shot up again, but Edward ignored it, "please let me know in three weeks." Hermione's hand went back down. "By then, you should all have a good idea of your workloads this year."

Edward turned to Malfoy. "Are there any other questions?"

Malfoy gazed at Edward defiantly, but shook his head. Hermione decided to keep quiet as well.

Katie Bell was the new Gryffindor Quidditch captain. She decided, with Professor McGonagall's support, to have open try-outs for all the other positions. No one wanted to challenge Harry for the job of seeker, that was decided the first Saturday. The other positions would be settled over the coming weeks.

Ron was fairly certain he could keep his Quidditch position. He was less certain he could keep up with Harry in their quest to become Aurors. Harry wasn't an academic standout, but he seemed able to scrape by with less effort than Ron. Harry had a pile of gold and, if there was peace by the time they left school, a chance at professional Quidditch to fall back on if his dream of being an Auror fell through. Ron loved his father, but had no great desire in follow

his footsteps as a poorly-regarded Ministry official, or to follow Percy's ambitious sucking-up. Neville also had a well-off, although not wealthy, family to fall back on. There was an estate, which Neville planned on managing and improving. Hermione would no doubt have a wide number of career options.

Ron had very few options he liked the looks of.

Ron also knew he was in love with Hermione, and he hoped Hermione felt the same about him. Neither had said much, but both acknowledged openly that they were 'together,' without defining what that meant.

What all this meant to Ron was to make him afraid to make any sort of commitment or direct request until he had some idea what kind of life he could offer Hermione. That Hermione, an independent Muggle feminist, might not think in traditional terms was a bit outside Ron's adolescent imagination.

Hermione, who had a much better idea of how Ron thought than even Ron did, had decided to try and mature and train him as she wanted. She knew she wouldn't get him the way she might hope, but figured she could at least get him started in the right directions.

Hermione was also trying to oversee two other relationships. Neville and Ginny was something of an unexpected pairing. Hermione was still trying to figure it out, and Ron was trying to come to terms with it. Hermione suspected that Ginny was, as far as romance went, the most forward and adventuresome of the six.

Hermione was also trying to understand Harry's relationship with Luna. She could see that it was good for Harry, but she just couldn't understand Luna well-enough to see the attraction. She was glad Luna was a Ravenclaw; it made the relationships of the four Gryffindors seem easy to operate by comparison.

Hermione was, although she did not realize it, a bit jealous of Luna. Hermione loved Harry like a brother, and knew he loved her as a sister. For five years, though, Hermione had been the most important girl in both Ron and Harry's lives. She had been Harry's advisor. Luna was moving in on her territory in ways Cho never had come close to.

Harry and Luna's schedules fortunately meshed to a degree. They usually had a few minutes together between their classes. Although both students were natural late-risers, they quickly took to getting up at 6:45, feeling it was a reasonable sacrifice to make. They ate breakfast with the earliest eaters, and alternated between sitting together at the other's tables, whichever was open at the time. This was considered appropriate behavior, even at the Slytherin table, so long as the 'intruder' didn't stay so long as to leave a House member seatless. It was not considered good behavior at lunch (except on weekends) or dinner, and not even a free spirit like Luna dared break that taboo.

Thursday, September 12, 1996

The second week went much like the first. Harry and Luna were eating breakfast at the Gryffindor table, next to Hermione. To their surprise, Hedwig came in before the rush of breakfast mail, and left Harry a note.

"It's from Dumbledore," Harry said quietly. "It's a stop-press from today's Daily Prophet."

"What is it?" Hermione asked. Harry read it softly.

At about midnight, a large force of Death Eaters attacked the Ministry Annex for Long Term Care. It had housed eighty-four people who had been Kissed by Dementors, and fifteen innocent victims of the Dementors, dating back to the 1920s.

As usual, there were twenty-one caregivers, eight guards, and a member of the Minister's Office on duty when the attack occurred. Sixty of the sentenced soulless were killed and twenty-four taken. Nine of the innocent were also killed, the remaining six taken.

Of the twenty-one caregivers, fifteen were squibs. All fifteen were killed. Three of the others were killed, three are missing. Six guards are also missing. The remaining two guards were killed. The member of the Minister's office was injured and his condition is listed as 'serious' by St. Mungo's.

No reason is known for the attack or the taking of the soulless.

"Dumbledore added a note," Harry added. "Barty Crouch was one of the ones taken. Percy was the official on duty."

"I wonder why Percy was injured, not killed?" Hermione asked.

"It could be he was lucky, it could be he was working for Voldemort and his injuries were cover, or it could be He wants us to think Percy might be working for him." Harry grimaced. "I wonder what He wanted those people for."

"Zombies," Luna said simply.

"What?" Hermione asked, shocked.

"Zombies. The soulless are more easily commanded by Dark Arts," Luna said, in her matter-of-fact yet dreamy voice.

"They are essentially mindless as well as soulless," Harry said, trying to remember what he knew about zombies and the Kissed.

"True," Hermione had to admit.

"Well," Luna said, "I think we have the first lessons for the DA."

"Good idea!" Harry agreed.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but had to agree. "If we can get things started."

Professor Snape had been complaining from the first day of the term about the makeup of the DA. He wanted Slytherin to be integrated into the group. Harry, and the rest of the DA, were resisting. Harry and Hermione merely said that it was currently limited to the previous year's members. Any new members would have to be voted in, and the group was still discussing how that might be done. They would meet again the next night.

'Maybe,' Hermione thought, 'a good starting topic will get everyone ready to move on the group.'

"We didn't do much with zombies with Quirrell, did we?" Harry asked Hermione.

"No, he said we'd work with them Second year," Hermione stated thoughtfully. "Lockhart didn't cover them, though."

"I bet he marked it 'done' somewhere, and went on talking about himself."

"Professor Lupin had zombies as an optional report," Luna contributed. "I'll ask Amber to research them for me tonight. She likes looking things up."

"Your year has O.W.L.s," Hermione reminded her.

"I know. I'll remind her that zombies weren't properly covered, and that's why we want the information. She'll run to find out about them, and help us as well as herself."

'Sounds like Hermione,' Harry thought, but he was wise enough not to say anything.

"Here comes the Seventh years," Hermione said. That was the signal for Luna to leave. Kissing was certainly discouraged in the great hall, and so the couple merely held hands for a moment, before Luna left.

Harry gave Hermione a dirty look.

"What?" she asked.

"You don't have to sound so happy when they show up," Harry answered, rather grumpily.

"Sorry," Hermione said, not terribly sincerely.

Saturday, September 14, 1996

Harry had left a note for Professor Snape at breakfast, requesting a meeting for any time after 3:00. He had Quidditch try-outs to help with in the morning (Ron regained his keeper's spot, Ginny had earned a spot as a chaser and reserve seeker). He and Luna had taken a large picnic lunch to Hagrid's, and had found a sun-lit but-secluded arbor overlooking the lake after discovering Hagrid was in the Forest. They had sat on a bench and got to know each other better.

A little before 2:45, Harry checked the notice board near the potions area of the dungeons. Snape had left him a note, giving him an appointment at 4:00. Harry decided to show Luna a collapsed tunnel in their time remaining.

"And what's interesting about this?" Luna asked, puzzled. Usually she could come up with something interesting in any situation, but this time she was at a loss.

"So far as I know, only Ron and Professor Lupin know about this, although I guess my cousin might as well. Ron and Professor Lupin know the tunnel has collapsed."

"Yes?"

Harry shrugged. He waved his wand three times. A magical smokeless torch, a large-if-shabby sofa, and a table appeared. He closed the passage door.

"You created these?" Luna asked, impressed. That was late Sixth year Transfiguration and Charm work, if not Seventh.

"No," Harry admitted. "I vanished them from a storeroom."

"Ah," Luna said. This was late Fifth year magic. "That makes more sense."

"And with the Map, we won't walk out when someone is nearby," Harry added. He had explained the 'Marauder's Map' to her and Neville at Potter Place.

Luna sat on the sofa and leaned back. "And what nefarious ideas does that adolescent male libido of yours have, Mister Potter?"

Harry blushed.

Luna sat up. "I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't tease you."

Harry sat down, and Luna laid her head on his shoulder. "We're not very good at this, are we?" she asked.

"No," Harry agreed, "but we're in this together, right?"

Luna smiled. "That's right. We'll learn together, at our own pace."

Harry kissed the top of Luna's head, while she held Harry around his waist.

Harry was nearly late for his appointment with Snape.

"What do you need, Mister Potter?" Snape asked, nearly politely.

"The DA set up its conditions for new members last night," Harry answered. Snape merely nodded, so Harry went on. "No one new under Fourth year. Anyone new has to be nominated by a current member, and approved by a sixty percent majority. I can dismiss any member, subject to a seventy-five percent override."

"I see. Well, that do doubt eliminates any members of Slytherin from joining," Snape stated, almost angrily.

"Any security prefect may join automatically, since we're selected by the Headmaster," Harry said, handing Snape a slip of parchment.

Snape read the slip. "What does this mean?" There were eight names, with Zabini's name checked.

"I want your opinion on those other seven names. Can they be trusted enough to let them join?"

"Do you think I'd speak against my own House, Potter?" Snape demanded, incredulous.

"I'm not asking your opinion as Head of Slytherin House, but as a member of the Order of the Phoenix. I take the idea of Dumbledore's Army very seriously, sir," Harry retorted.

Snape looked at Harry with a hard face for a moment, then went back to the list. "Why Stevens?"

"She's a half-blood, and, unlike a number of them in Slytherin, she doesn't try to out-Pure-blood the Pure-blood Supremacists."

"That's true," Snape admitted. He caught a strange look on Harry's face. "What is it, Potter?"

"Just something Bellatrix Lestrange and I said to each other. The Dark Lord's followers really don't know he's more of a Mud-blood than a half-blood, do they?"

Snape looked like he was about to faint. "What . . . what do you mean by that!"

Harry looked surprised. "You mean you don't know, either?"

"No! Tell me!" Snape insisted.

"His father, Tom Riddle, was a pure Muggle, who rejected His mother and refused to marry her when he found out she was a witch. She died right after He was born, so Tom Riddle Junior was raised in a Muggle orphanage. That puts Him closer to Mud-blood than I am -- my mother might have been the grand-daughter of four squibs, but she was a witch, yet they all call me a half-blood. What does that make Him?"

"There is no absolute rule about these pejorative epithets, Potter. You're right, you're closer to Pure-Blood than the Dark Lord, if . . . His father was a Muggle?"

"Yes. He admitted it to me twice. And his current body was made from. . . ."

"The bone of a Muggle, the blood of a half blood, and the flesh of Pettigrew." Snape smiled evilly. "Well, well, well. Anyway, you would still be considered a half-blood by most Supremacists, but acceptable. The Dark Lord would be the worst kind of half-blood."

Snape smiled again, but then shook his head. "Back to the matter at hand. Why Bulstrode?"

"She seemed upset at the death of Crabbe and Goyle, and was blaming Malfoy. Maybe we can get her to break away from Pansy and Draco now."

"Perhaps. Can you guarantee these will be accepted?"

"Guarantee?" Harry asked. "No. I will speak for them, if you vouch for them." Harry didn't think it necessary to mention that Dumbledore had already approved them.

"You were under the Sorting Hat for some time. Did it mention considering you for Slytherin?"

"Actually, yes," Harry said.

Snape nodded. "I think you were properly placed, but sometimes you show some Slytherin sense. I'll vouch for all eight students."

"Thank you, sir."

"Potter!" Snape called as Harry was leaving. "You need to pick someone to practice Legilimency on next spring. It should be someone who trusts you, but who has little mental discipline. Until last spring, I would have recommended Longbottom. Perhaps you might consider a Creevy?"

"Yes, sir."

Chapter XIII

The DA settled in to meeting two hours every late Sunday afternoon. Dumbledore had arranged for them to meet in an abandoned dungeon that had once served as a medieval combat practice area. The House Quidditch teams drew lots for the afternoon practice times (3:30 - 5:30), Gryffindor drawing Tuesdays -- each had sworn to forgo Sunday afternoons.

Hermione had been refining her Protean-charmed Galleons over the summer. Each Galleon now became charmed to match each member. More importantly, that member could now send a short message, up to 25 characters, back to Harry, and to a large disk which Hermione gave to Dumbledore. ("Leave it to Hermione to make the thing big enough for Dumbledore to see without his glasses," Ron had said admiringly.) In both cases, the name of the student would also appear.

What Hermione didn't tell anyone, other than Harry and Dumbledore, was that she had incorporated several security charms into the process. Because each Galleon was activated by having the student hold it and use their wand, if someone was holding the Galleon other than the student, or if someone was using a different wand, that would also show.

Hermione had produced an even more-sophisticated version for the Order of the Phoenix. Since Professor Snape had reduced his point-taking from the Houses other than Slytherin (he took points as often, but not in as high a number as he had reached the previous autumn), Gryffindor was in an early lead for the House cup thanks to Hermione.

While there had been many murmurings within the DA when Harry asked them to consider the new Slytherin members (he kept to the agreement, and each Slytherin was sponsored by a different DA member), all the DA students seemed to be trying to be on their better behavior. Marietta Edgecombe had dropped out of the DA, but only Cho had followed her; all the other students from the year before who hadn't left school returned to the group. The remaining Ravenclaws ignored the subject, and Harry encouraged everyone else to do the same.

The eight Slytherins were all capable, and none made the snide remarks certain other Slytherins were infamous for. Millicent Bulstrode had been the hardest to get into the group; Harry and Hermione had pled long for her, and she made it only by the exact vote. She kept her head down and her end of the work up. The Slytherins were slowly integrated into the group.

Since there were eight Slytherins in the group, the other Slytherins didn't give them too hard a time. The small group that looked to Malfoy for leadership had shrunk -- some had left school, Crabbe and Goyle were dead, and a few others were now wavering between Draco on the one side and either Zabini and Bulstrode on the other. It helped that most of the remaining students from hardcore Death Eater families were either Seventh years worried about their N.E.W.T.s, the Sixth years other than Zabini, or Second years. The three other hard-core supporters were isolated in the First, Third, and Fifth years.

Pansy and Draco had lost their prefect status because of their involvement with the Inquisitorial Squad. Even the most biased Slytherin admitted, since that was the only punishment meted out by Dumbledore other than a few detentions, that the House had little to complain about in that regard. Dumbledore had even allowed Slytherin's win of the House

cup to stand, and had allowed the appointment of a Slytherin Head boy (Carl McCloud, who had not taken a direct part in the Inquisitorial Squad).

Harry's Occlumency lessons continued on Monday nights. Edward, Snape, and Dumbledore all worked with him. There had been no repeats of the type of contact there had been on the train, and Harry had no desire to create a connection. (Snape had told them that Voldemort was more controlled now -- he had no desire to connect to Harry at the moment, either.) The five students closest to Harry knew what he was doing, and so had no need to question him. If anyone else noticed he was missing Monday nights, or was curious, they were wise enough not to mention it.

The rest of the school seemed quiet. Grawp was still somewhere in the Forest, but the creatures there seemed to have learned to avoid him. The giant had also calmed to some degree, and Hagrid was no-longer sporting injuries that were as serious as those of the year before. (Fortunately, Hagrid had not found Grawp a giant girlfriend -- Madame Maxime, however, had a younger, less-refined sister who had taken to visiting, which no doubt accounted for his quieting down to a great degree.) The centaurs had retreated even further from Hogwarts, and seemed unlikely to interfere with what went on near the school again, for good or ill.

Outside of Hogwarts, six individual Ministry workers, who had all lived alone in isolated settings, had been attacked and killed in mid-September through early October. Voldemort was still obviously gathering his forces, unready for any major confrontations. While Fudge had admitted to Voldemort's return, he still wasn't asking for direct aid from the International, the Warlocks, or the other Ministries. Until Voldemort again attacked outside of Britain and Ireland, those bodies were not inclined to put stronger pressure on Fudge.

Fudge was walking a political tightrope. Having convinced the International and the other Ministries Voldemort was not back and that Dumbledore and Harry mistaken at best, they were waiting for one more mistake on his part before dislodging him from office. Fudge had to hope he could contain Voldemort within Britain and Ireland; failure to do so would be the type of event those groups were waiting for.

Voldemort, who certainly was in no hurry to find the Ministry led by someone competent, was therefore waiting as well. He would not launch the type of attack that would drive Fudge out of office until he felt powerful enough to withstand a well-organized opposition. Snape reported that there were some murmurs against this policy from many directions, and that Voldemort's unidentified associate was gathering support. To what end, no one on the outside was certain.

The Order was busy trying to make certain security was tight around members' families and Hogwarts. At least, that was all Harry or his friends could learn. Anything else was 'classified' and not for their ears.

The biggest change to Hogwarts came in late September. After dinner on the last week night of the month, Dumbledore stood to address the students. They instantly quieted, fearing bad news. "As most of you no doubt remember, Death Eaters attacked the Ministry Annex for Long Term Care earlier this month. While fifteen of the caregivers were killed, there were two other weekday shifts as well as two weekend shifts. We are hiring six of the remaining seventy-two caregivers to come and work at Hogwarts. Mister Filch has turned in his resignation. . . ."

All the students united in cheering the news for well over a minutes.

Once the cheering died down, Dumbledore went on. "Mister Filch has worked very hard, but has always refused additional help. Mister Filch will train these replacements over the next three months, and then retire as of December Thirty-first."

The students cheered again.

"We are also hiring six of the guards. We will be erecting two cabins, one at the other end of the grounds from Professor Hagrid's, one just on the edge of the grounds on the way towards Hogsmeade. We are, of course, making these changes to increase the level of our security."

That quieted the whispering students a great deal.

"On a brighter note," Dumbledore was not so unkind as to refer to Filch's leaving as good news, "we have decided to have a Halloween dance this year, rather than just a Halloween Feast." The murmuring started again. "This will not be a formal affair, like the Yule Ball nearly two years ago. All students may attend. The Feast will be from Six until Seven, and the Dance from Seven-fifteen until Ten."

"The hall shall be laid out with tables for eight. The best tables shall be reserved for groups of eight students where there are no more than five from any given House. Tables for less than eight students, or with six to eight members from any given House, may be reserved starting the Twenty-eighth. Those wishing to reserve a table, please see Doctor Potter."

Snape and Remus both made some comment to Edward, which made him grimace.

"To help prepare for the celebration," Dumbledore continued, "the first Hogsmeade weekend shall be October Twenty-sixth and Twenty-seventh. All students, Third year and above, who have permission may visit Hogsmeade between Nine a.m and Four a.m. on the Saturday. Fifth through Sixth years may also visit Sunday, Eleven through Two-thirty. Please note the new return times! Mister Potter and Miss Bell will meet with me tonight after dinner, and they will in turn meet with the Head Boy, Prefects, and Security prefects at Eight o'clock."

"Our immediate future will have hardships," Dumbledore added, serious again. "Having a bit of gaiety does not degrade anyone's grief. It reminds us to live, even in times of trouble." He looked out over the young faces. "Please resume your dinner," he concluded simply as he sat.

After a moment of silence, Ginny told her friends, "I'll take care of the table. Don't worry." She started wolfing down her food.

Ron smiled. "I'll notify the twins. I'm sure we can come up with some appropriate farewell gift for Filch."

Many of the Gryffindors turned towards Hermione. "If he hadn't backed Umbridge like that, I would feel sorry for him," Hermione told them, "but he did, so I don't."

At the head table, Professor Vector was asking, "Are we really so likely to be attacked that we need security guards, Headmaster?"

"Oh, no, absolutely not!" Dumbledore assured all the staff. "However, I do hope to try and continue the Hogsmeade weekends; at least twice before the Christmas break. We will need the extra security then."

"Then why the six caretakers?" Sinistra asked.

"Mister Filch really has always needed help, as have all the caretakers in my memory. They have always refused, and we have always backed down. Now we shall have an adequate number, and, I hope, with the greater number there shall be at least slightly less cause for antagonism on the level Mister Filch feels towards the students."

"Students and caretakers are to some degree natural antagonists," Remus pointed out.

"True, true," Dumbledore agreed. "Like I said, I merely hope the level is less intense." He shook his head. "Imagine, wishing to whip the students!"

"I completely understood the desire," Snape said sardonically, "but he was going to actually act upon it! That was something entirely different."

"I wonder what the Weasley twins will send him for a farewell gift?" McGonagall pondered.

"And, if we subscribe, will it be bigger and better?" Edward asked.

"If this is the level of conversation, I believe I must retire," Dumbledore teased his staff.

"Does that cat go with him?" Remus asked as Dumbledore stood up.

"Yes, indeed," Dumbledore said. "He was most worried about that. I went so far as to promise Mrs. Norris her own pension, to make certain she retires with him."

Dumbledore basked in their congratulations.

Saturday, October 26, 1996

While an Auror's family had been attacked and killed while the Auror was on duty, mid-October had been otherwise quiet. Dumbledore had therefore allowed the Hogsmeade weekend, to the delight of the students and worry of the staff.

Luna's dorm mate Amber was dating Justin Finch-Fletchley. Ginny had quickly recruited them to make up the dance table for eight. The eight students therefore went into Hogsmeade together on the chilly October morning.

"Shall we meet at the Three Broomsticks for lunch?" Hermione asked.

"What time shall we make it?" Justin asked.

The group looked at Harry, who flushed a bit. "How about Eleven-thirty?" Luna suggested, removing the attention from Harry. "That would be right before the lunch crowd wanders in."

The group agreed and split off towards different destinations.

"She's doing that more often," Hermione said to Ginny before their pairs split.

Ginny nodded her head, while Neville asked, "Doing what?" and Ron asked, "What, acting normal?"

"In a sense, she **is** acting normal," Hermione said. "She's so . . . dreamy and seemingly disconnected at times, I thought she might have a condition Muggles call Autism. Yet I've noticed, whenever Harry is put on the spot, and under times of stress, she can show she's amazingly in-tune with what's going on around her."

"I noticed that last year," Ginny said, "although you're right, she's doing it more and more often. I used to think she was just plain eccentric, but the more I get to know her, the more I think she's so in tune with everything around her that what we see is almost nothing in comparison."

"So that's what she meant," Neville mused.

"What did she say?" Hermione demanded.

"She told me once that she sees the world in more colors than most people, and can hear the underlying music. That sometimes she gets distracted by what other people can't sense."

"If it were anyone else, I'd say they were crazy," Hermione said, remembering that most of the previous year, she had thought Luna a bit past sanity.

"Professor Trelawney is a fraud most of the time, but Luna has the Gift," Ginny stated. "She really can see things we can't."

"Maybe that's another reason she believes all that tripe her father prints," Hermione reasoned. "If she can see things most people can't, it must be harder to tell fiction from reality. I hope she doesn't grow up into another Trelawney!"

"Harry will keep her grounded," Neville said.

"Never thought you'd be part of the 'all she needs is a good shagging to be normal' school of thought," Ginny teased.

Neville blushed, and Ginny dragged him off towards Honeydukes.

"The mouth on that girl gets worse by the week," Ron said. "One day, she'll slip in front of Mum, and get skinned alive." Ron noticed Hermione wasn't saying anything. "What?"

"What that means is, then, when Luna seems tuned into the real world, she's tuning out most of her reality?"

"That's how it works for seers," Ron said. "That's why we figured Trelawney is mostly a fraud; her mistiness is more of an act. She should act more like Luna."

"Wow," Hermione said.

The Three Broomsticks was crowded, as usual. Harry seemed pensive, and when asked said that while the students seemed as happy to be in town as usual, the shop keepers had looked concerned. After lunch, the octet revisited most of the shops. The shop keepers were putting up a brave front, but all were obviously worried.

Even though they were getting all the public news (The Daily Prophet, The Truth, and even The Quibbler), the students were still somewhat isolated from the fears of the general public, most of whom could easily remember the terrors of the previous war, and even those from Grindelwald's time.

That night, Harry was one of the prefects on patrol duty. As he was circling near the Ravenclaw common room, he could hear shouting.

Moving quickly, Harry came across a strange sight: Cho and Marietta were cornered by seven Fourth, Fifth, and Six year Ravenclaw girls, with Padma Patil trying to keep the two groups separated.

"What's all this, then?" Harry demanded.

"These two were stealing Luna's stuff again," Amber said hotly.

"Oh, like you never did it, too!" Marietta huffed.

"Just because you never grew up doesn't mean we can't!" one of the Fourth years shouted.

"Quiet!" Harry insisted. "Cho, do you have anything to say?" Cho, her eyes on the ground, shook her head 'no.'

"That's one point off each of you two **and** you seven," Harry stated. "The rest of up to your Ravenclaw prefect here, and your Head of House." Harry's face hardened in real anger, and the entire group cringed. They could actually feel the power of Harry's anger, and it frightened them all. "What do you say, Padma? You know everyone; shall we send this lot off and take these two and Amber to see Professor Flitwick?"

Padma recovered first. "Yes, I think that's a good idea."

"You didn't have to do that, Harry," Luna said the next morning at breakfast.

"I know, but it just seemed like petty harassment to me. And what else could I do? I even penalized the crowd trying to help you." Harry was also pleading.

"I know, Harry. I meant frightening them like that." Luna looked at him. "You have powers you haven't fully explored yet."

"I have?"

"It's not the fact that you feel that makes you more powerful than Voldemort," Luna told him, for he had of course told her all about his talks with Dumbledore over the past few weeks, "that merely make you the better person. Somehow, you can channel what you feel into power."

"Maybe, but if so, why aren't they teaching me that?"

"I think," she said slowly, thinking through the idea, "you need to learn to control yourself more. That goes along with your Occlumency lessons, doesn't it?"

"That's true," Harry admitted.

"So, when you've come closer to mastering Occlumency, and have started Legilimency, you can start learning how to harness that power."

"It's supposed to be what allows me to beat Voldemort," Harry whispered, "what if I don't learn in time?"

Luna leaned against him and hugged him gently. "You can learn, Harry; I know you can."

Thursday, October 31, 1996

The Halloween Feast and Dance went nicely. Most of the students managed to arrange themselves in integrated tables; even more than half the Slytherins managed to find some Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs to sit with them, especially the younger years.

There had been no news of any attack for more than a week at that point. Most of the students, except those around Harry on the one side and those around Draco on the other, were able to put aside all their worries. So far, the war was still low-keyed for most of the students.

Hagrid had provided an excellent array of pumpkins, larger than usual now that he could legitimately use magic. The band was a local combo, who played a very eclectic array of tunes, from gavottes to heavy metal (or as close to it as two pianos, a drumset, and two marimbas could get).

Nearly two years older, and more secure with their dates, Harry and Ron enjoyed this dance much more than the Yule Ball. Despite her declaration of the year before, Luna decided she rather enjoyed the slower dances. Neville, it turned out, had taken dance lessons during the previous two summers, and Ginny didn't get stepped on once.

As Harry and Ron got ready for bed, Ron remarked, "Nice having a normal Halloween, wasn't it?"

Chapter XIV

Friday, November 1, 1996

Step-presses from The Daily Prophet and The Truth:

Last night, between approximately 10:45 - 1:30 am, Death Eaters attacked the small Norfolk village of Myrby. The village was technically Muggle, but nearly a third of the village was wizard or mixed wizard/Muggle households. Of the population believed to have been present (189), none survived the attack. All the bodies were mutilated, but identifiable.

It is currently uncertain if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was present for the attack. Also uncertain is what story the Ministry and Muggle officials will create to cover for this massacre.

Harry, Hermione, and Luna stared at the message (again provided early by Dumbledore). They looked up to the Head Table, and saw a very tired Remus Lupin looking back. He nodded, and got up from the table.

The trio followed him into the back room where the Triwizard champions had met after they had been selected. "I see you three received the information," Lupin said simply.

The three shocked teens could only nod.

"We don't know for sure what it means; if it was an isolated act of terror, or the first step in a huge campaign to start a panic in both the Muggle and wizarding world, or what." Remus sat down, still amazed and horrified at the massacre.

"Nothing like this happened in the first war," Remus said slowly. "There were massacres, but all against wizarding families. . . ."

"Like the Potters," Harry stated grimly.

"Exactly," Remus agreed. "There were Muggle-massacres like this in the war against Grindelwald, of course. . . ."

Now it was Hermione who broke in, "But those were covered up by the blitz bombings of World War Two. How can these be hidden?"

Remus sighed. "Nobody has any idea. The Ministry and Dumbledore and who know who else are trying to figure that one out!"

"Maybe that's it, then," Luna said.

"That's what?" Remus asked.

"The main reason everyone was killed," she answered. "They were probably after someone, but if they killed everyone it would be harder to figure out why any one person was killed. And if everyone who is anyone is busy thinking up excuses to give to the Muggles, then who's left trying to solve the mystery?"

"You may very well be right," Remus said.

"Were any Hogwarts students from Myrby?" Hermione asked.

"Probably," Remus answered. "Professor McGonagall is checking the records now." He sighed. "There is one other possibility. Now read the other notice."

"Sixty-three missing Muggles?" Hermione asked, shocked. Sixty-three young Muggles had been reported as 'missing' under unusual circumstances since early September.

"That's what it says," Luna pointed out. "All fairly young men, too." She looked up. "What do you get when you combine sixty-three Muggles, Dementors, and a Dark Wizard?"

"Is that a joke," Hermione asked, not certain if Luna was asking a serious question or being silly.

Harry rolled his eyes, but Luna merely said, "You get more soulless zombies -- easier to control, and it's faster to assert that control."

"And last night might have been a test-run," Harry said. "The zombies would just tear those poor people apart."

"Most probably," Remus agreed.

Edward walked into the room. "I see you got the early notices, too." Harry merely nodded.

"Sunday, the DA will stop working on the Patronus. It's time to start in on zombies. Have the DA meet on the near side of the marsh next to the lake."

"Yes, sir."

Harry and Luna exchanged glances. Whatever Edward had planned for them, it was not going to be pleasant.

Sunday, November 3, 1996

The thirty-nine current members of the DA assembled as requested. Professors Snape, Potter, and Lupin were there as well. It was rare for any professor to attend the DA, although Edward and Remus had stopped by for a few minutes once each.

"Zombies," Lupin stated, "you all know what they are -- people brought to near death and partially controlled by a Dark Wizard. Some are used as servants, as they are under a control so total it makes the Imperius curse look weak for most uses. The difference, of course, is that they cannot act normally."

"Zombies may also be used in combat. Their most primitive instincts are brought out, and they will maim and kill. However, this may cause revulsion even to a zombie long under the enchantments. The zombie may then break the spell. To break the spells from outside the

enchancements, there are a number of potions that may merely be splashed on the zombie, and its will and personality will slowly be restored."

"However, the soulless, those Kissed by dementors, may be used without fear that the spell can be ended. They will tear their most beloved apart without a hint of remorse. No known potion will break the spells. Only destruction, best accomplished by separating the head from the body, will stop the soulless zombie. Not even the Killing Curse will stop one."

Snape took up the tale. Sensing his position with Voldemort was finally crumbling, he had gone public with his involvement and had been officially pardoned just the evening before. It was already known Voldemort had offered a 10,000 Galleon reward for his head, 15,000 for him alive -- in both cases twice what was being offered for Karkaroff, who was still in hiding. Malfoy's following in Slytherin was now down to a solid and die-hard nine, with perhaps another six or nine still leaning.

A flip of his wand, and a tarp flew off a large near-by pile, revealing the pumpkins from Halloween. Another flip and one was floating in mid-air. "Reducto!" The jack-o-lantern exploded.

"So easy, in theory," Snape said. Another pumpkin levitated, and was transformed into a human head. "Harder, when it's a person." The face even blinked. "Strike, and you might have killed a regular zombie who could have been saved, or a real, whole person. Hesitate, and you might be torn apart, just like those people in Myrby."

Most of the students shuddered. "Kill or be killed," Snape went on. "That's one of the evils of the Dark Lord. To fight him, you sometimes need to do things that you normally would, and should, feel guilty about having done."

The students stood there, silent.

"The Reductor Curse, with the power behind it needed to destroy a head, will tire some of you out quickly," Edward stated. "There is only one easy alternative." His left hand came out of his robes, and there was a large explosion that shocked all the students and frightened most of them. The pumpkin-head exploded.

Justin Finch-Fletchley recovered his voice first. "Sawed-off shotgun? 30-30?"

"Exactly," Edward said. Edward held it up. "This is a Muggle weapon. The gun powder sends a projectile at deadly speed. These are special shells -- they will take a man's head right off. They are also charmed, and will go through most shield charms."

Several students gasped.

"Yes, these are technically illegal," Snape told them. "We have permission to use them. Like I said, to fight evil, sometimes you have to fight dirty."

"Now, we have several score pumpkins. These," Edward held the gun aloft, "are nasty and even painful to use. We will practice Reductor Curses, and then, those who wish to may remain and give them a try."

After nearly an hour, the group had the Reductor curse down, although few people were sure they could actually use it against a human, or once-human, opponent. Over half the DA were willing to give the sawed-off shotguns a chance. The next hour was loud and messy. Only Justin, Seamus, Harry, Luna, Ginny, and Ron were able to handle the weapon, most of the rest giving up after dealing with one or two recoils. A few of the boys kept trying, embarrassed that tiny Ginny and slender Luna were able to fire the guns and come back for more. The two girls were simply more determined than those boys, however, and more willing to endure the pain when they fired the shotguns incorrectly.

A few days later, a number of special robes arrived at Hogwarts. In addition to space for extra wands, there was a pocket for the sawed-off shotgun and twenty shells. If there was any warning of an attack on Hogwarts, the DA would be ready to help out.

Harry (working on Hermione's suggestions), having worked out the details first with Professor McGonagall and then the other Heads of the Houses, also staged some defense drills. While a number of Slytherin students made fun of them and even disrupted the first one, the other Slytherins took care of the problems; Draco and his friends were only moderately bruised but learned to keep their opinions to themselves.

Harry's time was very full, but for the first time he didn't seem at all buried in emotion or even worried, at least compared to the last few years. He finally had gotten into Charms and Transfiguration; he went from doing very well to nearly rivaling Hermione in the practicals. Harry hated to admit it, but his Occlumency lessons had really taught him to concentrate in general, and especially how to concentrate on the magic within himself. The Occlumency itself was going so well that he would be allowed to start on Legilimency in the spring, just as Snape had predicted. Harry's work in Defense was now the top of his class in the written work as well as the practical.

Harry was doing well in Herbology and Basic Medical Training. He was still struggling in Potions, but for the first time was finding it interesting. Add in his Quidditch practice, the DA, the time he was spending with Luna as part of a couple, and with Luna, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville as a group, Harry had little real free time.

He didn't miss it very much. Partly, it was not in Harry's nature to be the quiet, contemplative type; partly it was his readiness to avoid emotional worry (at this point he was still grieving for Sirius and dealing with the Prophecy -- having Edward and Remus nearby and dating Luna was buoying his emotions, not presenting problems to weigh him down).

Harry, of course, did not think in these terms at all. Unknown to Harry, however, every Sunday morning, starting in mid-September, Dumbledore served coffee. The group invited every Sunday were Harry's teachers (including Edward, as his official Occlumency instructor). The subject, of course, was Harry.

They were all worried about him. They all knew (even Snape) that Harry still had major problems to work his way through. They were all therefore keeping a close eye on him, to see

if those problems, or the lesser, everyday ones of any student, were taking him over the line towards depression or over-stress.

So far, he was showing less signs of strain than he had at the end of the previous year. In part, this was because Harry finally knew what was expected from him and, to a large degree, why it was expected. Facing a life-or-death struggle was not an easy burden for anyone to shoulder, let alone at age sixteen, but it was slightly less stressful for Harry than being left in the dark.

In part, it was because Harry had five very good friends, one of them a girlfriend, to give him support. Harry knew, in the end, he would have to face Voldemort alone. He no longer felt he had to worry about getting to that final confrontation alone as well. And having five friends spread the support out; he did not feel he was a burden to them as he had sometimes felt when it was just Ron and Hermione.

Ron was his best mate. Hermione was his knowledgeable support, Luna his emotional center, and Ginny had become his cheerleader -- always urging him on. Neville had grown to be someone Harry could share his darker moods with, and whom Harry could help through similar feelings.

But still, every week, the group met and discussed Harry and his friends. In part, it was because most of them liked him (except for Snape), or even loved him. In part, it was because they knew so much depended on him.

Starting in late October, another change had come into Harry's routine. While the group was meeting, Carole (who spent every weekend at Hogwarts) would hold a brunch. Harry had attended twice before that, but Carole drew him closer just before Halloween.

Harry had never been around a pregnant woman before, and it had made him nervous in September and October. Carole, aided by Luna and Ginny, had finally gotten Harry interested in knowing the next Potter. Harry had even started wondering to Luna if he might be asked to be the baby's godfather.

The final thing that was helping Harry to cope better than he had the previous spring was much more basic. He was flying again. Aloft, all those unreasonable burdens fell away. Hermione worked hard to help Harry schedule a few flying times outside of Quidditch practice. Quite often, he would simply fly, with Ron, Luna, or Ginny flying as well. Sometimes, they even played tag. Other times, Harry was helping Hermione or Neville brush up on their skills.

So the group watched, and worried, even though they were happy there were so few signs of strain. Each member knew, however, conditions would continue to worsen. The attack on Merby would either not be an isolated one, or had been a test which would signal something even worse.

Voldemort and his 'associate' were playing things very closely. The Death Eaters never met as a large group any more. The 'associate' was growing more and more powerful in the group -- Snape had seen the 'associate' had been growing more and more suspicious of his conduct, and so had had to stop direct spying.

Madam Pomfrey was worried about Harry, too, but she was starting to worry more about some of Harry's watchers. The effects of stress certainly did not lessen with age.

Saturday, November 23, 1996

"Miss Lovegood! If you expect to be allowed into the Infirmary, you will take that silly lion off your head!"

The lion's head hat growled a bit, but Luna obediently removed it and sat it inside the outer door. Hermione and Neville fidgeted as she did so, as they wanted to see Harry. The game was still going on, and if Harry was alright, they would have to go back to watch Ron and Ginny.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey asked Remus, who had brought Harry in. Poppy Pomfrey had known and loved Remus as she'd cared for few students over the years, and she had never seen the man as angry as he was now.

"It was the most deliberate set of fouls I've ever seen," Remus said, barely managing to keep his voice down. "A beater. . . ."

"Nott Major," Hermione supplied.

". . . deliberately threw his club at Harry's head. Struck him right in the back of the skull! Then that chaser. . . ."

"Nott Minor," Hermione added, helpfully.

"Yes, Hermione, I know all the students!" Remus flared. It was only two more days until the next full moon, and Remus was edgier than usual.

"Sorry," Hermione said in a small voice.

"I'm sorry for snapping," Remus told her. "Anyway, the younger Nott boy swerved and rammed Harry deliberately. Ginny Weasley managed to slow him down, otherwise he might have been. . . ."

"I see," Pomfrey said, who had been examining Harry the whole time. "No breaks, mild concussion, and he'll have a nasty headache when he wakes up." She glanced at the group. "You can go back to the game. He'll be fine."

Hermione and Neville glanced at the group, patted Luna on the shoulder, and left. Remus was undecided about what to do when Carole Potter came in on a run.

"He's fine, Mrs. Potter," Pomfrey told her. "You should slow down in your condition!"

Carole puffed for a few seconds, then turned to Remus. "You might want to go down to the field. Hooch threw the two Notts out of the game, but Edward is out for their blood. He and Snape are in the middle of an argument that even Minerva doesn't want to get in the middle of." Dumbledore was in London, at the Ministry, and so was of no help.

"And you want me to?"

Carole shrugged. "Between the two of us. . . ."

Remus sighed. "All right." He glanced at Harry. "I never seem to be able to be there for him."

"You are, Professor Lupin," Luna said. "Trust me, you are."

Remus gave her a smile, and then allowed himself to be whisked off by Carole.

"Madam Pomfrey?" The witch looked at her. "Maybe Harry should be in a private room? Otherwise, everyone will bother him, once the game is over, I mean."

The witch gave her a smile, and moved Harry's bed into one of the private rooms. "You know, Miss Lovegood, I once suggested the same when Mister Pomfrey was injured by a bludger. I'll just remind you, as my predecessor told me -- yes, the door locks, and simple spells won't open them. You can't override my commands, though."

Luna blushed, which was very unusual for her. "Of course not, Madam Pomfrey."

After Madam Pomfrey had left the room, Luna locked the door, took off her shoes, cloak, blazer, scarf, jumper (it had been a cold, windy day), and tie. She climbed up on the bed, and laid down. Harry partially woke up, gathered her in his arms, and they fell asleep.

"Really!" Dumbledore scolded, "I'm ashamed of the pair of you! You are both at fault, so I want no excuses, recriminations, blame, or vengeance. I wish I could put the pair of you in detention!"

"Sorry, sir."

"Sorry, sir." Both men looked abashed at best.

"Now, Edward, I agree that both Notts must be severely punished. It is, however, up to Severus and myself to decide on that punishment. Severus, there was no need to escalate the confrontation through such foul language in front of the students! You do not wish the Notts expelled. I will agree only if truly adequate punishment is meted out. They are under House detention until that punishment is decided."

"Yes, sir," Snape said, feeling worse than he had the first time he'd been called into the Headmaster's office, back in his third year.

"Yes, sir," Edward said, feeling almost as bad as Snape. He turned to Snape. "I apologize for confronting you in public, and in letting my temper get the best of me."

Snape glared for a moment, but then relented. "I apologize for letting my temper flare up first."

"Go on, you both have work to do!"

Once they were gone, McGonagall turned to Dumbledore. "Sometimes, I swear boys never grow up!"

"We never truly do, my dear Professor McGonagall, we never do."

Draco Malfoy slipped into Professor Snape's office, where the two Nott brothers were awaiting their fate. "That was a bit more obvious than I had hoped, but you both did a good job," he told them. "The Dark Lord, and your father, will not be disappointed, even if it turns out Potter wasn't severely injured. Our Master wants Potter to know he's never totally safe, not even here." Draco opened the door, and then took off.

"We're in deep shit, aren't we?" Thomas asked his older brother.

"Fairly deep," Theodore admitted. "Still, we're committed."

Thomas sighed. "It might have been easier to bear if that arse had managed to catch the bloody snitch."

"That would have taken a miracle. Gryffindor could have had Longbottom, with a broken arm, as a seeker and Malfoy still would have missed the snitch."

"As always."

"Exactly."

Chapter XV

Saturday, December 7, 1996

The day of the Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw Quidditch game dawned drizzly and chilly. By game-time, however, the rain had stopped, although it was still gray and cloudy. Harry attended the game with Luna, and Ron, Neville, and Ginny came along as well.

The game was closely matched, and the snitch was being elusive. Colin Creevy was having a difficult time announcing, as all the chasers were losing the quaffle fairly often to the aggressive play of the other team.

Shortly before the first hour passed, Cho brought her broom to a sudden halt, and dove for Madam Hooch, screaming for a time-out. After a brief exchange, Hooch rose on her broom to above stadium level, gave a squawk of surprise, and headed toward the teachers' stands, where Harry, and most of the other students, noticed the faculty present were not paying attention to Hooch -- they were talking to two elves, who presently disappeared.

After a brief conference with the faculty, Hooch started gathering the players near the center of the playing field, and McGonagall went to stand under them. Edward waited a moment, then performed the spell needed to make his voice carry over the stadium.

"Attention! Attention! Quiet down!" There was an urgency in his voice that actually made the crowd, even the rowdier or more panicked students, quiet down. "Everyone sit down!" Amazingly, every one did. "The castle is under attack by forces from the far end of the Forbidden Forest. All faculty report to the castle end of the enclosure, except Madam Hooch, Professor Sprout, and Professor Hagrid. Professors Snape and Lupin, split the faculty. Lupin, you lead the main force to face the invaders heading towards the main entrance, Snape will circle around into the back with the other half. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Quidditch players, meet at center field. Potter, Weasleys, Lovegood, Longbottom, Prefects and Head Boy, meet me there, too. All other students and visitors, stay in place!"

In little more than three minutes, Edward was barking orders at the center of the pitch. "Hagrid and Sprout, you're guarding the castle side of the enclosure. You," he pointed to the head boy, "and Zabini, split the fourth through seventh years who have their wands into three groups. And if they don't have wands, see if they can borrow them from First or Second Years. McCloud, take half the other prefects, you'll take your third out to Professor Sprout; Zabini, your third will look to defend the forest end from the inside; you other prefects, your third stays here and defends the youngsters. Professor McGonagall is in over-all command, Longbottom, you're her chief aide. If there are adult visitors you know and trust, send them out to Sprout; if you don't, Zabini, watch 'em. Go!"

He turned to that day's Quidditch players. "You lot, who has their wands?" Cho was the only player with her wand. "Right. You four, off your brooms." The five youngest players were dispossessed. "The rest of you, borrow wands from first years. Madam Hooch, use them to cover the area around the stadium. Report anything suspicious to McGonagall or Hagrid; he's tall enough to tell without getting too near the ground. Take off!"

That left Edward with McGonagall, Harry, Luna, and the two Weasleys. "Voldemort is attacking with what appear to be the zombies and other supporters. Snape has some potions that might stop them if they're regular zombies, but if they're the soulless kind we will have to blast them. Reducto, got it?"

All four students nodded.

McGonagall now turned to the students. "We also just got a report from Professor Dumbledore, via those elves, that there are Dementors coming through the Forest heading this way. They should appear in about fifteen minutes to twenty-five. Unless Dumbledore instructs them otherwise, the elves will gather the students in the castle in the great hall. There should be enough senior students to defend them there, while we take on the Dementors here."

"The Death Eaters, not to mention the zombies, shouldn't be able to get into the castle!" Sprout protested.

"It's not locked down," Edward reminded her.

"What does that mean?" Ron asked.

"It means anyone inside can let them in," Luna said simply.

"Malfoy!" Ron snared.

"Or someone like him," Harry agreed. "What are we going to do?"

Edward smiled. "We're going up to Gryffindor Tower and getting your guns and all the shells we can carry, plus some of your spare wands. Ginny, you'll get Hermione's for Luna. We'll defend from the inside. Make certain you don't hex, or especially shoot! any of the faculty or students. Okay?"

They nodded and all got on their borrowed brooms. "Let's go."

They kicked off and headed straight to the Tower, flying high. Harry and Ron thought that Hermione would have hated flying this high -- in fact, none of the four had flown this high on broomsticks until the past summer, in the protection of Potter Place. They could see the firefight starting near the great front doors of the castle -- the invaders were already nearly in the Castle and Remus' group would have to fight its way past them. They could also see the other group of faculty just entering the back entrances of the castle, while the Death Eaters and zombies had also just arrived.

Harry opened his dorm window, and all five flew in. Edward barked out orders. "Ginny, get your and Hermione's guns. Luna, go with her. Harry, bring me that case you're storing for me." Ron was already digging his equipment out and Harry was moving towards his locked trunk. "I'll be down in the common room seeing if anyone is near the entrance."

All four had stripped off their regular robes as soon as they landed -- none had their robes with the extra pockets. All but Luna were wearing the Muggle jeans and jumpers they'd had underneath; Luna was wearing sweats in Ravenclaw colors. The teens entered the Common

room wearing the special belts, with holster, shells, and wand-holsters. They each had loose robes (again, Luna had Hermione's), with shells and extra wands tucked away.

"The House has been cleared, so we'll hope they're in the great hall. You know what the main purpose of this attack is, right?"

"To get Dumbledore," Harry answered.

"He-Who, err, Voldemort's here?" Ron demanded.

"I'm pretty sure," Harry said, touching his scar. "It's faint, but he's here."

Edward pulled out the pump-action shotgun from the bag Harry had handed him. "Right. This might be a serious attack on Dumbledore, or just an attack to prove he can get in, or an attack to get Dumbledore and Harry both. Either way, be careful -- don't hand the bastard any bonuses. Ginny and I will go check on the students in the great hall. You three go via the entrance to the dungeons. Be careful not to blast any of the faculty. Any questions?"

"No, but I'm fairly sure I recognized one of the attackers -- I think it was Barty Crouch Junior."

Edward looked at Harry. "You're sure?"

Harry nodded. Edward did some quick thinking. "Alright, that means a soulless zombie -- the worst kind, just like we feared. The head must be destroyed -- remember, *reducto* to the head or blast it off, just as we practiced! Change of plan. Ginny, you go with the others. If you don't meet up with anyone by the last entrance to the dungeons, you and Luna go down and let them know we were all right -- no reason to mess about with potions against that type of monster, in case they haven't figured it out already. Have them come to the great hall as well if they can. Let's go."

Edward split off on the main staircase. Four minutes later, the teens were passing the first entrances to the dungeons, so they stopped to listen. There were faint sounds of fighting coming up the stairs. They kept moving.

They came to the last entrance, and there they found their first body. It was Filch. "Is he dead?" Ginny asked.

"Heavily stunned," Harry said. He hit Filch with a slight restorative spell. "That should keep him alive." He kissed Luna lightly on the cheek. "Good luck."

"To you, too," Luna said.

Ginny looked at Ron. "Both of you be careful."

"We will," Ron said. Ginny and Luna ran softly down the stairs. Ron and Harry both set their jaws and went on towards Dumbledore's office.

As they made their next left turn, a hex exploded down the corridor, just missing Ron's shoulder. He rolled across the corridor down the side-hall.

"Did you see what it was?" Harry breathed.

"No."

"Reducto!" came a voice and then an inhuman scream. "Weasley, Potter, come out here," the stern voice commanded.

Harry peeked around the corner. There was a smoldering body and an angry-looking tall thin figure. "Professor Trelawney?"

"Yes. I presume you know we are under attack?"

Harry stepped around the corner, Ron still covering him. "Yes; Voldemort might be trying to get Professor Dumbledore."

She winced a little at the name, but carried on. "Then we shall do our best to try and stop him." She turned and started to stride away, very different than her usual glide-step. "Don't be idiots, boys. There are times when one must shake off the habits of one's normal life and defend the Light. Stay behind me, but hurry!"

They swallowed their surprise and followed.

"I hope I am right in presuming that was some form of zombie I was forced to destroy."

"Voldemort. . . ."

"Dark Lord, please, Mister Potter."

Harry and Ron both rolled their eyes. "Right; at least some of the attackers are zombies made out of people Kissed by Dementors," Harry answered, "while many of the Dementors are attacking the Quidditch field."

Trelawney shuddered. "Disgusting! That evil boy!"

"Professor?"

"Yes, Mister Potter?"

"What year did you graduate from Hogwarts?"

She halted, her eyes taking on that distant stare they had been used to from class. "Yes, I was in Slytherin, class of Forty-six. I knew Tom Riddle, and liked him until the year after the death of my friend Myrtle. Inter-house friendships were more common back then, even for us Slytherins. I knew Hagrid was innocent, and some of us wondered about Tom. He was too obviously interested in Grindelwald his last two years. Now, enough ancient history. Go around that way, Potter, it's longer but less likely to have these creatures in it. Weasley, come along and keep that wand up! I trust you both know how to handle that other weapon!"

Harry moved swiftly through the corridors, meeting no one. In a few moments, however, he heard the sound of a duel. Harry drew the sawed-off shotgun with his left hand. The hardest thing to learn the previous weeks was shooting with his left hand, but that kept his wand in his right.

"You cannot defeat me any more than I can destroy you, Tom."

Harry put his wand away and pulled out his best reserve wand. "Don't call me that, Old Man! Tom is gone, in every way. Only the will of Voldemort lives!"

More spells were cast, ending with what sounded like nearly-deadly stunning spells. Harry heard two bodies hit the floor. He spun around the final corner, and saw them, lying there. He raised the sawed-off shotgun, his arm steady. Harry wondered what the slugs might do to Voldemort.

Voldemort started to get to his knees. "Stop right there, Riddle."

The Dark Lord stopped rising, but turned his shoulders to look. "Potter! With a Muggle pop gun! Do you think something like that could stop me?" He started to stand again, and without hesitation, Harry fired.

A normal bullet would have been deflected by the partial shield Voldemort was able to throw around him. Had the charmed shot hit the Voldemort's shield in the front, it also would have been deflected. As it was, the charmed hollow-point slug tore into Voldemort's right shoulder and exploded, and He screamed in agony. Harry shot Him again, but because of the writhing, the slug hit Voldemort square in the left leg, which smashed the bone and blew a third of the flesh away as well.

Before Harry could load another set of shells, Voldemort disappeared. He apparently had been carrying some sort of automatic port key, which had pulled him out of sight.

Harry stood there, reloaded shotgun again at the ready, for a few seconds, lowering it only when he heard Ron calling to him.

Ron came up to Harry, while Trelawney knelt by Dumbledore. "Sorry, we ran into six zombies along the way."

"Three zombies, three idiot would-be followers," Trelawney corrected. "What happened to the Dark Lord?"

"I shot him, but he port-keyed out," Harry said simply. "How is the Headmaster?"

"Mister Weasley, go for Madam Pomfrey! And be careful, just because the Dark Lord is gone does not mean it is safe."

"Yes, ma'am!" Ron's respect for Professor Trelawney had obviously gone way up.

"Potter! Guard us!" Trelawney started first aid. Harry nodded, and readied the reloaded shotgun. He also changed back to his main wand.

Hermione and the rest of the students in the library were alerted when an elf appeared and told the librarian what was happening. Madam Pince let out a shriek of alarm which drew everyone's attention. Still, in less than a minute, she had everyone moving towards the great hall. Hermione and Katie Bell brought up the rear.

There are only two real entrances into the great hall at Hogwarts (the other doors led to the small ante-chamber with no exit, and a staff room which only current staff members could enter from the outside). Professor Sinistra had been monitoring the hall, which many students used as a study area. When the alert had come to her, she had shut the great doors leading to the grounds and sealed them with a command. None save another teacher could open them.

The other entrance opened into a regular corridor. Sinistra couldn't really close that down -- one end held the only rest rooms, which might be needed if they were there long. Students were also to report to the great hall, and so would have to be let in via that door. Only the door at the other end separated that corridor and the main entrance corridor. That Sinistra also commanded close, but it was a more vulnerable entrance than the great doors.

There were a number of Sixth and Seventh year students, although a few of them (some of the Slytherins) were considered slightly suspect. Madam Pince brought the students from the library a few minutes later, which still included Hermione. The two staff women set Hermione at interior end of the corridor, with some reliable students, while they kept watch outside the other.

A group of Fourth and Fifth year Gryffindors, shepherding the younger students from their Common Room, came next. All the Hufflepuffs and all of the Ravenclaws (except for two Seventh years and a Fifth, who would not let a mere Quidditch match distract them from their studies) were at the match. Within twelve minutes from the first alarm, only nine Slytherin students were missing from either the great hall or Quidditch pitch. All the other students were accounted for.

Ginny and Luna approached the sound of battle, Luna with her wand ready, Ginny with her own shotgun at the ready. Suddenly, the noise stopped. As everyone discovered later, upon comparing time lines, as soon as Voldemort had been port-keyed out, so had the zombies and Death Eaters. The Dementors had barely broken from the woods, before they also disappeared.

A number of zombies and three Death Eaters had been killed (all three had been killed by Trelawney, much to the shock of the faculty and students). The only serious injury on the Dark Side was Voldemort Himself. Three of the new guards and three of the new caretakers were killed, while Filch was the only survivor on the Hogwarts side seriously injured.

"It was a set-up!" Snape stated in surprise the next morning. All the faculty, and nine members of the Order and six Aurors, were in the Staff Room. Dumbledore, although tired and sore from his fight, was firmly back in control of Hogwarts.

"Explain," Dumbledore demanded.

"For months, since early last spring, in fact, I was aware there was something different about the Dark Lord's forces this time. This past July, I learned there were a number of cells I had been unaware of until then. Voldemort had also taken on . . . an associate."

This was news to most of the faculty and the six Aurors who were not members of the Order.

"Apparently, over the last ten years, a new Dark Wizard was rising without anyone noticing, working in eastern North America as well as in Western Europe. When the Dark Lord was reborn, they made an alliance, with the Associate -- I can't even get a name or a set title for him! -- as the new number two."

"Apparently, the Associate, and many of the old Death Eaters, thought that the Dark Lord was too obsessed by Potter and the Headmaster. So, yesterday was planned. They would help the Dark Lord gain entrance to the castle, and the Dark Lord would have his chance at both of them. If the Dark Lord had succeeded against either, they would have been his to command."

"But Voldemort failed," Edward pointed out.

"But He failed," Snape agreed. "His position was also undermined by Potter's claim that the Dark Lord was of mixed-blood, something I managed to encourage during the last few weeks I was active, and which Wormtail confirmed to several Death Eaters. The failure of the attack yesterday has ruined, at least for the moment, the Dark Lord's position and it exposed six Slytherin students as moles, who left with the Death Eaters. It did not expose my agents still with the Dark Lord."

"But it did not expose Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, or Parkinson's little brother," Remus pointed out. "If they helped let anyone in, they weren't caught."

"Exactly," Snape agreed. "They claim they hid in Malfoy's room, and we cannot disprove it. More importantly, three-quarters the Movement -- that's what the associate's forces called themselves, the Movement of Pure Blood or variations on that, and the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters have adopted the jargon -- belonged to the Associate before the Dark Lord's rebirth. They are all following him now. So are nearly all the new recruits made over the last year that aren't from loyal old Death Eater families. Over half the old Death Eaters are following him, too -- they won't forgive the Dark Lord's parentage. The Lestranges are heading that group. Lucius Malfoy controls most of the others, and seem to be waiting to see what happens. No one is purely supporting the Dark Lord today, so far as my spies can find out."

"So what happens now?" Flitwick demanded. "Are we fighting two wars or one? Is He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named even still a factor?"

"Right now, still a factor, but the different leaders are supposed to be meeting tonight," Snape said. "Like I said, I have spies within the Movement even now. I knew from the time of His return it wouldn't be long before my own position was found out; I'm just lucky to have survived it. The Dark Lord now claims his original transformations overcame his birth. Since he had to use the bone of his Muggle father and Harry Potter's mixed blood to come back, none of the others admit to being convinced. No one wants the Dark Lord banished from the Movement, or at least they aren't saying that openly, but his place is uncertain. Those charmed

slugs really damaged him badly. I doubt if he'll be active for many weeks, maybe even two or three months, even if he's given medical aid."

"But who is this 'Associate'?" McGonagall worried.

Snape shrugged. "I don't know. I only met him once, and he was masked. His voice sounded familiar, but that's just an impression. He also liked hiding behind titles, but most of all, he was just called the Associate when speaking to those Death Eaters he hadn't fully influenced, such as myself. I do now know he was the one behind the zombies, and the one who orchestrated the Lestranges' release and the Dementors joining the Pure-Bloods, even though he originally opposed using them. The Dark Lord's efforts, or rather his agents', were the attempts to get the giants involved, which failed, and the attempts to get the Prophecy and the associated attack on the Ministry, which also failed."

"The Dark Lord is a much more powerful wizard than the Associate," Snape concluded. "We must never forget the raw power of the Dark Lord. However, the Associate is a much better organizer and campaigner. We must hope they fight, because that alone will give us time to figure out what to do next."

Monday, December 9, 1996

The Sunday news reports had, mostly, made Harry once again a hero. Even then, however, there had been a few discordant criticisms, of both Harry and the Hogwarts faculty. The Daily Prophet Monday morning exploded with outrage.

The reason was simple: Harry had used an enchanted Muggle weapon. Harry had of course known that enchanting Muggle-items was illegal when there was any chance of those items being used or clearly seen by Muggles. After all, it was Arthur Weasley's main job to look out and correct such occurrences.

What Harry had not noticed was the revulsion even many of his fellow students had had towards the shotguns. They hadn't just not really understood how the weapons worked; they viewed Muggle weapons as mindless abominations. A few had stated that as early as Saturday evening, and over a quarter of the DA had not come to the Sunday meeting. Nearly a third came primarily to let Harry know up upset they were with his choice of weapon.

That left some surprising supporters. To Blaise Zabini and two of the other Slytherins, Harry had been justified in using the best weapon at hand. Justin Flinch-Fletcher came from a county family that still rode to the foxes, as did two other students (one other Hufflepuff and a Fourth year Gryffindor), and they had no problems with the idea of using shotguns (although two hadn't been successful with the sawed-off models). Neville, Dean, and Seamus had decided the year before to stay with Harry, Seamus after some considerable struggle, and would not change now. Colin and Denis Creevy would brook no opposition to Harry.

Hermione didn't like guns, but didn't feel the hatred towards them that many felt, and so wound up agreeing with both Blaise and the hunting Muggles. Luna and Ginny supported Harry whole-heartedly.

Ron agreed with Harry publicly, but privately he wondered if some of the criticism in the press wasn't fair. Using the weapons against zombies was one thing; against a wizard, even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, it was at least approaching a taboo zone.

That, indeed, was the prime criticism. Wizards had, throughout most of history, had the upper-hand when dealing with the numerically-superior Muggles. Firearms had tipped the power balance in favor of Muggles -- most wizards did not have powerful enough shield or blocking spells to protect them. The gun had become the ultimate symbol of both Muggle power and culture to many wizards. To use any kind of gun, with charmed bullets no less, against any wizard other than Voldemort would no doubt had caused yet another hearing at the Ministry.

As it was, the Ministry had withdrawn permission for the use of the charmed bullets, and for the DA to use the weapons. The faculty and the security guards could use them against the zombies, but no one else could handle them.

Chapter XVI

Tuesday, December 10, 1996

Dumbledore looked across the table at the few people he had called to meet with him: Minerva McGonagall; Severus Snape; Remus Lupin; Edward and Harry Potter; and Alastor Moody.

"Nothing is to leave this room," Dumbledore said. "That includes your close friends, Harry. If you, or anyone, does not like this condition, please leave."

No one left. No one even moved.

Dumbledore surveyed the group, then went on. "Very well. The enemy claims to have reformed as the Movement for Pure-Bloods. They have issued an ultimatum, sending copies to the Minister, myself, and to the International and several other places. It will be released to the international media on the day before Christmas Eve, assuming we can keep it quiet until then. I have to inform the Minister and the International of my advice by noon the day after tomorrow."

Dumbledore picked up a parchment, and read:

From the Movement for Pure-Bloods
issued 9 December, 1996

The **Movement for Pure-Bloods** make the following demands, and the following offers and compromises:

1) Definitions:

A Muggle-born will be legally defined as anyone with magical powers sufficient to be classed as a witch or wizard, who did NOT have both parents classed as both witch and wizard. Magical children of a pair of squibs are judged to be Muggle-born for these criteria. A Mixed-blood is the child of a witch or wizard whose other parent is a squib or a Muggle. 'Full-blood' is defined as any witch or wizard who has both witch and wizard for parents. The term 'Pure-blood' shall be reserved for those with Full-blooded ancestors for at least three generations.

Other mixed-wizards (magical parent mated with a Veela, giant, etc.) shall be treated as Muggle-born. Werewolves, vampires, etc. should be considered reduced one step (ie a Full-blooded werewolf would be under the restrictions of a Mixed-blood while in human form).

2) Schools:

No Muggle-born may be allowed to attend Hogwarts, Durmstrang, or the Ysgol, starting in the autumn of 1998; no one of Muggle or Mixed-blood may be hired to teach at those

institutions after the current 1996-1997 academic year. No Mixed-Blood shall be made a prefect, Head Boy or Girl, or the equivalents at those institutions, starting in the 1998-1999 school year. No Mixed-blood may be selected to head one of those institutions after the 1996-1997 academic year.

Muggle-borns may be allowed to attend any other school of witchcraft and/or wizardry. Mixed-bloods and even the Muggle-born may teach at or even head any other institution.

The subject known as 'Muggle Studies' must cease at Hogwarts and the Ysgol, and may not be introduced at Durmstrang.

All Muggle and Mixed-blood students must take, and pass, a two year course on wizarding culture and traditions before being eligible for the O.W.L.s. This requirement would start for those entering schools in the autumn of 1998.

All students and teachers who do not meet the above criteria may stay in school or continue to be employed by that school if they are attending or employed for the entire 1997-1998 school year. Any Muggle-born not attending before that date who has a full sibling currently attending may also attend that school.

3) Government:

No Muggle-born may work for any Ministry of Magic, the International, or any associated agencies, other than charity or medical groups. Only Pure-bloods will be eligible to be any Minister of Magic. No Muggle-born or Mixed-Blood may rise above the level of Sorcerer Or Warlock.

4) Amnesty:

A full amnesty will be given to all members of the Movement for Pure-Bloods for any crimes, real or perceived, committed prior to noon, GMT, 6 January, 1997, or prior to the agreement of all parties to the terms in this document, whichever occurs first.

If these terms are agreed to before noon, GMT, 6 January, 1997, the Movement will surrender the Mixed-blood Tom Marvolo Riddle, who called himself Lord Voldemort. We understand that, according to a Prophecy, only a certain Full-blood has the power to execute Riddle. We will not stop him from doing so at any time. If our conditions are not met, Riddle will remain under our protection, and has agreed to work for our goals. While we wish to end the violence, we will do so only if this agreement is made.

We further agree that all current legislation concerning the protection of Muggles and Muggle society may stay in place, subject to the normal discussion and political processes, which may weaken, or even strengthen, such legislation.

The Members of the Movement agree to renounce violence, including the overthrow of current Ministries, and in the undermining of Muggle society in exchange for this agreement. Any violence perpetrated after the above terms are agreed to may be subject to punishment.

The Movement further states it will not engage in violence, except in defense, until noon, GMT, 6 January, 1997.

The Servant of the Pure-Bloods

"Damn," Remus said softly, "they think we'll bargain for Voldemort."

"Do ye think the Ministry won't, lad?" Moody asked. "Look at what they demand. Lots of folk half-agree with it. They didn't hate and fear Voldemort for hating Muggles; most of our kind hate Muggles! They hate and fear him because he wants to conquer and control us!"

"But . . . but it's wrong!" Harry said.

"You may think so," Snape said, "and let's be generous and say everyone in this room agrees. This document will tear the wizarding world in two, and the greater number will be tempted to agree to these terms!"

"Surely not!" McGonagall stated.

"We fear the Muggle-borns and the Mixed-bloods," Snape insisted. "We fear our culture will be over-whelmed; that we will become a mere quaint group on the edge of Muggle society, to be exploited as all such fringe groups are exploited. Look at the offer at face value, never mind that we almost certainly can't trust it! It gives most of our culture what it wants; it says what most of us truly believe in!"

"Severus is right, I regret to say," Dumbledore stated.

"Are you sure we can't trust them to keep their word?" Edward asked.

"How can you even suggest they would?" Harry demanded.

"Because the only way that I can see we can rally support against this agreement is to show they cannot be trusted," Edward told his cousin. "Snape is right; most of our society would either say these are good criteria, or at least not unreasonable criteria. We get to end the war, and kill Voldemort."

"You mean I have to kill him!" Harry protested.

"True, but most people won't care about that. This is what most people want. The only way to protest it is to show that it can't work; that the murderers can't be let go without punishment, as most would simply murder again, even if they don't believe it themselves."

"The first time one of the Lestranges gets a chance, there will be more dead or tortured Muggles," Snape asserted.

"And people like Malfoy will be trying to hamper Muggle-borns with ever-greater legal restrictions," Remus said. "Soon, they'd be a badly off as, well, as we werewolves."

"Why wasn't Beauxbatons listed?" Harry wondered.

"The French community has a lot more mixed-bloods," Snape answered. "If they had listed Beauxbatons, then it would be easier to show they really don't expect us to agree to these terms."

Edward picked up the parchment. "You know, it rambles a bit, but who ever wrote this was very clever. I wonder what the Death Eaters think of it?"

"Except for the lunatic fringe. . . ." Snape started.

"I thought they were all the lunatic fringe?" Edward stated.

"Most are fanatics, but not out-right insane on the subject," Snape insisted. "Anyway, except for those few like the Lestranges, the ones like Malfoy are probably are worried about an all-out fight -- they lost their taste for a war in the years of peace. This is a sop to them, while the Associate has probably assured the others, again like the Lestranges, that this is unlikely to be accepted, but will gather them more support."

"And that could easily be right," Moody admitted.

"I shall have to inquire very carefully amongst the International and the other Ministries directly concerned," Dumbledore said. "I thank you all for your opinions."

As the meeting broke up, Edward saw Harry was hanging back. "Have you decided what you want to do for Christmas?" Edward asked.

"No, sir, not yet. We're talking it out now."

Edward saw Harry eyeing the Headmaster, and understood. "Alright, then. Let me know what you decide." He patted his cousin on the back, wished him good luck, and left.

"Excuse me, Alastor, I believe Mister Potter needs to speak with me. Come back in an hour or so."

Moody gave Harry a twisted smile, and left them alone.

"Yes, Harry?"

"May I ask you to trust me, Professor?"

Dumbledore blinked at that, startled. "I do trust you, Harry. I asked you to this meeting, did I not?"

"Only because I might have to execute Voldemort."

"That was a major factor," Dumbledore admitted. "How do you wish me to trust you?"

"I need to talk about all this with my friends. We'll only discuss it where you allow us to, but we need to talk about it. Please, sir," Harry pleaded, "let us."

"Very well, Harry," Dumbledore replied after a moment's reflection. "Tomorrow evening, after dinner is over and the hall is cleared, you may use the waiting room, where the Tri-

Wizard champions met. Discuss this nowhere else, except the Castle at Potter Place. I want no hint of this to leak out on our end."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Wednesday, December 11, 1996

"And that's where the discussion ended," Harry concluded the next evening. Five stunned faces looked back on him.

"So the war . . . could be over!" Neville finally said.

"No!" Hermione replied, horrified. "How can you even hint these people should get away with this . . . this unfair . . . the killings . . . everything!"

"Hermione," Neville said sadly, "just pretend for a moment that this is a serious offer. Let's look at each effect. Take Bellatrix Lestrange -- she tortured my parents, she probably tortured me. She is responsible for Sirius' death. Yes, in an ideal world she would be punished even more than she has been, especially for Sirius' death. Tell me, Harry, how many more people should die so she can be punished?"

"That's not the point!" Harry said.

"It certainly is part of the point!" Neville stated back. "Obviously, the terms can't be agreed to just as they are, but if they're genuine, they're a good starting point to negotiate from."

"That's true," Ginny said. "I doubt if anyone can get the Ministries to refuse to at least negotiate these terms. Except for the restrictions on Muggle-borns, they're not totally unreasonable."

Harry and Hermione simply stood there for a moment, jaws slack in disbelief.

"The only way to prove the other side has no intention of making peace is by trying to make the peace," Luna said simply. "Unless our side gets verifiable, undeniable proof that this is a delaying tactic or a move to split us apart, there is no other choice but to negotiate. If, say, the Order of the Phoenix simply says 'no' and attacks this Movement, then most people will see us as just as bad as the Death Eaters." She shrugged. "Do any of you want war just to make a point?"

"I hate to say it, but they're right," Ron said. "You two might be totally right morally, and even right about them not being trust-worthy. In fact, you're probably totally right. But that is not relevant."

"How . . . how can you even suggest. . . ." Hermione sputtered.

"How can you have read those books on politics and strategy you had me read and even ask that?" Ron demanded. "This looks like a genuine peace offer, no matter if it is or isn't. If our side ignores it, it makes us look as bad as they are!" He looked at Harry. "Some already think

that." Harry flushed angrily, the disagreement about the shooting of Voldemort still divided them to some degree.

"It isn't that we agree totally with those terms," Ginny said quickly, "but we have to be realistic about this. Harry's word still carries a little weight; he should say he doubts the motives of the Movement, but agrees that there should be some very tough negotiations on those terms. If they refuse to negotiate, that means they're faking. In the mean time, we can hope any spies or moles that our side has will dig up proof."

"It would be nice to end the war before more people are killed, wouldn't it, Harry?" Neville asked.

"At the cost of disenfranchising people like me?" Hermione shrieked.

"No, Hermione," Luna said. "But, unless this is fought out to total surrender, at the cost of many many lives on both sides, we won't get everything we want. How many innocent children, innocent Muggles, are you willing to sacrifice for your principles, if it turns out this Associate can end the war now?"

"That would be their choice!" Hermione insisted.

"Mostly, but not entirely," Neville argued.

"Do you four, of all people, really fear Muggle-borns like me and Dean and Colin? Do you really think we shouldn't be here, that I should never teach here?"

"We never said we agree with all of the proposals," Ron told her, "especially not those."

Harry sat in a chair, holding his head. "God, this hasn't helped at all."

Luna sat next to him, keeping Harry between herself and Hermione. "Hermione is probably right; this is most likely a ploy to divide us. But the Ministries can't ignore the possibilities that this is a genuine offer. The terms are currently unacceptable. Even if there's an amnesty, amnesty for what and for who should be specifically spelled out. The terms against Muggle-borns have to at least be improved, if not dropped altogether."

Luna looked at Hermione. "Ginny is right; Harry still carries a little weight. If he agrees with what I've just said, he should tell that to Dumbledore. Don't think we're abandoning you, or people like you."

"And I'm different, aren't I, just because you're all Pure-bloods and I'm a Mud-blood!"

"No," Neville said, while the two Weasleys hung their heads. "It's not because you're Muggle-born, but because you and Harry are Muggle-raised. You do look at things differently than we do. It doesn't mean you're always right or always wrong. It does mean we're different, not in blood, but in. . . ." He was stumped for a moment.

"Culture," Ginny supplied. "Not everyone has picked up on our ways as well as you two. God, except for the photography, Colin is still almost a hundred percent Muggle. So is Dean."

"And that's bad?" Hermione demanded.

"It might not be bad, but it's not good, either," Neville insisted. "I like that part about the course in wizarding culture! What Harry said someone mentioned is right -- if we don't maintain our wizarding culture, we'll end up a little exploited part of the Muggle world, and I don't like that idea at all!"

Hermione's jaw set in a position Harry and Ron were all too familiar with. Harry stood and raised his hands. "Stop! Please, stop, all of you! Alright, I understand how you all feel. I'll have to think about all this, and talk to Dumbledore tomorrow morning."

"We know you'll do the right thing," Neville said, "even if we can't agree on what it is."

Hermione decided there wasn't anything she could add, so she merely said goodnight. "I think we should take the long way back to the Common Room," Ron said to Ginny and Neville. They agreed and said goodnight as well.

"This isn't your final decision to make," Luna reminded Harry. "Make your opinion known to Dumbledore, and then we'll see what happens. Even if we disagree, I promise not to argue with you about it."

"Thanks," Harry said.

Luna pointed to a far window. "Looks like someone started decorating early. Mistletoe." It hung there, the sole holiday decoration in the room.

Harry grinned. "Not worried about the nargles?"

Luna thought for a moment. "I'm willing to risk them if you will."

Harry was up early the next morning. He flew for nearly an hour, and came in for a quick late breakfast. He just had time to speak to Dumbledore for about ten minutes before his first class.

"I agree that is the most politic position for both of us to take in public, Harry," the Headmaster stated. "It is the most I believe I can convince the Ministries and the International to take."

"But you don't like it any more than Hermione does, do you sir?"

"No, I do not."

"So the Order at least will still be preparing for war?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, we shall be. Do you disagree?"

Harry shook his head. "I hope we're all wrong, but I don't think we are. Even if most of the DA falls away, I'll keep training."

"Thank you, Harry." Dumbledore smiled. "You were right; I should trust you more."

Friday, December 20, 1996

The night before the students left for their winter break, Harry called his five friends into the room off the great hall after dinner. He merely handed them a slip of parchment Dumbledore had handed him at lunch.

The Ministry and International have decided to enter into negotiations with the group known as the Movement for Pure-Bloods, in order to find out if more reasonable terms may bring the potential war to an easy and swift end. The Minister has appointed himself, along with Amelia Bones, as the negotiators for the British Ministry, with Percy Weasley as their chief aide.

"God help us all," Ron said. "If there was any chance of this working, it's probably gone now, with Fudge and Percy working on it."

Hermione snorted, but added no comment.

Saturday, December 21, 1996

The six friends were sitting together on the train to London, taking a break from patrolling. Relations were still a bit strained over the proposed peace.

Harry sighed. "Something to say, Malfoy?"

"No, no; just enjoying the sight of one of the last Mud-bloods to attend Hogwarts."

"Unlikely," Hermione said in a bored voice.

"Improbable," agreed Ginny, in the same tone.

"Any other clever observations?" Neville added.

Malfoy scowled.

"Krum did that much better," commented Ron, keeping up the tone.

"No, Krum could do it without getting so red," Harry pointed out.

"But is that a failure on Draco's part, or an added attraction?" Luna asked.

"You'll all be the ones . . . the ones"

"Mocked?" Ginny asked.

"Ridiculed?" Hermione asked.

"Scorned?" Ron asked.

"Jeered?" Neville asked.

"Derided?" Harry asked.

"He doesn't seem to have much of a vocabulary today, does he?" Luna asked the group.

Malfoy tried to slam the door, but it merely slid shut a little on the hard side.

"It was nice for Malfoy to try to keep up the tradition," Harry commented. "I almost missed it last September."

"Too bad he didn't reach for his wand," Ron said. "I really like the new tradition of hexing the little ferret."

"Life will be different when we get back," Hermione said.

The rest of the group looked at her, puzzled.

"January Sixth is the first day of classes. Either life is going to get harder because of this peace, whatever it is, or the wizarding world will be split and in a civil war."

"Merry Christmas," Neville said, bitterly.

"Joy to the world," added Ginny.

"Peace on Earth, good will to man," Harry said with a sigh.

"And yet it does look so peaceful," Ron said, looking out at the fields they were passing.
"There should be hope."

"God, bless us, every one," Hermione quoted.

"She will," Luna said, serenely.