

Companions of the White Warlock

by

DrT

Table of Contentse

Companions of the White Warlock.....	1
Chapter I.....	3
Chapter II.....	9
Chapter III.....	16
Chapter IV.....	22
Chapter V.....	28
Chapter VI.....	35
Chapter VII.....	42
Chapter VIII.....	49
Chapter IX.....	57
Chapter X.....	64
Chapter XI.....	70
Chapter XII.....	76
Chapter XIII.....	82
Chapter XIV.....	89
Chapter XV.....	96
Chapter XVI.....	104
Chapter XVII.....	110
Chapter XVIII.....	117
Chapter XIX.....	123
Chapter XX.....	130
Chapter XXI.....	138
Chapter XXII.....	144
Chapter XXIII.....	150
Chapter XXIV.....	156
Chapter XXV.....	162
Chapter XXVI.....	169
Chapter XXVII.....	175
Chapter XXVIII.....	182
Chapter XXIX.....	189
Chapter XXX.....	196
Chapter XXXI.....	202
Chapter XXXII.....	208
Chapter XXXIII.....	215

Chapter I

Thursday, June 19, 1997

Harry Potter trudged determinedly towards the castle. He decided he wanted to go towards something and not think about also moving away. Away from the lake. Away from Dumbledore's tomb.

Hermione and Ron followed close behind him, making certain than no one else came too close to Harry. They knew he needed his private thoughts, and few others were important enough to intrude. Still, they had to make two exceptions. "Mister Potter?"

Harry came away from the spot of inner peace he had found after all the recent troubles. He was surprised at how calm, how peaceful, he was, now that he knew where he was going, even though he had no real idea about how to get there. "Yes, Professor McGonagall?"

"I believe you know Professor Russell."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry acknowledged. "Professor," he greeted.

"We've never talked, Mister Potter," Russell acknowledged. "It is time we did so, and also time we took a little side trip before delivering you to your Aunt's."

'Interesting,' Harry thought. "A side trip where, sir?"

"Headquarters," McGonagall answered.

"For two reasons," Russell continued. "First of all, the Fidelius has been broken. We need to reapply it, even if only you and I remember the location after today. The second reason, well, that I will tell you when we get there, so that we may have some privacy."

Before Harry could say anything, Russell went on, "Miss Granger and Mister Weasley may come with us, if you like. You may also choose the Secret Keeper, if you prefer someone other than myself or yourself. If so, I will apply the Charm and I will know the location, but I will be unable to tell anyone."

Harry thought a moment. "Will it still be used as Headquarters?"

"That is up to you, Mister Potter," McGonagall answered. "It would be convenient, but it still needs to be protected."

"Fine, but I don't want that thief Fletcher there!"

"You will have no argument from me," McGonagall said fervently.

"Then you can do the Charm and be the Secret Keeper, Professor Russell," Harry said.

"Are you sure you wouldn't want to be the Secret Keeper?" Russell asked.

"It might be best," Hermione murmured.

"Okay, fine."

"Good. Please forgive the liberty, but I have sent your elf and the free elf ahead," Russell said. "I understand Miss Weasley has spent some time there already. Do you wish her or any of your other friends to come along as well? We may need to search for something while we are there, if we aren't lucky."

Harry frowned, and then his eyes went wide. "R.A.B.?"

"Exactly."

Harry thought some more. "Fine. We can ask Ginny, Neville, and Luna. It might take some extra eyes and some original ideas."

"Luna will have those," Ron muttered.

"Then let us go now, so no one will know we went," Russell said.

"Take them to your office," McGonagall said. "I'll send the others along shortly and you may leave from there."

"While we are waiting, Miss Granger can fill you in on our tutorials," Russell said. Hermione flushed slightly.

It was over an hour later when the Fidelius ritual had been completed at Grimmauld Place, and Harry had told the group gathered where they now were. It took another half an hour to explain the Horcrux theory to Ginny, Luna, and Neville.

"So," Luna said, summing up for herself, "Lord Thingy has split his soul into six or seven pieces. You destroyed one. . . ."

"The enchanted diary," Harry agreed. Ginny shuddered.

"And Professor Dumbledore destroyed a second."

"One of two Slytherin heirlooms," Harry agreed. "In that case, Slytherin's ring. We went after the second, a locket, but someone with the initials R.A.B. had beaten us to it."

"And I'm hoping it was Regulus Augustine Black," Professor Russell said. "We know he broke away from Voldemort's group and was killed or died. His body was found out there in the entrance hall." They moved into the entrance hallway. "Isn't that correct, Kreacher?"

Kreacher, who was huddled under the portrait of Sirius' mother, scowled, but nodded. Dobby was standing next to him.

"Did he have a necklace with him or near him when he was found?" Harry demanded.

Kreacher tried not to say anything, but nodded. Harry asked, "Was it a large gold locket, with an ornate 'S' on it?"

Kreacher smiled nastily. "No, Master. It was exactly like the one Master is wearing! Master Regulus had bought them, hoping to give one to the blood-tr. . . ." Dobby kicked Kreacher, ". . . to Master Sirius."

Harry pulled the faux Horcrux off his neck. "That's like the one we couldn't open in the Tapestry room!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Don't tell me we threw it out, or gave it to Fletcher to pawn!" Harry wailed.

Ron turned on Kreacher. "You nicked it, didn't you?"

Kreacher didn't answer. "Bring me the necklace, Kreacher, and when this war is over, I'll offer you to whomever you want, even a Malfoy," Harry said.

Kreacher's eyes went wide. "Master would do that for Kreacher?" Dobby kicked him again. "Yes, Master. Kreacher. . . ."

"Do NOT answer, Kreacher!" Mrs. Black's portrait screamed, the curtains opening.

"She is no longer your Mistress," Harry said. "Obey, and you will be rewarded. Disobey, and I swear I'll tear this place down to the dirt until I find it." He turned to Mrs. Black. "I own the house. When the war is over, I'll be glad to send you on to anyone you want, too."

The portrait thought, and then said, "No. You will make out a will, leaving this house and myself to

Narcissa Malfoy, or her heir. If you win, you will turn the house and myself over to her or to her heir."

"Agreed, if you fulfill your bargain."

Mrs. Black commanded, "Go ahead, Kreacher."

Kreacher hesitated for a second, and Harry told him, "The offer is still open, Kreacher."

Kreacher jostled Mrs. Black's frame, and the necklace fell to the floor. "Stand back!" Russell demanded. He knelt over the locket and then wave his wand over it and the one Harry was carrying several times.

Russell stood up with the locket in his hand. He examined it and Harry's for several seconds and then handed them to Harry. "Open the false Horcrux, Harry."

Harry did so.

"Now open the other," Russell instructed. "It will open only when the other is already open."

Harry bit his lower lip, but did as he was told. As he did so, the Slytherin locket seemed to grow out of the space inside the smaller locket. "Everyone but Harry, stand back!" Russell snapped.

"How do I do it?" Harry asked. "It's not like I have another basilisk fang handy."

"Neither do I," Russell said with a grin. "Some Horcruxes may be easily broken, but Slytherin's locket had a number of charms built into it. Still, I have a solution. Miss Granger, can you tell your friends about the Stone of Duns Scotus?"

"The . . . the what?" Hermione asked.

"No? Miss Lovegood?"

"Duns Scotus, to mock the alchemists trying to create a Philosopher's Stone, created instead a stone which would turn gold to lead, and which would kill anyone touching the material or the beaker while the reaction was going on," Luna said shyly.

"Very good. Dobby, could you bring us a large lead-glass vase filled with water?"

"Yes, Professor."

Dobby was gone and back in less than two minutes. "Drop the locket into the water, Mister Potter." Harry did so. "Now, suspend this stone above the water with your levitation charm." As Harry did so, Russell moved everyone back. "I'll put a magical shield around the vase, which will disrupt Har . . . excuse me, Mister Potter's spell. Are we ready?"

Everyone nodded.

"On three. One . . . two . . . three." Russell waved his wand and Harry relaxed his. The small milky stone fell into the water, which immediately started to boil. A sickly green mist started to gather over the vase, but in a flash of light, everything went still. There was not a trace of the mist. The vase still stood, although it had partially melted. The water was gone. The gold locket and chain were clearly a dull lead. The stone still showed white.

"Who was that?" Mrs. Black asked in a small voice.

"That was one sixth or seventh of Voldemort's soul," Harry said. "Your younger son died striking back at his Master." He rounded on Kreacher. "He asked you to take that locket to Sirius, didn't he?"

Kreacher nodded fearfully as Harry flushed in ire.

"Harry!" Hermione snapped.

"Kreacher disobey his family," Dobby said in a horrified but quiet voice, "and then Kreacher acted

to betray his Master!"

"I forbade Kreacher to send that locket on to my other son," Mrs. Black said. "Tell me, Potter. Is it true what Phineas told me? That He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is a half-blood of the worst kind?"

"The worst kind?"

"A Muggle father and a magical mother," Russell said. "A wizard may sow his wild oats as he will, while a witch must watch what she does." Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna all rolled their eyes at that.

"Then yes," Harry said. "In fact, she used a love potion on Voldemort's father until after she was pregnant. When he came to his senses, he dumped her." Ginny winced at that.

"Then I was wrong to stop my son's plans." With that, the curtains closed by themselves.

Harry turned to Kreacher. "Until the time I specifically order you to go somewhere, you are not to leave the cellar of this house. Understand?"

"Yes, Master." He wandered away.

Harry turned to the others. "I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"No, Harry," Neville said. "Thank you for including me. I mean that."

"Yes," Luna said. "Thank you." She thought. "What are the other Horcruxes?"

"Right," Ginny said with false bravado. "Three down, three to go."

"We don't know for sure if there is a Sixth," Harry reminded them. "To start the ceremony, Voldemort has to murder someone himself. He was going to create the Sixth Horcrux the night he murdered my parents. That's why he could tell my mother to get out of the way. He didn't need to murder her, he wanted to murder me."

Harry's eyes suddenly went wide. He pointed to his scar. "Could this be the Sixth Horcrux? Is this why he wants to murder me himself? Because he has to do in some special way to preserve his soul? That's it, isn't it? That's why I have a link to the bastard! That's why I can speak Parseltongue!"

"Nonsense, Harry," Luna said. "If that were the case, you would be evil."

"She's likely right, Mister Potter," Russell said.

"You may call me Harry, Professor."

"Thank you, Harry. Now, let me examine you." He waved his wand around Harry's scar, which twinged as he did so.

"Good news and bad news, Potter," he said three minutes later. "Your mother's love and sacrifice prevented Voldemort's Curse from killing you, just as the Headmaster has always said. Voldemort likely had some object with him with which he was going to make the Horcrux. He probably placed it next to your head and then let the Curse fly. His soul was already torn from the murders of your parents, and the attempted murder of you. So yes, a piece of his soul ripped through you, creating the link et cetera. However, you are not a Horcrux, it either created the Sixth Horcrux, rejoined to Voldemort, or was destroyed. You don't have to die for him to die."

"Ooomph!" Harry lost his breath as Hermione, Ginny, and Luna hugged him.

"Like I said, I don't know if that Sixth part of Voldemort went into the object, rejoined with him, or was destroyed," Russell admitted. "We need to go to Godric's Hollow and see if we can find out."

"How about Sunday?" Harry suggested.

Russell shook his head. "A week from Monday would be better. You need to spend some time with, or at least at, your relatives. And we'll go on a Monday because there will be less chance of any

Muggles out and about.

Harry thought about that, and realized that Russell was allowing him to decide. "Okay, a week from Monday."

"So, we've destroyed the first three Horcruxes," Luna said, "and we have an idea for the Sixth and Voldemort is the Seventh. What are the Fourth and Fifth?"

"Dumbledore thought the Sixth might have been Voldemort's snake, Nagini," Harry said. "If he created one right before he regained his body, that is. He did murder a Muggle, and Dumbledore said that the snake was unusual."

"That's unlikely," Russell said. "When the snake dies, the Horcrux would be destroyed, and how likely would it be that Voldemort would consider killing a Muggle important enough to create a Horcrux when he was planning on killing you? He told his followers, I believe, that he had gone down the road of immortality, which implied he had at least one more ceremony to go. That means either that portion of his soul that split off that Halloween night either rejoined to him or he does not know that it split. It is, however, possible that Voldemort fed a Horcrux to the snake at some point. That could account for it's growing unusually large. I argued the point with Albus a few weeks ago when he finally told me some of this, but he was fixed on the idea. He might have been correct, but we need to go to Godric's Hollow first."

"And what about the Fourth and Fifth Horcruxes?" Neville asked.

"I know **what** number Four is, but I don't know where it is," Harry said. "It's a small gold cup with two handles that belonged to Helga Hufflepuff. Riddle murdered a descendent of hers that had both the cup and the locket." He frowned. "Not that it matters, but it probably means he created that Horcrux when he killed that woman. He probably made the diary or the ring when he killed his father and his two grandparents. Dumbledore thought that the Fifth could be something that belonged to Ravenclaw, but that there were no heirlooms of Gryffindor, except that sword I pulled from the Hat and, I suppose, the Hat itself."

"So if we could trace the descendants of Ravenclaw and Gryffindor," Hermione said, "we might find out if they could have been murdered by Voldemort. If so, we could find out what heirloom might have been stolen."

"It might work for Ravenclaw, but not for Gryffindor," Russell said. "Harry is the last known legitimate descendent of Gryffindor, from his daughter's youngest son. Of course, there are likely others, lost to the geneologists if they intermixed with Muggles or squibs very much. Still, that would be another reason why he went after Harry here instead of. . . ." He stopped.

"Instead of who?" Ginny asked.

"Two babies fit the Prophecy," Harry said. "Voldemort marked me, so it was me, not Neville."

"What!" Neville squeaked.

"And there aren't any known legitimate descendents of Mistress Ravenclaw," Luna said. "The last one was a Dorcas Meadowes."

"She was a member of the original Order," Harry said, shocked. "Moody told me that Voldemort killed her personally."

"That gives us something to work on," Russell said. "Right, Harry has until a week from Monday to mostly rest. The rest of you? I will talk with your parents. I would like some of you to review all the material surrounding the death of this Dorcas Meadowes and the geneological material here and at Hogwarts. Miss Lovegood and I could be mistaken about the last heirs of Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. We need to doublecheck all that."

They all nodded their agreement. "I can check though the archives of The Prophet," Luna said.

"Daddy has a run of thirty years at home."

"And we have a lot of books on British wizarding families at home," Neville said.

"Good. You may all Floo home, then," Russell said. "I need Harry to write out about forty slips giving the address of Headquarters. Then I will escort him home and have a talk with his relatives."

"Did you have any questions, Harry?" Russell asked a while later as Harry wrote out the information slips.

"Why didn't Professor Dumbledore tell me about how closely you were working with him on this?" Harry asked.

"Albus was never one for sharing information," Russell said simply. "It was his one flaw as a leader."

Harry did not like hearing Dumbledore criticized, but he could hardly argue that point. "Getting the other two or three Horcruxes won't be this easy, will it?"

"I doubt it," Russell admitted. "Still, that locket gave off no magical signals which could hint at its use as a hiding place for a Horcrux. Horcruxes on their own give off powerful Dark Magic signals."

"And how do I recognize those?" Harry asked.

"Normally, you would learn those next year," Russell said. "I did teach Miss Granger this year, however, and Miss Lovegood has a rough idea."

"That's good to know."

"Albus forbade me to give anyone detailed information on Horcruxes, but Miss Granger knows the basics of how to deal with them, and I gave her copies of the books she'll need to learn what she needs to know. If something happens to me, you won't be operating blind."

Harry looked up. "Is something likely to happen to you?"

Russell snorted. "After you, I could be number two on Voldemort's 'most wanted' list. Greyback really wants me, too, almost as badly as I want him."

"And what about Snape?" Harry demanded.

"Ah, yes. We need to talk about him. Is there some day next week you're likely to be alone at your Aunt's?"

"She goes to a Club meeting every Wednesday afternoon," Harry said.

"Shall we say One o'clock?"

Harry nodded and held up a slip. "This was the last one."

"Then let's get you home. Or at least what passes for it."

"Have you met my relatives?" Harry asked.

"I am an intelligence officer, Harry. I am also very nosy. And yes, I have met your uncle three times." With a wave of his wand, Russell's robe turned into a three piece Muggle business suit.

"Shall we?"

"Let's."

Chapter II

"Well," Vernon Dursley snapped, "at last, one of your kind who knows how to dress. Where's that patronizing old fop who was here last July?"

"Professor Dumbledore was murdered late last Friday evening," Russell said sternly. "Tell me, Dursley, if one of the most powerful wizards of this millennium could be murdered, what do you fancy your chances would be?"

Vernon scowled, and then he looked puzzled. "I know you, don't I?"

Russell nodded. "Yes, from some share holders' meetings. I own two percent of your company. You might consider all the implications of that statement."

Vernon gulped as he did so.

"Now, Harry will be here for between two to four weeks. I will be by a few times, and Harry may make a few day trips. He has many things on his mind. I would hope, I would strongly suggest, you will be understanding."

"Really?" Vernon sneered.

"Really. You might also bear in mind that I am not as kind, patient, tolerant, or distant as Professor Dumbledore was," Russell said coldly. "I've killed an even dozen times this past year, four times last Friday in fact, and my temper is getting very short."

Vernon started to sweat.

"I understand you have a shotgun, correct?"

Vernon frowned, but nodded.

"Will these shells fit?"

Vernon leaned forward and looked at the two large boxes of shells Russell held out. "Actually, yes."

"These are shot, these are slugs. There will be people watching in case you are attacked. If there is such an attack, your defenders will give you a password. Don't shoot them. Any suggestions on something to use?"

Vernon looked perplexed. Petunia, however, said, "'I love Muggles!'"

Russell and Harry smiled grimly at that. "Very good. Here is a photo of a Death Eater in full regalia. They don't always wear those stupid masks. Feel free to shoot any of them. If you do, our people will clean up. Harry will teach you how to use the ultraviolet equipment to run off any dementors. Be especially wary on the nights of the full moon."

"Why? Are vampires and werewolves going to attack?" Vernon said sarcastically.

"Vampires, no. They are staying neutral at the moment, thank Merlin. Most of the werewolves, however, have not, at least as of last Friday. Those shells have a mixture of silver alloys."

Vernon's eyes went wide. "You . . . you're serious, aren't you?"

"I am."

Vernon shook his head to clear it.

"I'm sorry you had to be mixed up with this. Take care." Russell disappeared.

"Go to your room, boy," Vernon said, obviously still shaken. "Your aunt will bring your dinner up."

"Yes, sir."

Harry stayed on the property the whole time between his arrival and the next Wednesday. He did work out a little with Dudley's equipment in the cellar and did some yard work. He read through some of his defense work. He had been slightly surprised late Sunday afternoon to find the Potions book in his trunk.

He was very tempted to tear it apart, but then he realized that it was both a resource and a look into Snape's mind. He reread all the annotations, looking for insights.

Harry wasn't certain if he had found any insights, but looking at the Seventh year material, he was surprised by the suggestions for spells -- charms, hexes, curses, shields -- scattered through it. And, on one mostly blank page, there were suggestions of how to do both Occlumency and Legilimency.

After he had beaten Dudley's heavy bag for almost thirty minutes, Harry spent the rest of Sunday evening (the Dursleys had decided to go on a vacation until the next Sunday) practicing Occlumency for the first time in almost a year. He was amazed at how easily he could Occlude his mind. Harry decided that Snape had either been deliberately torturing him, or had forgotten how he had begun himself.

Harry had sent Hedwig off to Professor Russell Sunday evening, telling him about the Dursleys' vacation and about the Occlumency. Hedwig came back with a note saying that Russell would be arriving earlier on the Wednesday than they had planned.

Harry was therefore only slightly startled when he heard pots rattling in the kitchen at 7:00 am. Harry threw on his clothes and hurried down the stairs.

"Good morning, Harry," Russell said, who was at the stove making a large cheese omelet for the two of them. Harry could smell bacon cooking in the oven.

"Good morning, Professor."

"Eggs and bacon fine with you, lad?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was right to think that your guardians wouldn't leave you much food," Russell said disapprovingly.

"Aunt Petunia made a special trip for me, actually," Harry said. "She just underestimated how much I eat these days."

"Well, that's good to know. I should tell you that the Board of Governors met last night."

Harry wasn't certain what to make of that. "And?"

"Professor McGonagall was confirmed as Headmistress. It was a tough fight. There are twelve governors, and it takes eight votes to make a ten year appointment and nine for a life appointment. That bitch Umbridge was trying to get back, and the first three votes were seven to five. Then one of the bought votes suggested they make the next one a secret ballot, thinking that some might cave in if they could do in anonymously, but instead two of the bought votes switched. Nine to three. Umbridge was furious."

"Good," Harry said.

Russell flipped the omelet over with a skilled flick of his wrist and smiled his agreement before going on, "In addition, Hogwarts will reopen in September, but only for First through Fifth years. O.W.L.s are seen as necessary, after all. In addition, some families will want their older children home to help protect their property, and who wants the children of Death Eaters and would-be Death Eaters letting them into Hogwarts again? Any child of a known Death Eater will be banned. Also on the plus side, since his mission to the werewolves hasn't really succeeded and he was seen fighting against them, Lupin will be coming back as the Defense teacher and Head of Gryffindor. We won't be adding any other teachers for a year. Flitwick will be teaching First year

Transfiguration, Lupin Second year, myself Third year, Vector Fourth year, and McGonagall will still teach the Fifth years."

Seeing Harry was still listening, Russell pulled the bacon out of the oven and plated breakfast. Harry drank milk, while Russell had a large flask of latte with him.

"We are going to have four Sixth and four Seventh year students stay on as what we'll call proctors," Russell went on as he did so. "Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and two Slytherins, Mark Stover and Carla Brown are the Sixth years. Neville Longbottom, Anthony Goldstein, Ernie Macmillan, and Susan Bones will be the Seventh years. They should all be able to keep an eye on things. Longbottom, Weasley, and Lovegood will also be able to keep an eye on your interests."

"Well, I wasn't planning on coming back. . . ." Harry said doubtfully after swallowing a bite.

"The Order will be working on protecting Hogwarts. Lupin and the Weasley boys will be spending a good chunk of time this summer looking for other odd ways into the building complex."

"That's a good idea," Harry allowed.

"A number of people thought so last summer, when they offered," Russell said drily. "The Headmaster vetoed the idea."

"Why?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"We don't know," Russell admitted. "Anyway, you, Miss Granger, and Mister Weasley are now considered members of the Order. You, and most of the other Order members, may live at Hogwarts at least part time but are not going to be living near the other students, or even the staff. Your quarters, if you care to use them, are well away from all of us."

"Thank you."

Russell shrugged. "It was a compromise. Anyway, here." With a wave of his wand, a wooden box appeared.

"What's in that?" Harry asked.

"The Headmaster's notes on finding the Horcruxes. Only you can read them without being cursed at the moment. I'm lucky that I escaped testing the thing with a rather nasty shock. So, read 'em. At least that will prevent you from looking in holes he already looked in."

"That will be helpful," Harry said with a sound of relief. He had worried about just that problem, among a number of others.

"You might glance through and see if he said anything about Godric's Hollow."

"Right. I'll get on it tonight."

"I'll stop by Friday night and see if you found anything. We'll also look around today and see what food you'd like that free elf to bring along in the morning. I'll feed us today, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Harry said. They finished their breakfast in silent enjoyment. Russell then cleaned and cleared everything away, including storing the rest of the cooked bacon.

"Where shall we talk?" Russell asked.

"How about we stay here?" Harry asked. Russell sat back down.

"You aren't going to try and convince me that Snape didn't murder the Headmaster, are you? That he's still on our side?" Harry asked in an accusing tone.

"No, because I'm not totally convinced myself," Russell said simply.

Harry slammed his fist on the table. "How can you even suggest it?" he demanded.

"You didn't pay much attention in Divination, I believe," Russell said, taking out two packs of Tarot

cards. "I am fairly accurate with them. I threw for the Headmaster a year ago. I predicted the Headmaster's plan, whatever it was, would lead to both his success and to his death. He accepted that. He also knew that Malfoy was assigned to kill him, and that Snape was to kill him if Malfoy failed. He forced Snape to give up that annotated Potions textbook, and arranged for Slughorn to unknowingly give it to you."

"Why?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"He would never say why, at least to me, but I believe there were at least three reasons. First of all, he wanted Slughorn to continue to favor you. You are your mother's son and the Chosen One. Your becoming the best Sixth year potions brewer he's ever seen just added to your luster."

Harry knew why the Headmaster had wanted Slughorn to favor him, but then he frowned. "Why would I have been better than Snape was?"

"Ah. That brings us to the second reason. Snape did not add those notes BEFORE he brewed those potions, nor did Snape come up with all those potion ideas by himself. He had a long-term Potions partner, and together they figured these additions out as they made them."

"My mother?" Harry asked, a little fearfully.

"Your mother. So, while your mother's notes are apparently at least partially lost, this was a way of returning some of your heritage to you."

Harry thought about that. "And the third reason?"

"Dumbledore may have known he was not going to have as much time with you as he wanted. I believe that book has a wealth of spells, created or annotated by Snape?"

"It does," Harry admitted.

"Do you feel you could use most of them?"

Harry thought about that, then said, "I can, although I haven't made it through all the Seventh year material."

"So, in terms of combat knowledge that still means you are probably already more dangerous than all but perhaps a hundred or so people in these isles, Harry." When Harry started to object, Russell merely reminded him, "Remember we are a small community, and besides, in terms of power, you are now number one or two. You may not yet be ready to confront Voldemort directly, but you can probably beat just about anyone else."

"I couldn't beat Snape," Harry complained.

"He had easier access to your mind than any enemy, other than Voldemort, could have. That gave him the advantage. We'll work on Occlumency this summer." He frowned. "I wanted to tutor you last summer, but the Headmaster was afraid I would learn your secrets. If you prefer, I can look for someone else."

"No," Harry said. "I'll work with you. Hermione trusts you. Now tell me why else shouldn't I kill Snape the first chance I get?"

"Snape may have been able to fool Dumbledore, or Voldemort, or both. One of those three things must have happened. Tell me, who do you think he could have more easily fooled? Voldemort, who distrusts everyone but himself, but who believes he cannot make an error, or Dumbledore, who believed in giving everyone a second chance yet knew he could make a mistake?"

Harry said nothing.

Russell then gave Harry ten minutes of his experiences with Snape, and why he thought Snape might have been caught up in his own schemes. He concluded, "I hope you do not kill Snape, Harry. To kill a sentient being, even by accident, injures us. To kill in self-defense, as you must kill

Voldemort and the pieces of his soul, hurts us the least, but still hurts us. To kill in hatred and anger hurts us the most. I have killed a total of eighteen people, Harry. I regret having to kill each and every one of them. I killed none of them in hatred, although I must admit I did kill a few out of revenge. While I regret them the least, I was damaged the most by killing them. If you were to kill Snape, it will be in hatred. It could be the first step down the path of Darkness, and I know I would hate for you to turn into the next Dark Lord."

Harry's eyes went down in shame.

"Dumbledore killed once, because he had to. He made certain he did not kill again. Who would it be least damaging for you to kill, Harry? Snape or Voldemort?"

"Voldemort," Harry admitted. "Why else do you think Snape might be, well. . . ."

"I know. Whatever he is, he is not innocent," Russell admitted. "Tell me, could Snape really have saved Dumbledore that night? Surrounded by Death Eaters who all wanted to kill the Headmaster, could Snape have saved him?"

"I think so, but I can't say for certain," Harry allowed.

"Which death would you have preferred for the Headmaster? Killed instantly by the Killing Curse, which would also cement Snape into the heart of Death Eaters even if he really does want Voldemort destroyed, or mauled to death by Greyback?"

Harry shuddered at that.

"And tell me this, if Snape decided that he could not save the Headmaster, do you think he would have been cold enough to have killed the Headmaster as he did rather than fight his way out and lose Dumbledore, Malfoy, and himself?"

"Yes," Harry hissed.

"And remember that Snape wanted to save his godson. . . ."

"Malfoy?"

"Exactly. And remember, Snape could have killed Flitwick, Granger, and Lovegood, but he didn't. In addition, Snape not only didn't allow the other Death Eaters to kill you, he also didn't capture you or suggest they capture you, did he?"

"No," Harry had to agree, "he didn't even suggest it. He told them Voldemort wanted me left alone."

"Voldemort wants to kill you, Harry, and to kill you himself. That suggests either he has never created the last Horcrux or he has decided to replace the ones destroyed." He paused in thought. "I wonder if there is a point where the soul cannot be further split, and he'll destroy himself?"

He shrugged. "Never mind. The point I was making is that Snape could have captured you that night as he fled, or at least made certain the others grabbed you. Voldemort does not want anyone else to kill you, that is true, but he would likely have welcomed the chance to kill you the same night Dumbledore was killed. That would have placed Snape even higher in the Dark Lord's esteem. Instead, I believe he reminded you that you should be practicing Occlumency."

"He might have been too angry to have thought about capturing me," Harry pointed out. "I've never seen him that angry before."

"You may be right. Let's examine that, shall we? What exactly did you say or do to him?" Russell asked.

"I had just called him a coward," Harry admitted.

"Why would that upset him that much, if he had been Voldemort's creature all along? If, however, he had just killed Dumbledore, knowing that this meant that his life would probably be ruined even if we win in the end, he might see what he had done as brave and self-sacrificing. For you, your

father in many ways, to then call him a coward would certainly have enraged him. Alternatively, he might have felt a failure, a coward if you will, because he had found no better way out of his dilemma other than murdering the one person who had cared about him for decades. Again, for you of all people to agree with that assessment. . . ."

"Or he felt triumphant, having killed the one person he had felt forced to humor for over fifteen years, and having me call him a coward was just too much," Harry said.

"It is possible," Russell admitted. "I don't know which side Snape is on. I could make good arguments either way. I am asking you not to kill him or torture him. In fact, please, do not ever use an Unforgivable. They are unforgiveable not just because of their effects on the victim, but because of their effects on the caster. They seduce you down the wrong paths, Harry. I have killed eighteen people, Harry. I have never used an Unforgivable."

"I've tried one twice," Harry muttered.

"Which one?"

"Cruciatius. Once against Lestrage after she killed Sirius. She said righteous anger wasn't enough. You had to want to hurt the other person."

"She ought to know, sadist that she is." Harry winced. "And the other?"

"Snape, but I never completed any of them."

"Good. Don't. Do you really want to become Snape? Or Lestrage? Or Voldemort?"

"No!"

Russell placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry looked up. "Then trust me on this, Harry. No more Unforgivables. I'll teach you alternatives. I'll bring you a list Friday, in fact. I will have failed if I teach you how to destroy Voldemort, and you end up ruining yourself in the process."

"Yes, sir."

"And, if you capture Snape, give him to me. I have ways to extract information the Dark Lord would kill for. In fact, he has, but he still does not know how to do it. And if Snape is a murderer instead of a cold-hearted, ruthless, worthless piece of shit, we'll destroy him together."

"And if he is the piece of shit?" Harry asked.

"Then he'll be hounded into the fringes of the world by others, and he'll have to live knowing he killed the only person who could have saved him."

"I can live with that," Harry said. "I just wish there were some way to know for certain."

"There is a way to learn if Snape is a loyal Death Eater or not, over time but before any final confrontations," Russell offered.

"And that is?"

"Snape knows about the Horcruxes," Russell said. "He knows what they are and that you will be after them. If we find new layers of protection, or find out that any have been moved, then Snape is likely a loyal Death Eater. If they have not, then either Voldemort thinks their current levels of protection are fine or else Snape is working for his downfall, most likely for his own twisted reasons."

Harry considered that. "Fine. I won't kill him."

"Good. Now, if you want, we can leave together for a short time, say three hours. Would you like to go clothing shopping? We can pick up some groceries as well."

"Yes, sir."

"You're out of Hogwarts, Harry. You may call me anything you like, even John."

Harry thought a moment. "How about 'Prof'?"

Russell considered that. "I like it," he said.

Harry was hardly convinced by Russell's arguments about Snape. However, that night as he skimmed through Dumbledore's notebooks, Harry admitted to himself that he could not kill or torture Severus Snape, at least until he learned the truth.

He still intended to make him suffer, however.

Chapter III

Monday, June 30, 1997

Russell came for Harry at 8:30 in the morning. They apparated together to Godric's Hollow. While Harry could not legally apparate by himself, Russell told him that he could in the presence of a licenced adult over 21, both of which Russell of course was.

Harry did not know what to expect of their destination. He knew that the house or cottage at Godric's Hollow had been at least partially destroyed back in 1981. He had no idea if it had been leveled, repaired, or replaced.

What he said first was, "It's beautiful here."

They were mostly surrounded by woods. Steep hills rose around three sides of the Hollow, and extended almost a mile to the east. A small stream flowed past them. "The village is about three quarters of a mile down stream," Russell said. "Come on, everyone is around back."

To call the building in front of them a 'cottage' showed typical Victorian understatement. This building had a strong foundation showing there was a cellar, three floors, and attics.

"The old Potter manor house, which was the third one on this site and which dated back to the 1500s, was destroyed back in 1916, in an attack from Grindelwald's allies," Russell said. "Your grandfather decided to start over, and built this in the early 1920s, although the architecture is more typical of about forty years earlier."

They circled around back. "Does anyone live here now?" Harry asked.

"No. There was a trust that was set up for you, and this is part of the trust. You've had access to the money vault, but there should be a family vault as well, plus what you got from Black. Oh, by the way, there is an elf that lives here."

"I own another elf?" Harry asked, wondering if Hermione would remember S.P.E.W.

"I'm afraid so. I was told her name is Sandy." They finished going around the house, where they found Remus, Tonks, Hagrid, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna.

"Could you call for Sandy?" Russell requested. "Direct your voice towards the house."

"Sandy?" Harry called. "Could you come here, please?"

An elf, wearing just a very long muffler wrapped all around her, appeared.

"Mister Harry has finally returned!" the elf squeaked in the highest voice any of them had ever heard. "Sandy is so very happy to see Mister Harry! Sandy has kept the House of Potter waiting for him." She frowned. "Mister Harry. . . ."

"Yes, Sandy?"

"Sandy hates to say but must say that Sandy is owed back wages. . . ."

Hermione crowed in happiness.

"Back wages?"

"Sandy is a full employ of the House of Potter, but Sandy is free. Madam Lily arranged it."

"I see. How much are you owed?"

"Sandy is not certain. Sandy is to be paid a Galleon a week."

"Was there any money left in the house?" Russell asked.

"That is Mister Harry's money now, not Sandy's!" Sandy firmly explained, offended.

"How much is there?" Harry asked.

"Sandy is not certain. Sandy is bad with numbers over a hundred."

"She must be owed almost thousand Galleons," Hermione pointed out.

"What day are you to be paid?" Luna asked.

"Mondays," Sandy said. "Today is pay day!"

Harry reached for his money pouch and took out ten Galleons. "I owe you many many more, Sandy, but here is today's pay and some of your back pay. I hope this doesn't mean you're leaving."

"No!" Sandy answered, horrified. "Sandy told Mister Harry that Sandy is pledged to the House of Potter. Sandy would only leave if there is a bad wizard, and Mister Harry could never be bad to Sandy!"

"I would hope not," Harry said.

"I believe you owe her . . . 755 Galleons, give or take a Galleon or two," Luna put in.

"we'll check how much is left before we leave," Russell said. "Right now, we need to find out if there is a Horcrux here, or if the item that Voldemort intended to use as one is here. It might be simple to find out, it might be very complex. We might have to use your memories, Harry, as well as Remus', Hagrid's, and Sandy's." He turned to Sandy. "Were there any items present immediately after the death of Harry's parents which were not here before?"

Sandy nodded. "Yes, sir. Would sir like to see them?"

"Yes, please," Russell said.

"Mister Harry?"

"Yes, please bring them."

Sandy popped away and popped back three seconds later. She handed Harry two items: an empty silver-and-white gold knife sheath with a yellow gold 'G' on it, and a small potions bottle.

"Lay them on the ground," Russell said. "Miss Granger, why don't you try those revealing charms I taught you."

"Alright. . . ." Hermione said nervously.

"Try the bottle first. It's the less likely of the two."

Hermione did as instructed. She seemed disappointed by the results over the bottle, and confused by the sheath. "I would have thought, if it were a Horcrux, it would have a stronger signal," Hermione said.

"Why don't you try, Miss Lovegood."

Luna looked at least as nervous as Hermione, which was a little out of character for her, but she tried as well. "I agree it feels like we were told a Horcrux would, but it doesn't seem that strong."

"Let me see," Russell said. Just under a minute later, he said, "Interesting. It's part of a Horcrux. The knife must have been in it when the Horcrux was created." He turned to Harry. "I'm afraid I will have to at least draw out some very painful memories, Harry. I am really sorry."

"My parents' murders, you mean," Harry said.

"I'm afraid so."

"Can he access memories that old, when he was that young?" Remus objected.

"No, he can't," Russell said. "I can, however. It also means that you'll remember them; they will no longer be beyond your reach."

"What do I have to do?" Harry said simply. "Do you have a Pensieve?"

"I would only need a Pensieve if we wanted to study the memory," Russell said. He leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear, "Is there anyone you don't want seeing this? Only you and I need to."

Harry shook his head. "It's fine."

"Does anyone not want to see this?" Russell asked the group. "We will need some people to stand lookout."

"I'll keep me eye out," Hagrid said.

"So will I," Tonks added.

"Sandy is not allowed to leave to help Mister Harry until he is seventeen," Sandy said. "Mister Harry is here, though, so Sandy will protect."

"So will I, Harry."

"Are you sure, Neville? I did meet your parents, after all."

"Fair is fair you mean?" Neville asked with a wry smile. "No. No, I don't need to see it."

"Neither do I," Ginny said. "I don't want to see that monster."

"Do you want us with you?" Ron asked.

"It's really up to you," Harry said. "It's going to be hard to see, but we all know what happened." He turned to Remus. "But, if you could bear it. . . ."

"I'll come," Remus said. He would not let Harry down, no matter how painful the memories might be to see.

"Come over to the shade of the house," Russell said. "Dumbledore charmed the actual house, so that none may enter until Harry does, and he can't until he's at least of age. And that charm still seems to be intact, despite Dumbledore's death."

"That figures," Harry grumbled.

"Stand facing me, Harry," Russell said. He placed his left hand on Harry's right shoulder, and Harry did the same to Professor Russell. "Remus, Miss Lovegood, a hand on either side of Harry's neck. Miss Granger, Mister Weasley, the same on mine."

"Everyone ready? Harry, I understand you heard your mother scream when you are too near a dementor, is that right?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Think of that scream, Harry. When I have us in the memory, you can all let go."

To everyone else, it was if they were in a silver fog. When Russell had found when he wanted to start, he set the memory into motion. The mists quickly cleared. "You may all let go now. We are in Harry's memory."

They were in a bright, sunny room, although the approaching dusk was throwing long shadows. "I've started the memory a little early, Harry," Russell said.

It was the nursery. Baby Harry was in a crib. There were many little brooms, each less than an inch long, flying in a pattern above Harry's head next to the wall. A little Snitch was flying in and out and around them.

"It looks like you're already following the Snitch," Ron said, smiling.

"You were an adorable baby," Hermione said, frowning at Ron.

"Really?" Harry said, doubtfully. He looked at Luna.

"Most of us are programmed to think most babies are cute, I think," Luna said. "You seem nicer than most. Of course, I haven't seen all that many. . . ."

"Look who's awake," came a voice from the door.

"Mum. . . ."

Russell and Remus brought the others to the far side of the room, leaving Harry a clear view of his mother.

"She really was beautiful," Harry said in awe.

"She was," Remus agreed.

"James!" Lily called. "Come along!"

"Dada!" Baby Harry called.

"I'm coming!" called a familiar voice. "Is our little man hungry?"

"Ungry, Dada!" little Harry called, and then he laughed. A few seconds later, James Potter came in, with a tray magicked in front of him. It had a bowl and two small plastic cups.

"Kiddy plastic sippy cups?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Petunia sent them," Remus answered.

"That's a shock," Harry muttered.

The group watched the Potters feed their baby, play with him, talk with him, listen to him babble in his limited vocabulary, and then take him out of the nursery to give him a bath. All together, it was a pleasant 90 minutes. "Thank you," Harry said to Russell as he watched his parents put him to bed.

"It won't make up for the horror," Russell said, "but I thought you deserved to see this."

"How long. . . ?" Ron asked.

"Less than three minutes, I'm afraid." Sure enough, just a few moments later, they heard the sound of a small explosion. "That was the front door being blown in," Russell said.

Lily rushed into the room and grabbed the drowsing Harry, who started crying.

"Lily," they heard James call, "take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off. . . ."

Lily was looking around in a panic. They heard another door being blown open, and they heard Voldemort laugh over what Harry now realized was his father's voice, casting hexes.

"It's no good, Potter," Voldemort said. "Expelliarmus!"

"You bastard!" James shouted, while Lily was muttering, "Why can't I apparate!"

"Do it!" Voldemort commanded.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Wormtail," Remus growled.

"I wondered if it might have been Snape," Harry said, breathing heavily.

"I had thought he would have done it himself," Russell said.

The door of the nursery was kicked open. Voldemort loomed in the doorway, and Lily huddled in the corner. Harry noticed that he looked a tad less inhuman than he did now.

"Not Harry! Not Harry! Please -- I'll do anything!"

"Stand aside! Stand aside, girl!" Hermione held on firmly to both Ron and Harry, while Luna

clutched Harry's other arm.

"Never!" Lily said. "I'd die for him first!"

"Then you will if you do not stand aside!"

Lily raised her wand, and Voldemort shouted, "Avada Kedavra!" Lily slumped to the floor.

Voldemort kicked her body aside. He picked up the screaming baby Harry and tossed him two feet to the crib. "So, you are the one who is supposed to destroy me, brat?" He snorted. "It hardly seems worth it. Your Mudblood mother, your ineffective father, would have made better sacrifices. Still, I might as well do what I came to do, just in case you have potential."

He pulled a long, narrow knife in its sheath from his robes and placed it next to Harry. After muttering a few phrases directed at the knife, Voldemort shouted, "Avada Kedavra!"

The sickly green light flashed out of Voldemort's wand and struck the baby on his chest, and it bounced back. With an inhuman scream, Voldemort's body melted into nothingness except for some ash. A yellowish-green mist stood in its place for a second, and then it split into two pieces, with a portion of it flashing towards the knife, while the rest was hurled through the wall, leaving a huge smoking hole.

The first potion had flashed through baby Harry's forehead and then into the knife. Harry and the knife itself were flung against the side of the crib next to the wall, while the sheath spun off under a chair.

Pettigrew burst into the room, looking terrified. He looked at the screaming child, to the pile of rags and ashes that had been his Master, and then to Lily's body. He bit his lip, and then grabbed Voldemort's smoking wand, glanced at Harry, grabbed the knife, and left on the run.

"Can we go now?" Hermione pleaded, tears running down her cheeks.

"Not yet," Russell said.

They waited. And waited.

"Where was Sandy, I wonder," Harry asked.

"Petrified, most likely by Voldemort," Russell answered.

"How much longer do we wait?" Ron asked, looking worriedly at Harry, who was looking anywhere but at his mother's body.

"We have to wait until Hagrid shows up," Russell said.

"By the way, I recognized the knife," Harry said. "Pettigrew used it to cut off his hand and to cut me." He sighed. "That was Gryffindor's, wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Russell agreed. "Ah . . . the next player.

They heard steps running up the stairs. To most of their surprise, it was Snape. "Damn!" Snape said, looking at Lily's body. "Why did it have to be you?" He glanced around, and his eyes went wide at the sight of Voldemort's ashes and clothes. "Impossible!" At that point, baby Harry started to cry again, mostly for his mother. Snape leaned over and waved his wand over Harry's head. The lightening cut from the incident glowed green for a moment. "Impossible!" Snape said again.

"I wish we could read his mind in a memory," Russell said, as Snape stood thinking for nearly a minute. Then Snape's hand went into his pocket, and he withdrew two vials and a small empty potion bottle. He mixed small amounts of potions from the vials into the bottle, and then added it to a sippy cup. Snape helped Harry drink the potion. It quieted Harry down.

"What were those?" Harry asked.

"In those amounts, a very mild sedative and a bit of strengthening potion," Russell answered.

"Snape helped me?"

At that moment, they heard arguing voices. Snape left Harry with the sippy cup and disappeared. A moment later, Hagrid came in through the hole in the wall. Sirius came in a moment later through the door, just as Hagrid had picked the drowsing Harry up.

"James is dead," Sirius said.

"Aye, so is Lily," Hagrid replied, tears in his eyes.

Sirius bit his lip, thinking. "What are you doing with Harry?" he finally asked.

"Taking 'im to Dumbledore," Hagrid answered.

"Alright, fine. I'm off after the bastard, then."

Russell pulled them out of the memory, and they were back near the Potter house, in the same position as when they had entered the memory. Although well over two hours of memory had passed, time does pass slightly faster in a Pensieve. Still, after 90 minutes in one position, everyone's bodies were stiff.

"No problems?" Remus asked Tonks.

"No," she replied.

"Harry," Hagrid said, "I am sorry I couldn't 'ave done more tha' night."

"It's alright, Hagrid," Harry said sadly. "I just wish Sirius had stopped and explained instead of going off after Pettigrew. Everything would have turned out at least a bit better."

"Sirius knew that, of course," Remus said. "It was his greatest regret."

"we all have a lot of them," Harry said. "What next?"

"You destroy the partial Horcrux," Russell said. "Break the 'G' and split the sheath. Voldemort didn't have time to put any additional hexes on it."

Harry thought about it, and then simply picked up two rocks. One strong 'wack' did the job, and the soul fragment dissipated. "Half done," Harry muttered. He looked at Russell. "Anything else, Prof?"

Russell used his eyes to point to Sandy. "Oh, yes!" Harry said, picking up the hint. "Sandy, is the money in the house easily moved?"

"Yes, Mister Harry. Shall Sandy fetch?"

"Yes, please. And bring a large, strong sack or box."

Sandy popped away and back in less than three minutes. The large chest was the size of Harry's trunk. Harry opened it (after Hermione, Luna, and Russell had tested it), and the group was shocked to see that it was two thirds filled with Galleons, and the rest with Muggle money. "Could you bring me another sack," Harry asked in a startled voice.

Harry counted out the Galleons for Sandy's back pay, and a year in advance as well. He also took fifty Galleons and the Muggle money -- mostly British, but Irish, French, Italian, Spanish, Germany, Belgium, Dutch, and American as well. "Does anyone need Muggle money?" Harry asked. No one saw the need, but, as Tonks said, "We'll know where to go if we need some in a hurry."

"Well," Russell said, "we've done well here today. Let's get everyone back."

Chapter IV

Tuesday, July 1, 1997

Harry fell out of bed as Vernon Dursley pounded on his door. "What?" Harry demanded. He had been taking a nap.

"Some freaks to see you, boy!"

Harry came down the stairs behind his uncle, wand at the ready. He was not prepared to see Rufus Scrimgeour and Percy Weasley standing in the front hall, in formal City business suits and bowlers. "Minister!"

"Minister?" Vernon barked.

"Yes, Minister," Harry said. "Uncle Vernon? Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic for Great Britain and Ireland, and his assistant, Percy Weasley."

"Weasley!"

"Yes. I assure you, Uncle Vernon, Percy dislikes his twin brothers at least as much as you do." Percy winced slightly.

"May we speak privately with your nephew?" the Minister asked.

Vernon looked warily at the three wizards, all three now with their wands out. "Right," he said, and fled into the kitchen, where Petunia already was. Dudley was not yet home for dinner.

"After you," Harry said politely.

"Perhaps you should put you wand away," Percy suggested.

"Perhaps you two should first," Harry retorted.

"Right." The Minister slipped his up his sleeve. Seeing this, Percy pocketed his, while Harry also put his up his sleeve, ready to get it at a moment's notice.

"Here to make another appeal, Minister?" Harry asked.

Percy opened his mouth, but shut it at the Minister's gesture. "I could make life hard for you, Potter," the Minister said.

"Let's see, classes are cancelled for Sixth and Seventh years, so you can't expel me like Fudge tried to, and I doubt you'd set dementors on me or torture me like Umbridge. . . ."

"What? How did Umbridge 'torture' you?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"Did you know she has a quill that, when you write with it, carves what you write into the back of your hand?" Harry held his right hand out warily, ready to pull it back and pull his wand if he needed to. The Minister and Percy saw the scar tissue, and winced. "Do you know why the twins left, Percy? Because she was going to have Filch horsewhip them and then expel them."

Harry glared at the Minister. "You tell me, why should I have any dealings with people who favor someone like Umbridge?"

"Because this is war, Potter."

"Which matters more to you? Winning the war, or being given credit for fighting more than Fudge did?" Harry asked.

"I need the second to do the first!" the Minister exclaimed.

"I suppose that's true, to some degree," Harry conceded. "I just don't see how I can help you with what you have to do, and I don't see how you can help me very much with what I have to do."

"What you have to do!" Percy burst out. "You are as conceited as ever!"

Harry ignored Percy, and looked at the Minister. "You're not, are you, Potter?" Scrimgeour said thoughtfully. The Minister knew that Potter was not lying, and that meant that meant Potter could really be 'the Chosen One'. "Fine. What do you want, and what can you give me?"

"In the short term, if you won't go overboard, I won't contradict you if you say that I am cooperating with the Ministry."

"How would you cooperate?" Percy demanded sarcastically.

"How would you?" Harry asked.

"Yes, what do you want, Potter?"

"I turn seventeen at the end of the month. . . ."

"And you want permission to use magic and to apparate now, correct?" Harry nodded. "Done."

"Minister!"

"Weasley, what is the most important thing we have to do?" Scrimgeour asked.

Percy opened his mouth . . . and then closed it. "Defeat You-Know-Who," Percy admitted reluctantly.

"Can you do it?" the Minister asked Harry.

"Without interference, I think so, but it won't be easy," Harry said. "There are preliminary steps which must be taken, and I need more training, which I have arranged."

"How many steps?"

"There were six things which must be done or found and destroyed before I can have any chance of destroying Voldemort," Harry said. "I've taken care of two, and the Headmaster destroyed one. That's what he was doing when he wasn't at Hogwarts -- seeking those things out. If word gets out that this is what I'm trying to do, Voldemort will concentrate on me, and he'll probably kill me, and we have no idea where one item might be, and only have good guess work on the other things. In that case, I'm dead and you lose. It's that simple. We're working on it. You can't help, as far as I know."

"Fact or theory?"

"Fact."

"Minister!"

"No, Weasley. I can't read people's minds, but I do know a lie, and these were no lies." He turned to Percy. "Obliviate. Weasley, please wait outside with the security detail and then you need to get Potter here the permissions he'll need to apparate and use magic this month. Good job conducting his apparation exam, by the way, Weasley. I need to speak with Potter and make certain he understands his obligations."

Percy shook his head to clear it. "He's a stubborn one, Minister. Are you certain. . . ?"

"Yes, go on." Percy left.

"You'll come to me if you need that help, Potter?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wish Dumbledore had said what he was up to," Scrimgeour said.

"He didn't trust anyone around you, sir," Harry said.

"To tell you the truth, there is no one I could trust with this, either," the Minister admitted. "Good

luck."

"Thank you, sir. The same to you."

The Minister smiled. "You CAN safely apparate, can't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we should have the paperwork for you soon enough. An owl should be by in the morning with your apparation license. Try not to use any magic before then."

"Yes, sir."

Scrimgeour looked at Harry. "Umbridge is a very able manipulator of paperwork. You might be glad to know that I have decided to move her into a position where she will not be dealing with the public, or have access to many state secrets. And also that I'll remember what you told me when the war is over."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry said, not really believing what the Minister said. With that, the Minister left, and Harry went to tell his aunt and uncle he was gone.

"So what was that all about?" Vernon demanded.

"He was just checking on me," Harry said, "and he reminded me that I could use magic now. But don't worry," Harry hurried on, "unless absolutely necessary, I won't it outside my room while I'm here."

"Well . . . see that don't!" Vernon snapped. He sniffed, gauging when dinner might be ready. He picked up a glass of cheap sherry, and started grumbling about Dudley being late.

"Would you set the table, please?" Petunia asked.

"Sure," Harry answered.

Wednesday, July 2, 1997

Privet Drive was quiet that afternoon. Vernon was at work, clearing the mound of papers that had built up due to his sudden vacation of the week before. Dudley was at driving lessons. Petunia was had just left for her Wednesday 'club meeting'.

Harry Potter was in the basement, rhythmically punching the heavy bag while his mind concentrated on his focus, a peaceful afternoon in the sun. Had anyone tried Legilimency on him, all they would have received would be the sylvan scene at the forefront of Harry's mind, not the undercurrents he was feeling.

Harry was startled out of both his rhythm and his Occlumency when Fawkes suddenly burst into appearance beside him. "Hello, Fawkes," Harry said when his heart beat had slowed a bit. "Are you feeling better?" Fawkes' mournful songs after Dumbledore's death and funeral had impressed itself on the souls of most of the listeners.

Fawkes warbled a few cheerful notes, and then held out a talon. It was only then that Harry saw that there was a note.

Harry hesitated, but finally took the note:

My Dear Harry:

If you are reading this, then I have at least partially failed in my duty to you yet again. Since I have, in many ways, failed you more often than I have helped you, I suspect this admission comes as no shock.

I hope Professor Snape or Russell has delivered my notes to you for finding the Horcruxes. I hope we have destroyed most of them together, but I have great faith in you, my boy, no matter if they are

all gone or if three remain.

I hope you can forgive me for not training you more. You have all the basic knowledge, details, and skills you will need to fight and destroy Voldemort if you do not chase him down, but let the fight come to you over the course of time. I believe Professor Snape will continue to function as an ear in Voldemort's camp, and I believe Professor Russell will have trained Miss Granger and even Miss Lovegood in what will be needed in identifying any remaining Horcruxes.

After you have read this, Fawkes will do one of two things. He will disappear, or he shall attach himself to you. If he perches on your left shoulder and sings, he has adopted you as a companion. He mostly fends for himself, but oddly enough seems to enjoy strong mint and cinnamon sweets. If you are at the Dursleys, perhaps you should request that he take you to Headquarters or the Burrow, as I doubt they would welcome him in their home. In any event, he will only appear to you when it is safe for you to leave.

Should Fawkes perch on your right shoulder and sing, however, he is offering you power, a power which may be turned down, and which should neither be turned down nor accepted lightly. He would be, in effect, anointing you a White Warlock.

I am certain you covered this topic in both your Second and Fifth years in History. "Yeah, like I paid attention either time," Harry muttered. Do not think about taking this power because it will make your task of defeating Voldemort easier. You will then fail to gain it. And, if you do take it, you will be the Champion of Light Magic. You will call together a band of paladins, and you will never be 'just Harry', assuming that were still possible in any event.

I do hope you are not offered this burden. If you are, I believe you shall make a better decision for yourself than I did, when I turned it down. It will offer you knowledge more than power, but above all, it confers responsibilities. I did not feel myself up to shouldering them, and then ended up shouldering them in any event.

*I leave you with much affection,
Albus D.*

Harry shook his head and looked at Fawkes. "Is there something you want to say to me, Fawkes?"

Fawkes trilled somewhat sadly and flew to Harry's right shoulder. "I thought that would happen," Harry said with a sigh as Fawkes sang a brief song of triumph. "Would you mind if I called Hermione and learned a bit more about this before I say yes?"

Fawkes seemed to think about it, and trilled happily. Harry moved to the telephone and made a phone call, glad he had had the foresight to memorize the number.

Hermione answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Hermione. This is Harry. I have a problem."

"What's that? It doesn't sound like you're being attacked or anything."

"No, I'm safe enough, I suppose. Fawkes is here. He brought me a note from Dumbledore."

"About the Horcruxes?" she asked eagerly.

"No. Apparently, I've been selected by someone or something to be something called a White Warlock. Do you know anything about the position?"

There was silence on the line.

"Hermione? Hermione, are you there?"

"Ah, Harry . . . you're the next White Warlock?" Hermione seemed to be in a mild state of shock.

"If I agree, and apparently if Fawkes here thinks I've agreed from the right motives or something."

"Harry, there have only been thirteen confirmed White Warlocks since Merlin, although most

people think Dumbledore was one. . . ."

"He said in his note that he turned it down," Harry said.

"Oh. Anyway, the last one was in North America, and he died in 1902. The one before that was in East Africa, and she died in 1818, although I guess that would make her a White Witch. . . ."

"What would be my obligations? Dumbledore says there are 'responsibilities'. . . ."

"Well," Hermione said frankly, "that 'saving people thing' of yours will become stronger. You will have a Council of Twelve to help you."

"Who picks those?" Harry asked.

"It seems as if you're guided to pick eight and you pick four on your own. Eh, Harry. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Be careful of who you pick for those four slots. Anytime a White Wizard has been betrayed by someone in his Council, it's been one of the ones he picked. Oh, and you have up to a year to pick them, although most choose them in a few days at most."

"Thank you," Harry said. "Don't tell anyone," he said after a moment.

"I won't," Hermione said.

"I'll be leaving here, I'm not certain where Fawkes will take me," Harry said. "I'll send Hedwig when I can."

"Alright."

"Hermione? Are you crying?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Harry . . . Harry, I know you. You'll do this, so that this nightmare will be over, and so that others can live normal lives, even if that means you can't."

"When have I ever had a chance at a normal life?" Harry asked, for once without bitterness.

"I know," Hermione admitted.

"Let me guess, you suspected this all along," Harry managed to tease.

"No, but Professor Russell mentioned it as a possibility last year," Hermione said. "And of course Professor Binns did give those lectures. . . ."

"I know, I know!" Harry said.

"Harry . . . take care. I love you."

"Don't tell Ron that."

"You know perfectly well what I mean," Hermione retorted.

"I do," Harry admitted. "I love you, too. Goodbye, Hermione."

"Goodbye."

Harry turned to Fawkes. "Shall I get my things?"

Fawkes blinked, and Dobby suddenly appeared. "Does Mister Harry Potter desire Dobby?" Dobby asked in a confused voice.

"Gather all my possessions," Harry said. "I'm not certain where Fawkes is taking me. . . ."

"Dobby can find Harry Potter, if he wants Dobby to find him and tells Dobby to come ahead of time," Dobby said.

"Great. Bring everything to me in an hour." With that, Fawkes disappeared with Harry.

"Dobby obeys the Master of the Light," Dobby said, bowing in reverence to where Harry had stood.

In Norwich, Hermione Granger laid crying on her bed. It was in part from relief. The odds of their side winning had just increased, if only from a distant, faint chance to more-or-less even odds. She was crying more because the Harry Potter she had loved as a brother would soon be gone. She could not imagine scolding the White Wizard, heir to the magic of Merlin, like a little brother -- or loving him like a brother, either.

That evening, Hedwig delivered identical messages to Ron and Ginny, Hermione, Fred and George, Luna, Neville, Remus, Tonks, Professor Russell, and Hagrid:

Dear :

I have been called away for a time. This note is a portkey, and it will bring you and ten others to me on the morning of Sunday the 13th, between 10:15 and 10:25. I did call Hermione to tell her that I was going, but not where or why. Let that be the password to let you know that I did write this. If you decide not to come, please destroy this, and be assured that I will remain your friend.

Harry

Hermione's had a postscript: *Tell no one but Prof. Russell about Fawkes or the chance at being a White Wizard.* Professor Russell's had the postscript: *See Hermione in private about an accurate guess you made. Be prepared to explain to everyone else who didn't pay attention in History.* He also sent a list of the people he had invited to come to him.

Just inside the Welsh border, Harry Potter spent the night on the bed in a spare room in the cottage near Godric's Hollow. Fawkes had easily passed through the charms designed to keep him out until he reached his majority, in part because, as the White Warlock, Harry could now be considered 'of age'.

He did not want to spend the night in his parents' room, and the nursery was still a nursery. So he sat on the bed, trying to decide how he was going to go to sleep.

Sandy knocked lightly on the open door, and she and Dobby came in. "Mister Harry cannot sleep?" she asked.

"Quite a great deal has happened today," Harry admitted. "My life is different."

"Perhaps Mister Harry's life is the same, only Mister Harry's view has changed?" Sandy suggested.

"You could be right," Harry admitted. With that, Fawkes began to sing, and Harry laid down, atop the covers, since it was a warm night. Sandy extinguished the candles, and she and Dobby bowed their way out.

Chapter V

Sunday, July 13, 1997

The eleven selected were standing in the kitchen of Burrow just after 10:00 in the morning. Despite some badgering, Hermione had refused to say anything about what might be expected. No one had thought to press Russell for any information.

Hermione and Russell were the first two to disappear. They were only slightly surprised to see they were in the back garden of the Potter cottage near Godric's Hollow.

Harry did not even pause to greet them. "I am the White Warlock," he said in a slightly weary voice. It was clear that his being the Chosen One in yet another sense didn't please him. "When everyone who is coming arrives, could you please explain to them what that means? I'll come back out then."

When Harry started to turn, Hermione asked, "Why are we meeting out here?"

Harry simply smiled. "If Hagrid comes, he won't fit inside, will he?"

When Harry came back out at 10:35, Fawkes on his shoulder, he was pleased to see all eleven of the people he had asked to come had done just that. Then, he was shocked as all of the eleven bowed and then knelt on the grass before him.

"What are you doing?" Harry demanded, aghast. The sight of his friends bowing and kneeling to him made him sick to his stomach. The sight of the serious looks on Fred and George also competed with sickening him with the slight looks of fear and awe he saw in some of them.

"You are The One," Remus said. "The Leader of Light Magic."

Harry stomped his foot. "No! No, I won't have it! I am Harry Potter! I may have been picked by fate or Higher Magic or some other damn fool thing to do this, but I am NOT better than anyone else! I might have to put up with this nonsense from other people, but I will NOT be treated this way by any of you! You should all know better! Some of you know me too well to treat me like this! Please," Harry begged, "get up."

Harry was glad to see that they all did as he asked, Hagrid perhaps the most reluctant of the group. "Like I said, this sort of thing might be useful politically, at least at first, but please, don't treat me like this, especially in private."

"Do you mean you want us to keep you from getting a swollen head?" Fred asked.

"Or are the rest of us supposed to be your jesters, like those two?" Ginny asked.

"The first," Harry said. "One thing I'm supposed to do is pick twelve people to act as my council and as my paladins. I'm asking you eleven if you would like to be considered."

"Considered?" Ginny asked.

"Yes. I can't just . . . anoint you or something."

"You . . . you can't be serious," Hagrid said, shocked. "Me? A Companion of a White Warlock?"

Harry smiled and came down the stairs of the back porch. He took Hagrid by the sleeve and led him around the corner so they could have some privacy. "Yes, you," Harry said. "You can't always keep a secret, but you're a loyal friend. In addition, you're knowledgeable about sentient beings and, to be honest, you and Grawp might be needed as envoys. I don't know if being a Companion would matter to the giants. . . ."

"Probably not," Hagrid said.

". . . but it might help with wizarding authorities."

"That's true, that is," Hagrid agreed. "Are you sure, Harry, I mean my L . . ."

"Don't you dare call me anything but Harry," Harry said. "You'll do it?"

"I'd do jus' about anythin' fer you, Harry," Hagrid said.

"Then would you get yourself a new wand, and get some tutoring?" Harry asked.

Hagrid sighed. "Aye, it's time. Dumbledore was after me since You-Know-Who came back. He got me permission and everythin'. I should have last year."

"Hagrid, call him Tom or Riddle if you don't want to use his title," Harry urged.

"I'll try," Hagrid said. "Now, when shall I take my Oath to you?"

"Why not now?" Harry asked.

"You wan' me to be the first?" Hagrid said, amazed. Each Companion would have to make an individual Oath to Harry. "But . . ."

"You introduced me to the magical world, Hagrid. You saved me. You should be first."

Hagrid got down on one knee and took Harry's right hand between his massive ones, and swore his Oath. Fawkes sang a short song of triumph. "Go wait over by the back porch," Harry said. "Send them around to this side one at a time: Hermione, Remus, Fred and George together, Tonks, Prof Russell, Neville, Luna, and Ginny."

"Right you are, sir, I mean, Harry," Hagrid said. "But wha' about Ron?"

"He's coming with me next," Harry said. He walked back with Hagrid, took Ron by the arm and walked him around the corner. "Are you alright?" Harry asked.

"I'm . . . I'm not entirely sure," Ron admitted. "I never suspected that you might be the next Merlin."

Harry winced. "You should know that whatever I am, I'll never be a Merlin, or even a Gryffindor." He looked Ron in the eye. "You don't have to do this, Ron. I'll understand, and you'll always be my friend."

Ron shook his head. "I'm not giving up on you now, Harry."

"If you swear the Oath, your main job after today will be to make sure I don't get a big head."

Ron smiled. "I'll do my best."

After he took the Oath, Ron was replaced by Hermione. She came close to Harry, and just stared at her friend.

"What?" Harry asked.

"When Professor Russell mentioned this could happen, I didn't think much about it," she said.

"Then I did a little research. . . ."

"Of course you did," Harry teased with a smile.

"Harry, do you have any idea how big this is?" Hermione demanded.

"I didn't at first, but I do now," Harry said firmly.

"Oh . . . of course."

"Hermione, I need for you to treat me just like you always have," Harry said. "I didn't suddenly become all-knowing or all-powerful, let alone any wiser than I was last month. I'm a tiny bit more powerful, a little more knowledgeable about myself and magic, and much more in control of the magic I do have, and that's pretty much it."

"Are you sure you want me?"

Harry gave her a dirty look. "Don't be daft."

"What position do I serve? I mean, the stories say that you are led to eight and you pick four. . . ."

"I know, you told me," Harry said. "I'm not going to say. That way, no one will look at someone and wonder, 'if anyone is going to betray Harry, it will be that one'. That could become a self-fulfilling prediction, and I won't have it. That's why I'm doing all twelve today."

"But there were only eleven. . . ."

"Trust me," Harry said with an evil grin.

"I do, Harry," Hermione said seriously. "I do, with all my heart. I would be honored to take the Oath to you."

"And you honor me by doing it," Harry said.

"Are you certain you want a werewolf on your Council?" Remus asked.

"Yes," Harry said firmly. "Leaving aside all the other reasons why I'm asking you, which are the real reasons of course, having a werewolf, a half-giant, and a Muggle-born should say something to the wizarding world."

"Good point," Remus admitted.

"Remus, I need you."

Remus knelt down in front of Harry. "I have failed you in many ways since your parents were murdered. I will not fail you again."

Fred and George were unnaturally serious as they came around the corner. "Harry," George asked, "why would you want a pair of jokers as Councillors?"

"And as Paladins," Fred added.

"And Companions. Well, I guess I can see why you'd want us as companions of a sort. . . ."

"I mean, we can keep you from getting a big head by pranking you, but somehow we don't think that would be a good image for a White Warlock," Fred agreed.

"I also need at least one fabricator, and with you two, I get two of the best," Harry said. "You don't have to do this, and you don't both have to do this."

"I'll do it," George said.

"And we come as a package deal, you know that," Fred said.

"It's up to you."

Fred and George looked at each other, and then smiled. "You got us!" they chorused.

Tonks peeked around the corner before walking over to Harry warily.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"This is all rather . . . unbelievable and fantastic," she said.

"My whole life has been rather unbelievable, and I've been living through it," Harry said a little sourly.

"Good point," Tonks agreed. "Why me, Harry?"

"Why not?" Harry returned. "I need people I can trust. I can trust you. I need people I care about

and who care about me, and that includes you. I need someone who can help train me in auror combat skills, and that meant either you or Moody, and while I'm sure he'd hate my saying so, he is pretty old and battered. Professor Russell is needed, and I didn't want more than one older person in the group. So, you again, and you're usually a lot prettier than Moody."

Tonks giggled slightly at that, mostly from nerves.

"And I need Remus, and Remus needs you," Harry added frankly. "This should help the two of you be together."

"Oh, you're going to open a business after the war, are you? White Warlock Matchmaking?"

"And that's another thing," Harry said, "I don't need people around me who are too reverent."

"And that's me," Tonks admitted.

"Between you, Fred and George, Luna, and Ron, that should be taken care of," Harry agreed.

"Not Remus?" Tonks asked.

"Maybe after a while," Harry agreed. "So, will you do this?"

Tonks' lime-green spiked hair relaxed into medium-long, straight, mousey-brown, and she seemed to shrink slightly as well. "I am proud to serve you," she said, getting down on one knee to take the Oath.

"You will have to give one more thing up," Harry reminded her.

"This is more important than being an auror," Tonks said, "even if it doesn't pay well."

"I might be able to come up with something," Harry said with a slight smile.

"Hermione tells me you expected this," Harry said.

"It was an off-hand remark to her at first," Russell admitted, "and then Albus and I had a talk about it. I have to say that this is a good thing for us, but probably not for you."

"Yeah, that pretty well sums things up," Harry agreed.

"I don't know what you know now," Russell admitted. "Is there anything I can answer for you?"

"Not right now," Harry said after a moment's thought.

"Could you answer something for me?" Russell asked.

"Well," Harry said wryly, "you can ask."

"I see. You might be able to answer this. Why me?"

"That seems a pretty common question today," Harry admitted. "I feel the need of an older, more informed person, who can help me along this new path. Two months ago, it would have been Dumbledore. Remus doesn't have quite enough experience, so it had to be either you, Alastor Moody, or Professor McGonagall. You seemed to be the better choice."

"Fair enough," Russell said. "I would be proud to serve as your Councillor, my lord."

"A Councillor, and I would imagine you would stay the Order's intelligence officer. But please, don't call me 'lord'," Harry said. "It reminds me of Voldemort, and Remus said there were no magical titles like princes."

"That's true, in that there are no hereditary titles, like duke or baron, let alone king," Russell said.

"Lord and prince are different, or at least they can be. In medieval practice, any wizard with at least twelve sworn followers was a lord, so you will soon be one. No doubt Voldemort got twelve sworn followers before he left Hogwarts."

"No doubt," Harry said, "but. . . ."

"Excuse me, my lord," Russell said, which made Harry wince, "even if none of us ever calls you that in private again, it would be useful for others to call you by the title, especially while you're so young."

"Make them respect the position, if not me?" Harry asked distastefully.

"Frankly, yes," Russell said. "Now, do you still want me?"

"Yes, Prof, I do," Harry said.

Neville came around the corner, bowed slightly to Harry, and then knelt before him.

"No questions or comments, Neville?" Harry asked, surprised.

"No," Neville said simply. "I decided you were the wizard to follow a long time ago, my . . . Harry. All this does is confirm that I was right. If you weren't the person you are, I wouldn't follow you, let alone take an oath to you, White Warlock or no White Warlock. In the six years I've known you, you've only disappointed me once."

"And when was that?" Harry asked, curious.

"When you decided not to keep the DA open last year," Neville said simply.

"Looking back, that was a big mistake," Harry acknowledged. "It would have been really useful during the fight in June. Now you have the responsibility of telling me I'm wrong until one of us convinces the other."

"I can do that," Neville replied with a smile.

"I think you and Ginny will have to set up something similar to the DA next year and run it," Harry said.

"I'd like to do that," Neville said seriously. "It was good for me, and I'm sure it would be for others, too."

Luna came around the corner much like Neville had. There was certainty in her movement that had largely been missing the year before. "No questions?" Harry asked as she knelt before him.

"Did it hurt, H . . . you do want us to still call you 'Harry', don't you?"

"Please, keep calling me Harry, and no, it didn't really hurt." Harry frowned. "I did seem to absorb a fair amount of information, and that gave me a slight headache for a few hours, but that was it."

"Good. Then I'm ready to follow you." She looked a little nervous. "This won't hurt, either, will it?"

"Not a bit," Harry assured her. "You will have to work hard, maybe harder than anyone other than the Prof and Hermione."

"Doing what?"

"Besides the work you were going to do at Hogwarts, I managed to partially lift the restrictive charms on Dumbledore's notes. You should be able to read most of them, but I can't seem to get them to release to anyone else."

"That is odd," Luna said. "Anything else?"

"Your other main assignment will be as Hermione's researcher. You'll have access to the Hogwarts library and the books at Headquarters, and Hermione will be out in the field a lot."

"Thank you for trusting me, Harry. You mean a lot to me."

Harry smiled back. "You mean a lot to me, too."

"Here I am, the last," Ginny said nervously.

"The next to last, actually," Harry said. "When I saw you earlier, you seemed nervous, and even a little frightened. Did I misread you?"

"You can read us now?"

"I seem to have become a Legilimens, but I have no idea if I'm all that good a one yet," Harry admitted.

"Oh." Ginny swallowed. "I have something to confess, then, and I'll understand if you think it means you can't trust me."

"Alright."

Ginny took a deep breath, and confessed, "You know that crush I used to have?"

Harry merely nodded at the obvious question.

"Right. Well, I wasn't totally over you last summer, you know." Harry nodded again. "So, I brewed this love potion my mother invented." Ginny dropped her eyes so she wouldn't have to see Harry looking at her. "It's different than what hit Ron. Mum's love potion doesn't really cause infatuation, it enhances whatever the, well, the subject actually feels for the brewer. Mum apparently found out that a number of boys lusted after her, but I don't want to get into that!"

"I don't want to hear that, either!" Harry said fervently.

"Well, anyway, I brewed it. I was going to give it to you last July at the Burrow, but then, well, I just couldn't go through with it."

"So. . . ."

"Wait!" Ginny insisted. "I had it poured out in a glass. It's clear and tasteless, if a bit oily. I poured it down the sink and was rinsing out the glass. . . ."

"When I came in and thanked you for the glass of water," Harry said, remembering.

"I don't think it affected you," Ginny said. "I mean, Hermione has said you can resist the Imperius, and I know you resisted Fleur's Veela magic a lot better than most boys, but I don't think it would have taken six months to work. But, it might have. . . ."

"It might have," Harry acknowledged, "but I don't think so, either."

"Don't get me wrong," Ginny said, "I enjoyed being with you, and you're a great kisser, but I also felt a little guilty the whole time we dated. I care for you, Harry, but I don't know if I can ever date you, and that was how I felt before this morning. Now, with all this. . . ." She gestured helplessly.

"Don't do this if you don't want to," Harry said. "We're friends, and we'll always be friends. Don't do this because you feel you should, or because you think you owe me anything, or because you feel guilty about the potion, or anything like that."

"I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do," Ginny said.

Harry and Ginny came around the corner together. Ginny went over to stand with the others. As she did so, Harry said, "Thank you for honoring me by joining with me. I need one more person, a person whose job it will be to look after me, nag at me to eat my veggies, and to do the same for all of you, and offer his unique insight into the world at the same time. In a sense, some of you already

proclaim my belief, hopefully all our beliefs, in the basic equality of sentient. To underscore all that, for the last member of the Council of this White Warlock, I call Dobby. Dobby, please come here!"

A very shocked Dobby appeared before the nearly as shocked Council. "Mister Harry. . . ." Dobby pleaded fearfully.

"You don't have to do this, Dobby," Harry said gently. "If you do, every bigot in the wizarding world will hate you. If you do this, you will be a symbol for all sentient, not just elves, but goblins, centaurs, merpeople, and others."

Dobby stood straight, although his knees were still shaking a bit. "Dobby will do this," Dobby said.

"When Dobby takes the Oath, the Council will be complete," Harry said. "This house will be our headquarters, and none will be able to approach within half a mile of it, save for the thirteen of us and Sandy unless I give them permission. It will also seal all your oaths, and you may not go back on them. Is there anyone who wishes to change their mind? This is your last chance."

There was a pause, then Neville said, "We're all with you."

And with that, the first European White Warlock in nearly half a millennium came to his full power.

Chapter VI

"So," Ron asked, "what next?"

"Dobby, did you and Sandy finish that project?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Mister Harry, sir!" Dobby snapped his fingers and seven poles appeared. Each was about six feet tall, and the upper half of each had some rolled up white cloth on it.

"In a sense, these are reverse-Horcruxes," Harry said. "These are my banners -- Hermione can explain the tradition later to anyone interested." Hermione stuck her tongue out at her friend, while Remus, Russell, and Luna all nodded, as most White Wizards used these symbols. "As long as I'm alive, nothing can damage them. Come on out front."

Harry handed six of the poles to Ron and went around the house, followed by everyone else. About twenty yards in front of the house, Harry unrolled the banner -- there was a phoenix on one side and a dragon on the other.

"Hey!" Hagrid said, "isn't tha' Norbert?"

"Well, I wanted a real dragon," Harry said. "Fawkes is the phoenix, of course." With that, Harry drove the base of the pole into the ground. It shot up more than twelve feet. "It goes an equal distance into the ground, if it can," Harry said. "If it can't, then it splits into seven strands and anchors the pole."

The banner unfurled, and suddenly the dragon disappeared, replaced by Fawkes on that side as well. "What happened?" Ginny asked before anyone else could.

"When I'm within thirty yards, only the phoenix can be seen. When I further away than that, only the dragon is seen," Harry said. "Now, I have some visits to make. But first, here." He handed each Companion a gold pin, shaped like a dragon. "When one of us calls another, the dragon turns into a phoenix and talks so that only you can hear it. Wear it next to your skin for now. It will take a day or so to become purely in sync with you, so that only you can use it. Then you can wear it anywhere on your clothes."

They all nodded their understanding.

"Fred, George, why don't you two go back to the shop. Here's a list of goods you need to get working on in your spare time."

"Right," George said, taking the list.

"We'll start thinking about them as soon as we get there," Fred added.

"You can apparate in and out here, even though most people can't, as well as headquarters," Harry reminded the twins. They nodded and disappeared.

"Dobby stays here. Ginny, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, and Remus, please go to Hogwarts. Remus, tell Professor McGonagall what happened, and ask her if she will call a meeting of the Order tonight. I imagine there will be a fair number of questions, and Mrs. Weasley might have some things to say to me."

The Hogwarts group said their goodbyes as well. That left Russell, Tonks, Ron, and Hermione. "Where to?" Ron asked.

Harry smiled, and it was not a nice one. "The Minister should have just started a meeting with the Wizengamot. I think we'll drop in."

"Those are closed to the public," Tonks pointed out.

Harry's grin became wider. "We aren't the public. Is everyone ready?"

"How are we getting there?" Hermione demanded.

"Magic," Harry said, and with a **BOOM** they were gone.

And with an equally impressive **BOOM** they were at the meeting of the Wizengamot.

"What is the meaning of this!" Scrimgeour cried out, while the many members were in an uproar, all demanding explanations.

"SILENCE!" Harry commanded.

"Potter! What the devil. . . ."

"I am Harry Potter, the one you have called 'The Boy Who Lived' and 'the Chosen One'. Today, I tell you my true title! I am the White Warlock!"

The silence was instant.

After a few seconds, two voices said, "Potter. . . ." One was demanding, the other a frightened hiss.

"Minister, do you want my support or opposition?" Harry asked.

The Minister looked beyond Harry to John Russell. "John, are you certain he is what he says he is?"

"I am," Russell stated. "He is the White Warlock, and I am of his Council."

"As am I," Tonks declared formally. "By the way, you may consider this my resignation from the Ministry."

At that moment, Fawkes burst into the chamber, singing triumphantly. "Well, Minister," Harry asked again when Fawkes' song had quieted a bit, "in or out?"

"You will plant a standard here?" Scrimgeour asked.

"No," Harry said, "in the atrium."

"The floors are charmed," Scrimgeour said. "Plant it and I'm in."

"If you want to make this totally public, fine," Harry said, turning and marching out the door.

"What? Wait!" Scrimgeour protested.

There was a group of nine flunkies waiting outside the door. Harry smirked as he realized that Percy was one of them. "Tonks, can you send out a general memo to the department heads?"

"Sure, my authorization shouldn't have been canceled yet." In less than a minute, two dozen paper airplanes were off. Harry marched through the Ministry, taking the stairs rather than the lift.

"I didn't realize that there would be so much walking involved," Russell said, half-way to the atrium.

"This will give everyone a chance to arrive," Harry said simply. "As you more-or-less said, I can't hide this."

By the time Harry and the group had arrived, the atrium was filling up. Harry marched over to the restored fountain and finally took one of the poles from Ron. "I am Harry Potter, the White Warlock!" The crowd quieted down. "Those who disturb the peace in this land, those who practice dark magic in this land, may have to answer to me! I have not come to replace the Ministry, especially in running the day-to-day affairs of state. I am, however, here to see that justice is done. You may fight the darkness with me, or you may aid the darkness, either directly or indirectly through indecision!"

Harry drove the pole into the floor, where it magically took root. The flag unfurled, and the phoenix symbol was clearly visible. "Minister, I ask for the final time. Do you fight darkness with me, or not?"

"I do," Scrimgeour said firmly.

"Then you know what to do," Harry said in a stern tone.

Scrimgeour sighed. "Aurors! Place Madam Umbridge under arrest for abusing students at the Hogwarts School during the 1995-1996 academic terms. Weasley! Move that bus conductor's hearing to the next meeting of the Wizengamot."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry said with a bow. "Minister, Arthur Weasley, please step forward."

The two men did so. First, Harry handed Scrimgeour a note, which the Minister carefully pocketed. Harry then handed each a badge, this one silver, which he or a Council member could use to request a meeting with the Minister. Arthur Weasley was appointed the Minister's liaison to the Council in addition to his usual duties.

Harry turned around. "Two down, five more to go," Harry said. With that, the group disappeared.

And they reappeared on the steps of Gringotts. "Prof?" Harry said, "would you please give this note to a goblin?"

"Yes, sir," Russell said.

In the twelve minutes they had to wait, a small crowd started to gather, curious as to what was happening. Finally, a group of nine goblins came out of the bank.

A stout, elderly goblin came over to Harry. "This note is true?" the goblin asked.

"It is true in all respects," Harry replied. "You are the Chief Hobgoblin of this branch of Gringotts?"

"I am Ringshank, the Chief Hobgoblin," the goblin said in a loud voice. "This wizard lays claim to being the White Warlock!" A small gasp came from those members of the crowd who had some idea what that meant. "If his standard flies from the traditional place of such standards, then it is true."

Harry took a pole from Ron, and held it above his head. Fawkes appeared, and took it from Harry's hands and flew up the front of the building. Near the top, Fawkes hovered and placed the end against the building.

The pole expanded, and the standard unfurled, and the dragon turned into the phoenix.

"Behold! The White Warlock!" Ringshank proclaimed.

Harry held out one of the silver pins. "And the friend of goblins," Harry said.

"And the goblins are the friends of the White Warlock," Ringshank said. He turned to the crowd. "The goblins are with you! There will be no goblin rebellion while the White Warlock reigns!" He and Harry shook hands. As Harry had hoped, the goblins wanted stability.

The crowd started shouting and cheering. Hermione nudged Harry, and he saw who she was pointing to. Harry crooked his finger, and Rita Skeeter edged closer. "What's this 'White Warlock' stuff about, Mister Potter?" she asked.

"The Prophet can do that research," Harry said.

"Does this mean you're 'the Chosen One'?" she asked.

"Yes," Harry said simply.

"When do you attack He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" she asked.

"Do you know where he is?" Harry asked.

"Well, no. . . ." Rita admitted.

"Neither do I and neither does the Ministry," Harry said. "And even if I did, it would do no good to try and kill him now. He has many magical protections keeping him alive, plus that would leave his followers here, building up an organization for the next Pure Blood loony, just like they did so many other times. I hope that my revealing this new power and title at this time will help the Ministry make the tough political decisions which Minister Fudge was unable to make, and to overcome the factions, like Delores Umbridge's, which have been holding Minister Scrimgeour partially back."

Rita looked at Harry in shock.

"Now, one more thing for The Prophet," Harry said. "There are 10,000 Galleon rewards for information leading to the capture of Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew alive. There are 10,000 Galleon rewards for the capture of Bellatrix Lestrange or Fenrir Greyback, dead or alive."

"Anyone else?" Rita asked.

"How about a Sickle for the capture of Draco Malfoy?" Ron suggested. "That's about the worth of a common ferret."

Harry repressed a smile. "I'll add nine Galleons and sixteen Sickles to Ron's Sickle," he said. "We might as well make it worth someone's time."

He turned back to Rita. "That's all for The Prophet. Do you have any questions from The Quibbler?"

Skeeter looked confused. "Not right now," she said.

Harry leaned forward. "You get one interview, for The Quibbler, if you want it. As for The Prophet, check your sources in the Ministry, Hogsmeade, and Leprechaun's Row."

Harry stood up, and his entourage gathered around him. With the 'BOOM', they were gone.

"The back garden of Grimmauld Place?" Ron asked, looking around when they reappeared.

"The Headquarters of the Order seemed appropriate," Harry said as he drove the pole in. "I do own it, and we are allied with the Order."

"Good point," Ron said. "Where next?"

"You'll see, but first, here," he handed Tonks a key.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Merlin created a horde, which Gringotts has been storing and investing for quite some time. You're the Treasurer. Each Councillor gets a hundred Galleons a week. Also, transfer a thousand Galleons to Hermione and fifteen hundred to Fred and George."

Hermione squeaked.

Harry turned to her. "You want to set up a potions lab, don't you?"

"I do," Hermione admitted.

"So, go ahead." He looked around. "Is everyone ready?"

"Where are we this time?" Hermione asked, looking around.

"This is Leprechaun's Row," Russell said, "the magical section of Dublin. While magical Ireland is under the authority of the British Ministry, the Mayor of Leprechaun's Row is the equivalent of the viceroy as well as the chief political officer of Magical Dublin. That's his residence."

They were again drawing a crowd. A wizard in elaborate robes and chain of office was hurrying out

of the Mayor's Residence. "I was wondering if you knew enough to come here," the man said. Harry and Hermione realized what Russell had already known -- the Mayor had been at the Wizengamot meeting.

Harry walked forward and offered his hand, something he had of course not done with Scrimgeour. "This is a busy morning," Harry said. "I can't stay long. I believe I can trust leaving the announcements to you?"

"You can," the man answered. He turned to the others, "I'm Sean Patrick O'Dell, Mayor."

"Mayor O'Dell has been a major thorn in the sides of Scrimgeour and especially Fudge," Russell said softly.

Harry turned to the small crowd. "Your good mayor will explain what is happening. All I can say is, keep up the good fight against Voldemort and his minions!" With that, Harry planted his standard, showing that Ireland was under his direct protection. He shook hands with the Mayor, and the group was again off.

Everyone knew where they were this time: the High Street of Hogsmeade. The twelve members of the Town Council were waiting for them, as were a large number of the residents and Skeeter. News of what had happened at the Ministry and Diagon Alley had spread quickly. The Council bowed before Harry as one, and then the rest of the crowd did as well. It was then that Hermione noticed Rita Skeeter had made it here as well.

"Thank you," Harry said. "Please, don't feel you have to do that again! Also, remember that this does not mean the war is anywhere close to being finished, unless we get very lucky. We will win this war, but it might take a week, or a month, or a year or more. You are all trained witches and wizards. The Death Eaters are strong only because they work as a pack. Most of them are pathetic excuses for wizards, who joined a crazed sadist who only cares about himself because they have no brains and no talent, and for the most part more lineage than money. All they have is a dream that if they kill enough people, everyone will kiss their robes. Individually, they are puling, puking, cowardly, insignificant losers. Keep together, and you can win. Four Hogwarts staff members held off nine Death Eaters, and when a fifth showed up they ran like the cowards they ALL are. Six or seven staff and students fought four times their number to a draw. Last year, six Fourth and Fifth year students fought a dozen of the strongest Death Eaters to a draw. **YOU CAN WIN EVEN WITHOUT ME!** But now I am the White Warlock, and you all know what that means. Voldemort himself as well as his lickspittles will soil themselves as they run away from me! So be on alert! They will continue to attack you one at a time, knowing that if they come up against equal numbers, **THEY WILL LOSE!**"

The small crowd cheered, and Harry planted his standard. Ron nudged Harry, and he turned to see Percy Weasley coming towards them.

"Potter," Percy said, as if he could barely stand the taste of the words. "The Minister sent you this."

Harry took the note and glanced at it. "Thank you, Weasley. That will be all." He turned his back to Percy, who glared and then stalked off.

"Hermione, could you call Skeeter over?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione said.

"Yes, my lord?" Skeeter asked eagerly.

"You can add this to your article," Harry said. "Any currently active Death Eater has until the Thirty-first of August to surrender, either to me or to the Ministry. They will have to make a full confession and be thoroughly debriefed, after which they will be given a partial pardon -- no death penalty or dementor's Kiss."

"And after that?" Rita asked.

"Then they can expect the same mercy they show their victims," Harry said coldly.

She gulped and nodded. The group then took their leave and began their walk to Hogwarts.

When they got out of listening range, Ron asked, "Lickspittles?"

"I don't know where all that came from," Harry admitted, "but it made sense."

"You were mostly right, of course," Russell agreed. "More than half of the Death Eaters and three-quarters of the other followers are incompetants. Still, we had all better remember that some are truly dangerous."

Once they got into Hogwarts, Russell took Harry and the group to a meeting room far away from the usual classrooms and student traffic areas. Ginny, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, and Remus joined them, and various drinks and snacks appeared on the table as Ron and Tonks filled them in on where they had been, and Remus said that the Order meeting was set for that night at 9:00. Harry would plant the banner afterwards.

"Are we going to be allowed in?" Ginny asked.

Harry looked at Russell, who said. "You, Hermione, and Ron are members. Miss Lovegood's father sent along his permission for her to do whatever is necessary." Luna nodded. "It's between you, Miss Lovegood, Professor McGonagall, and Remus here is she attends. You will have to add the Weasleys to the mix for Miss Weasley's permission."

"I'd like you both there for at least part of it," Harry said. He looked at Remus.

"I won't fight it," Remus said, "and I'll talk with Minerva. You will have to talk with Arthur and Molly."

"Right," Harry said with little enthusiasm. "What else, Prof?"

"I've been in contact with a large number of scholars who are interested in soul magic," Russell said. "None claim to be experts in the making or theories of Horcruxes. There is supposed to be such an expert, but I haven't gotten any feedback from him, yet. I'm hoping to hear from intermediaries sometime soon."

Harry wasn't certain what to do next, and looked at Russell. "Carry on," he said.

Russell nodded, "Of course. Miss Lovegood? Any report?"

Luna nodded. "There was one object reported as missing from the Meadowes' house, an enchanted emerald quizzing glass, supposedly a relic from Roweena Ravenclaw."

"What's a quizzing glass?" Harry asked.

Luna looked at Hermione. "Go ahead," Hermione said.

"Before optical lenses were perfected, some natural crystals were used as types of magnifying glasses. This one, a large oblong emerald, had been enchanted to help Ravenclaw, who did healing magic, with her diagnoses."

"Dorcas used it, too," Remus said sadly.

"How big is it?" Harry asked.

Luna looked towards Harry, and only then decided how to describe it to him. "It would be about three inches long, and about three quarters of an inch wide at the thickest part, in a light-weight red-gold setting."

"Possible for a large snake to swallow," Harry suggested. Hermione, Russell, and Remus all nodded

their understanding.

"Neville?" Russell asked.

"I found some more distant Ravenclaw relatives, but I don't suppose that matters, right?" Neville asked.

"Don't misplace the information," Russell said. "We might still need it."

"Right. As for Gryffindor's, it all goes back to a Henry Potter, who lived between 1407 and 1512. He married twice, because his two sons from the first marriage were killed without having children. You're descended from the one son he had from the second marriage." Everyone nodded their understanding.

"The important thing I found was that Henry had a mistress in between the two marriages."

"Why didn't he marry her?" Hermione asked.

"She was a Muggle-born witch," Neville said. "The son inherited all the land, but the daughters, including an illegitimate daughter from the mistress, inherited a wide range of personal effects. The son, John Potter, sued his half sister over the return of a knife, an heirloom from Godric Gryffindor."

"But we already knew that You-Know -- alright, Voldemort -- used Gryffindor's knife," Ron said.

"True," Neville said, "but I thought you might be interested to know that Elizabeth Potter married one Richard Pettigrew."

Everyone winced.

"Prof," Harry asked thoughtfully, "you said that a Horcrux gives off a powerful Dark Magical signature. Would anyone notice it who didn't test for it?"

Russell thought about that. "You mean, would Voldemort know that that knife contains half a soul-part?" Harry nodded. "I think he would if he ever handled it. Otherwise, probably not. Pettigrew should have figured it out by now."

"I think he has," Harry said, "but I also bet he's trying to shield it from his Master."

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"Because he's not a true believer," Harry said, "he's a little coward. If he can, he'll have some insurance to buy his life if he gets caught or tries to turn himself in."

"Is that why your reward was for him alive?" Tonks asked, "and why you got the Minister to extend clemency in sentencing?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I thought he might still have access to the knife. If it was his to begin with, he's even more likely to have it."

"How about Snape?" Ron asked.

"Part of me would like to have him dead rather than alive," Harry admitted. "Still, the Prof here has convinced me that there is a slim chance that Snape is still working against Voldemort, disgusting bastard that he is."

"And if he is?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Then we'll spare his life and just ruin it," Harry snarled. "Wormtail still killed those Muggles and murdered Cedric. Snape may or may not have murdered Dumbledore, but he certainly killed him."

Everyone nodded their agreement.

Chapter VII

The teens had not realized how large the Order of the Phoenix had grown over the previous year. Over 70 people plus the entire staff of Hogwarts (other than Filch and Trelawney) were assembled in the great hall, and they stood and clapped as Harry and his paladins entered. When they saw Dobby, the clapping slowed and the whispering started.

Ginny Weasley put her hand on Dobby's shoulder. She was not entirely certain what Harry and her parents (well, her mother) had said to each other that afternoon, but Mrs. Weasley had been looking rather chastised ever since. As for Ginny, she was now considered a full member of the Order of the Phoenix.

She watched Harry proudly as he spoke to the Order of the Phoenix and won them over. The Order had been functioning without its true leader for some weeks now. By the end of the meeting, everyone had come to terms and agreed with the new order within the Order. McGonagall was in overall operational charge, with Remus both as her number two and as the liaison with Harry. Russell would continue to coordinate intelligence. Harry, of course, was now the ultimate leader.

Ginny was less enthusiastic about her own role, although not fully dissatisfied. In effect, she, Luna, and Neville were confined to the castle and grounds. Luna was taking over Hermione's role as full-time researcher, and Neville and Professor Sprout were going to clean up an old greenhouse used for storage and convert it to growing medicinal plants. Ginny would be aiding her brothers and Remus in their search for any further secret ways into the castle or onto the grounds that by-passed the wards and helping McGonagall keep track of Order assignments.

Hermione would be moving freely between Hogwarts, Grimmauld Place, and the Cottage. Hermione understood (the others hoped) that she was to convey material from the latter two locations back to Hogwarts and go through it with Luna and the Prof. Harry arranged to hire Winky, and had her installed at Grimmauld Place full-time, while Dobby would be dropping in to supervise her and to keep an eye on Kreacher.

Tonks, aided by Remus, Russell, Moody, and Flitwick, would be teaching all the teens combat defense, but Harry and Ron would be concentrating on that. In addition, Luna and Harry would be going through Professor Dumbledore's notes. Harry would be mostly staying on at the castle at least through his birthday.

Harry also contributed his memories of what Dumbledore had showed him of the 'Saga of Tom Riddle' (as Luna called it) to a new pensieve. Harry had all of his paladins, plus McGonagall, Flitwick, and Moody see them as well. Other than Hermione and Dobby's anger at Riddle's framing of the old house elf of her mistress' murder, the stories did not seem to add anything to the immediate discussions. Still, Harry wanted the information out there in case anyone came up with any connections.

The leadership realized that now would come the long, slow slog until they had the next confrontations with the Death Eaters or some new lead came up in the search for Horcruxes. If there were no such interruptions, there would not be any break of any kind for them until Bill Weasley's wedding on the 26th.

Monday, July 14, 1997

"Come in, Harry."

Harry came into John Russell's private apartments. "How did you know it was me?"

"You have a characteristic knock . . . and my door is charmed to tell me," Russell responded with a smile.

"And you did say I should look you up today," Harry added.

"Exactly. I was wondering if you wanted any extra equipment, for yourself or the others."

Harry looked puzzled. "Like what?"

"Come into my den," Russell said. Harry followed Russell out of the sitting room, through a library and into another room.

In many ways, it was an armory. There were swords, knives, and other blades and assorted weapons on the walls. Russell took Harry over to a cabinet and opened it.

"Whoa," Harry said. There were sixty pistols in the cabinet.

"There are many who would say that any wizard using a Muggle weapon is a blood traitor," Russell said. "Since most of them are trying to kill us anyway, I really don't care."

"I'd like to learn how to handle one, but I don't know if I would normally carry it," Harry said. "In fact, we should all learn how to use one."

"I agree. If you can use it well, then you can decide if you will carry one. Tonks nearly shot her foot off once."

Harry shuddered, but then his eyes went wide and he made an abortive reach for the oldest pistol before withdrawing his hand.

"That is a Walker Colt, from the 1850s," Russell said. "Only 1000 or so of them were made. It is one of the most powerful handguns ever made, even today. It's pre-self-contained cartridge, so it has to be loaded by hand, the only disadvantage. Still, a little magic guarantees that it will never misfire." He took it out and showed it to Harry. "It fires a ball instead of a pointed bullet, so it has tremendous stopping power, but not great penetration. It's the only pistol I would want to use on a fully-transformed werewolf."

Harry nodded his understanding. "Greyback and his band."

"Exactly."

"It isn't enough to stop Voldemort," Harry stated.

"No, it's not. However, I know you would agree that it's also time to clean out the underlying bigots, criminals, and monsters, if we can legitimately charge them."

"They wouldn't nail Malfoy last time," Harry pointed out.

"Scrimgeour has more guts. Old Barty Crouch Senior might have done the same, if his son hadn't gotten caught up in things. We'll have to see. And remember, it might be your duty to point the way, but you can't force people to be good."

Harry grimaced. "I know."

Russell opened a drawer in a chest under the cabinet, and Harry saw objects he could not begin to identify. "I'm going to teach you what all these are, Harry. I have a dream-learning program for you tonight, and by morning you'll have all the basics, although you'll need to practice to actually be able to use them. I should also teach you Latin the same way."

"Alright." Harry was still looking at the drawer of weapons.

"I also want you to know," Russell said in a bland tone, "if anything happens to me, everything in this room will be yours."

Harry looked up, startled. "What!"

"This is war, Harry. If more than eight of your paladins survive this war, we'll have been very lucky."

"Maybe we should track Voldemort down and kill his body and trap his remnant of soul," Harry said. "Then we find each Horcrux, destroy it and then kill what's left."

"It would not be easy to destroy that 'remnant', Harry," Russell said. "I've never heard of any way to contain it, but I do have some feelers out. We'll have to see if any good ideas, or solid facts, come back. We can't even start to plan for that until we know there is something worth planning."

Harry frowned. "I hope they come back soon. I want this over with as few casualties as possible, even if we don't get all the Death Eaters."

"We shall do our best."

"Is the Master available?"

Vincent Crabbe merely nodded. The teen had shown up looking for Malfoy and had just stayed. He did not know a lot, but he knew his place. He merely opened the door and allowed his superior entrance to the Master's private domain.

"Ah, Severus," Voldemort hissed. "I was wondering who would bring me the news that has my oh so faithful followers in a nervous tizzy whenever they think they are out of my range. I should have known it would be you."

Snape merely bowed.

"Well?" Voldemort demanded, "what is it?"

Snape merely handed his Master a copy of that morning's Daily Prophet.

Voldemort scanned through the six pages of stories quickly, and then burned the paper with a flick of his wand. "Nonsense. 'White Warlock' and 'heir to Merlin' indeed." He glared at Snape. "You disagree?"

"You would know much better than I if there could be such a thing as a White Warlock, Master," Snape said frankly. "I do agree that if there were such a thing, it could NOT be Potter."

"I see," Voldemort said. "Tell me, what do you think about his speech in Hogsmeade?"

"Russell must have written it for him," Snape said dismissively, "Potter could never be that coherent, and Granger could never be that succinct."

"And the content?"

Even Snape had to think how he should answer that.

"Your hesitation gives me your answer," Voldemort hissed. "I must admit that there is a grain of truth in some of it. Why is it that I tend to attract those with superior bloodlines and inferior abilities and those with inferior bloodlines and superior abilities?"

"Because those with both are already in control," Snape answered simply. "In addition, it takes so long to get to the top. Scrimgeour is the first Minister we've had this century under a hundred, and he's the youngest Minister currently in Europe at eight-seven. Crouch might never had been made Minister in any case, considering he was only a few years older than you."

"Exactly." Voldemort shook his head, and then went on. "I have a plan in progress, but perhaps that is not enough. So, either you or dear Bella will have to make some individual strikes as well." He thought some more. "Bella, I think. You have greater uses at the moment, and should she fail, the others will know it was because of her lack of control."

Snape bowed.

"I shall consider her first target. As for you, you did well to bring this to my attention. I shall be generous and reward you. What would you have, Severus?"

Snape paused, and said, "If he is in usable condition, young Malfoy. He has some modest abilities in Potion Making."

"Why would he be unusable, Severus?" Voldemort asked. "True, he failed to kill Dumbledore, but I expected him to fail at that. It spurred him on to succeed in my major objective for him. Had I only demanded he find a way in for my Death Eaters, he would likely still be thinking about it. No, he is relatively unharmed. He is in room sixteen. You may enter with the password 'last chance'. He may walk out with the password, 'This is my last chance'."

"Thank you, Master," Snape said with a bow.

"He is a weakness, Severus," Voldemort warned. "I had not expected it of you."

"None of us can match your character, Master."

"True. Remember this, Severus," Voldemort warned in a voice that chilled even Severus Snape, "I meant it when I said the boy has one more chance. I expected him to fail, but his failure also caused you to be exposed. It would have been very useful to have you at Hogwarts right now."

Snape nearly spoke, but held his tongue.

"Yes, I am aware that this was caused more by Bella and his mother than by you. I was disappointed that you took it upon yourself to make that pledge. Bella is also on her last chance, and I do not want you, her, or the boy in contact with Lucius' wife again."

Snape bowed in agreement.

"Is there anything else you wish to report of my followers, Severus?"

"Greyback . . . I cannot say he is totally out of control, but it is clear that only you can control him," Snape said.

"True," Voldemort agreed. "You rightly prevented him from attacking the wrong targets, and his bloodlust has been aroused by his partial revenge on the curse breaker and his failure to get Russell." Voldemort frowned. "Russell was with Potter at Hogsmeade, and he also killed four of my followers that night. Tell me, Severus, is there any one of my followers who would stand a good chance of taking him out?"

"Only one? Truthfully, no, Master, unless Lestrage can surprise him. Perhaps Greyback and a pack if he's vulnerable during a full moon?"

"Perhaps. Not you?"

"I don't know," Snape admitted. "He is the only one of my former colleagues I would hesitate to attack other than by your express command."

"I see. Perhaps it is time to finish off a different old victim, after all then," Voldemort mused. He smiled horribly. "Perhaps the werewolf pack can lure Hagrid into the forest."

"That should affect Potter," Snape agreed. He thought about reminding Voldemort that the werewolf curse did not affect giants, and that their effectiveness in attacking Hagrid might be less than expected, but decided now was not the time to reflect badly on the Dark Lord's plans.

"Well, I shall think upon my options. Take your new apprentice, Severus, and make his position clear."

Snape bowed low. "As you command."

"You have the scent retarding potion ready?"

Snape shuddered slightly as he realized his Master's basic plan, but only said, "Yes, Master."

"I see you understand. If the boy obeys your commands, he will survive. If he does not, he will not. It is up to him. Use Wormtail as well. He is growing more annoying than usual."

"Yes, Master."

Friday, July 18, 1997

"Come in," Russell called. Harry staggered into the smoking room. "Tough day training, wasn't it?"

Harry sat stiffly in the other chair, "Yes," Harry said with a grunt.

"Well, we get tomorrow off, so enjoy it. I plan to."

"I take it you're planning on continuing in the field," Harry said.

"Unless you order otherwise," Russell answered. "I've lost two stone over the last year, and got some muscle back. I think I've regained a step, too."

"I'm not stopping you, that's for sure. I was just wondering."

"Was there something you wanted to talk about, or are you just checking on the old man?" Russell teased.

"There is something I'm wondering about."

"Killing?" They had all been practicing some very deadly hexes that day.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "Dumbledore, and you for that matter, have said that when we kill we damage our soul."

"We do," Russell agreed. "If we ever kill with glee and sadistic satisfaction, as it must be done when using the Killing Curse, the damage is long-term, even permanent. When we do it in self-defense with regret, the effects are also long-term, although not as damaging."

"Because we still feel some guilt."

"Exactly," Russell agreed. "The damage that killing as Voldemort and most of his Death Eaters do it, is that it either slowly erodes what makes us fully human, or it slowly splits us into two different people. Do you know anything about what the German Muggles did to millions of ethnic and political prisoners during their Second World War?"

"The Concentration and Death Camps? A little," Harry said.

"Exactly," Russell agreed. "Some of the guards and others went into the camps sadists and monsters, but not really all that many. A few of the ones who weren't sadists or evil from the start broke down, but most didn't. The others separated themselves by trying to see the people they were working to death and murdering as something other than human. Some became evil monsters, others became almost two different people -- one for work and one for their time off. But the underlying indifference to suffering that they created inside themselves can never go away, no matter how well they manage to disguise it to others and especially to themselves. I don't want to see that indifference building inside of you."

"Is it building in you?" Harry asked.

Russell nodded his head. "It is. I am not proud of it. It allows me to do what I think may be necessary, but I swear I curse the necessity." He smiled grimly. "I try to reassure myself that I at least don't cause unnecessary pain, that I've never tortured anyone. That even though I've killed, I'm still morally better than someone like Umbridge, who hasn't actually killed so far as I know. I also often think that maybe I'm just fooling myself, and that I've divided by soul just as much as any Nazi concentration camp guard, just as much as the average Death Eater."

"Do you think many Death Eaters regret killing people who weren't trying to hurt them?" Harry asked.

"No, not many, if any," Russell agreed. "I'd like to think it makes me less reprehensible, but if I am,

it's a matter of degree, not of substance."

"But you'd still kill to protect an ten-year-old Muggle-born and her parents, if there wasn't a better way, wouldn't you."

"I would," Russell agreed. "I just wish there was always a better way."

"I agree," Harry said.

"I was going to seek you out tonight," Russell said. "I thought you'd be with your friends a bit longer."

"They're all even more tired than I am," Harry said. "What's up?"

"I got a message today, written by a person of interest."

Harry thought he detected something in Russell's tone. "Snape?"

Russell shook his head. "Pettigrew. He's offered to tell us when the next attack that he's going to be involved in will be, for a price."

"When and where?"

"Sunday morning," Russell answered. "He obviously won't say where unless we meet his price."

Harry realized that the full moon would be early Sunday morning, just before dawn. "So it's a werewolf attack?"

Russell nodded. "A big one."

"Can we give Pettigrew what he wants and live with it?" Harry asked.

"Amazing enough, I think we can. He also said he will be giving you a present if we agree, and from the hints, I'd say it was the knife."

Harry thought about that. "Does that mean that Snape told Voldemort what we know about the Horcruxes, or that Pettigrew somehow figured things out?"

"It could be either," Russell said. "Dumbledore and Snape both agreed that Pettigrew was the one Death Eater likely to figure things out."

"What does he want?" Harry asked.

"He wants the reward money for himself and anyone else captured Sunday, he wants to be exempt from the death penalty, the Kiss, and any similar punishment, and while he acknowledges he will have to be imprisoned, he wants it in South America, North America, or at worst Australia. He wants a comfortable confinement, where he can use the reward money to buy himself little luxuries."

"A coward to end?" Harry suggested.

"Or it could be baiting a trap," Russell agreed. "If so, it was done by Snape, not Voldemort, and certainly not by anyone else that I know of."

"And?"

"And if it works out, I believe I can get him imprisoned in the wizarding prison in Bolivia after we fully debrief him. It will not be nearly as bad as he deserves, but not as nice as he probably hopes."

Harry shrugged. "He lived for over twelve years as a rat and since then for four years as Voldemort's servant. I'm sure, at least at first, any place you can get him sent to will seem better than those. He betrayed my parents, killed my father, and killed Cedric and those Muggles. Still. . . ." Harry shrugged. "I guess we live with it."

"Good point," Russell agreed.

Chapter VIII

Sunday, July 20, 1997
Midnight

"Nervous, pink meat?" Greyback snarled.

Draco Malfoy glared at his tormentor, but dared say nothing.

"Answer me, little boy," Greyback growled, getting in Draco's face. "Your protector won't be around to help you forever, you know."

"But he is here now," Snape said from behind. Greyback whirled around. Snape stared him down.

"Do not challenge me!" Greyback roared. His eight followers cringed slightly.

"I bow before just one being," Snape answered evenly. "So do you. Do not challenge me or mine, and I shall not challenge you."

Greyback spat on the ground and turned his back on Snape, and Snape decided he would not further challenge the pack leader. Snape signaled Draco and Pettigrew over. "Now, do you both know how to operate the new auto-portkeys?"

"Yes, sir," Draco said, just a bit doubtfully.

"He's never even seen a Muggle push-button device before," Pettigrew reminded Snape. He turned to Draco. "Let me take the lead. Don't act unless you see I'm in trouble. I'll go forward with the pack."

Draco looked at Snape. "One person should be forward," he suggested.

"Very well," Snape said. "I shall report to the Master as soon as you leave." He turned and walked a few feet away, wondering what Pettigrew was up to.

"Are you ready to go?" Pettigrew asked.

"So soon?" Draco asked in return.

"The moon will turn full at 2:24 at Hogwarts," Greyback snarled. "I have to have things in readiness before then."

"Fine," Pettigrew said. He turned to Draco and repeated the plan so there would be no misunderstandings. "You send us with your control, that's the blue button there. Greyback will trap and muzzle the unicorn before he transforms. Then on his signal, you transport in the rest of the Pack and yourself, that's the white button there. We let Greyback tether his Pack and himself with these special ropes."

"That's for sure," Greyback snarled.

"When he starts to transform, I'll cut the unicorn, unmuzzle it, then transform and move forward. Remember, DO NOT make any sudden moves. That scent retarding potion will protect you. As soon as they are transformed they will be attracted by the unicorn blood. When the last one is transformed, press this button."

"The orange one."

"You won't have light, so remember which button it is," Pettigrew reminded him. "It releases both the werewolves' tethers and the short tether on the unicorn. It will run the length of the tether and hopefully attract Hagrid then or later."

"Good," Draco spat. He had no love for the half-giant who had consistently favored Potter in his eyes.

"Remember, only hit the various recall buttons once they start to transform back or if there is significant opposition," Snape commanded.

Greyback snorted.

"You will start operations only some ten yards from the ward boundaries and less than thirty yards from Hagrid's cabin, and we know the Order is present at the castle in force," Snape reminded the alpha werewolf.

"Let's just get started, WE at least know what we're doing," Greyback said. His Pack growled in agreement.

"Yes, you two should be going," Snape said, addressing his remarks to Pettigrew.

It took Greyback over an hour to entice and trap the unicorn, a rather young and foolish one. There was just enough time to transport in the werewolves and for Greyback to tether them and then himself, a necessary step so that they did not attack the unicorn prematurely or run off towards the scent of people in the castle.

The nine werewolves were restless and in pain as the full moon approached. Only Greyback had the experience and will to fully keep his mind during the twenty minutes before the transformation started. Pettigrew cast a muting spell on them, which would be broken once they transformed.

The terrified unicorn was struggling against its bonds as it sensed the growing dark magic around him. Finally, the werewolves began to transform. Pettigrew slashed the flank of the unicorn with his silver knife, and its silver blood began to pour down its hindquarters.

When the werewolves were nearly all transformed, Pettigrew said to Draco, "Give me until they are fully transformed and all straining on their leashes," and he cut the muzzle and the first of three tethers holding the unicorn. He then transformed and disappeared into the long grass of the clearing. The unicorn bolted towards Hagrid's hut, making loud neighings of terror. It would have about twenty yards of rope before running out of the first tether.

Draco waited until the last werewolf was straining on its leash, and then pushed the release button.

A number of things happened at once. Draco was aware of none of them except for a bright flash that blinded him, and after that, he was unconscious.

At the same moment that Alastor Moody had stunned Draco, there was a series of explosions as John Russell coolly and accurately shot six of the werewolves, the silver alloy balls from his old pistol ripping through the backs of their skulls and exploding their brains. He had deadly aim, and it took less than ten seconds.

While Russell was shooting down six of the werewolves, including Greyback (the first one he shot), a similar form tore out of the woods and attacked the beta werewolf. Remus Lupin, his mind largely intact from long-exposure to the wolfbane potion, was asserting his own dominance.

Meanwhile, Hagrid had leapt out of his hiding place and cut the remaining tether on the unicorn, which continued on to Hagrid's cabin. Buckbeak and Firenze ran around the side of the cabin and took up guarding positions around the injured unicorn while Hagrid kicked one werewolf out of his way. He broke the other's neck, which would not kill the werewolf but it would keep him helpless until he transformed back at dawn. Moody bound the remaining werewolf with silver ropes before he could get up off of the ground where Hagrid's kick had landed him.

By this time, Remus had defeated his opponent, and Moody roped that one as well.

"Come on out, Pettigrew," Russell called out as he knelt next to Greyback's body. "You can't go back now!"

Pettigrew transformed back into himself. "Remember, we have a deal!" Pettigrew said, his arms raised. "I want the rewards for all these!"

"Right down to the ten Galleons for Malfoy," Russell agreed. "Still, we need to interrogate you, the boy, and the surviving werewolves."

"I know," Pettigrew agreed. He paused and asked, "Will Harry be meeting with me?"

"Perhaps after you've been debriefed," Russell said. Three additional Order members, who had also been both disillusioned and under scent removal potions, came forward to take the prisoners off. Pettigrew made certain that the three guards stayed between himself and the growling Moony.

"What do you intend to do with that one?" Moody asked Russell, pointing at Greyback's body.

Russell pulled out a large clasp knife. "I was thinking about taking a trophy for in front of my fireplace."

Moody shook his head. "Don't do it, lad. You don't want that on your conscience -- and besides, what happens if you nick yourself and some of that blood gets into you?"

Russell hesitated, and then pocketed the knife. "You're right on both counts," he agreed.

"Glad to hear it," Moody said.

"So are we," said a voice behind them. The two wizards turned, wands raised, but they did not fire off any hexes.

"I am Ronan," said the centaur stated haughtily. "Come." He ambled past the two surprised wizards and then past the dead werewolves over to where Hagrid, Firenze, Buckbeak, and the injured unicorn were. Hagrid moved slightly in front of Firenze.

"That is not necessary, Hagrid," Ronan said. He turned to Russell. "You may tell the White Warlock that we will live in peace with the people of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade as long as they do not trespass into our parts of the forest. These places will have notices, and any who trespass do so at their own risk. In all other parts of the forest, we shall treat each other with respect."

Ronan turned to Hagrid. "That applies to you as well, Hagrid. You have brought the spiders and the giant into the forest, however. We cannot fully trust you." He turned to Firenze. "The same also now applies to you. Not even Bane will attack you in the areas of common forest, unless you stray onto our truest territory. In return, you will formally instruct the foals at Hogwarts on how to recognize our territory, the penalties we will extract should they stray, and the greater penalties we will extract should they cause harm."

Firenze bowed in agreement.

"We shall heal this innocent one," Ronan said. At a gesture, the unicorn hobbled over to him. Ronan looked up. "Mars burns brightly, but not as brightly as we feared." He left, with the young unicorn following.

As Hagrid went over to move the werewolves' bodies, Moody muttered to Russell, "Thank Merlin for traitors and incompetents."

"I'm just thankful Harry agreed to stay near the castle," Russell retorted.

Moody grinned. "You don't know 'the Hope of the Wizarding World' as well as you might think. Potter! Take that damn cloak off!"

Harry sheepishly appeared nearby.

Russell glared, but said nothing. Harry, after all, was his leader.

"Sorry," Harry said with a shrug.

"Why don't you go nap?" Moody suggested.

"I'll have a preliminary report for you after lunch or dinner," Russell added.

Harry gave them a salute and went back to the castle.

That evening, after dinner but before dark, Harry, McGonagall, Hermione, Ron, Luna (who was taking notes), and Tonks met to hear what Russell, Moody, and Remus had to report.

"Shall we start off with the good news or the bad news?" Russell asked.

"Let's start off with the bad, then," Harry suggested.

"The attack here was not the only attack last night," Moody said. "There were two attacks on Muggle-born Gryffindor families. Bellatrix Lestrange led one of the attacks. I'm sorry to say that the Creevy brothers, their family, and the two Order members guarding them were all killed. They seemed to have taken at least three of the attackers out, but the Death Eaters came out ahead. The other attack was less of a disaster. It was led by that big Death Eater who was in on the Hogwarts attack. We still don't have a name for him, but he was heard speaking German to his followers. We're in contact with the central European ministries, who are checking to see if any of the neo-Grindelwald types are missing from their usual places."

Harry nodded and asked, "Who did they attack? Dean?"

"Exactly," Moody said. "Fortunately there were only three of them, and Finnigan was staying with Thomas. They fought to a draw when the auror who was stationed there attacked from the rear and the Death Eaters retreated. There was a fair amount of damage, but no one was really hurt."

Harry nodded again, saddened over the murder of the Creevys but glad that the news had not even been worse. "Prof?"

"First of all, let me remind everyone that except for the people in this room, the only people who know about the Horcruxes are Longbottom, Ginny Weasley, Snape, and Voldemort himself -- and Pettigrew." Everyone nodded. Hermione had fully briefed McGonagall, and Russell had briefed Moody.

"First things first then, here," Russell handed Harry Gryffindor's knife, along with a chisel and a hammer. "The soul fragment is concentrated in the handle."

Harry smashed the handle with the hammer and chisel. In moments, the soul fragment had disappeared.

"Pettigrew didn't have much to do for twelve years except be a rat and to think," Russell said. "He figured out the main outline of what had happened and what Voldemort had done. He of course didn't, and doesn't, know how many Horcruxes were made. He does say, and it seems to be the truth as he knows it, that Voldemort plans on making one more, when he murders Harry."

"So Voldemort didn't know this Horcrux was made?" Harry asked, pointing at the broken knife.

"Apparently not," Russell agreed. "He attributes his change of appearance from before his first bodies' death and what it is now with having been 'purified' by the rebirthing ceremony."

"Is it possible that he would be destroyed if he split himself again?" Hermione asked. "I mean, that would seem to be one more split than he had planned."

"I don't know," Russell admitted. "I am making progress at setting up a meeting with someone who is supposed to know if anyone does, but nothing has been finalized yet."

"How come the Dark Lord didn't know that was a Horcrux?" Ron asked.

"If he had ever handled it once it was made, he might have," Russell explained. "He didn't, and he had no reason to believe that it had been made into one. Since the sheath had been lost, he couldn't use it in a future Horcrux."

"Did Pettigrew know anything about the remaining two?" McGonagall asked.

"He doesn't know anything about Hufflepuff's cup," Russell said. "However, the reason why

Voldemort retreated to Albania when he had been disembodied is because Slytherin had set up a refuge there. He found the location mentioned in the Chamber of Secrets. He had already placed Ravenclaw's quizzing glass in the Albanian refuge some years before. He had his snake swallow it years ago, which has been mutating the snake ever since."

"So we really will have to kill Nagini to destroy that Horcrux," Harry stated.

"Exactly," Russell agreed. "I will be sifting through Pettigrew's and the others' minds for a few days yet. As of this moment, the most important things I have discovered are Voldemort's current hideaway and Snape's refuge."

He had everyone's attention except Harry's, since Russell had immediately informed him.

"I told Harry, and with his permission I have already set a chain of events into motion. Voldemort's location is a remote abandoned quarry in Cornwall. There isn't even a village within eight miles. Even though there are various distraction spells around it, that will not confuse electronics."

"But wouldn't any wards Voldemort have set up disrupt electronics, even if the distraction spells wouldn't?" Hermione asked.

"That is a bare possibility with these wards, but that really won't matter. The Muggles are launching some small missiles into the quarry even as we speak. The attack probably won't be destructive enough to take out Voldemort's headquarters inside a small shaft near a side of the quarry, but it will take out the entire camp outside that shaft, and give those inside quite a scare. There should be some Death Eaters, some werewolves, six giants, and perhaps a dozen trolls inside the quarry."

"That should make the Muggles happy," Moody said.

"Why?" Hermione asked before anyone else could.

"It turns out that a very tiny segment of the Muggle governments, segments of the intelligence groups, know about us, and know about what's happening," Russell explained. "They and their governments have felt frustrated about not being able to easily strike back. This should make them feel that, with our help, they can partially defend themselves."

"What about Snape?" Ron asked.

"A joint force of the aurors and the Order as raiding his house now as well," Tonks said. "If Snape is there, good. If he isn't, he knows we're thinking about him."

"By the way, Pettigrew asked again if you would meet with him," Russell told Harry.

"Did you tell him we know he killed my father?" Harry demanded.

"No," Russell said.

"I will," Remus growled. "I won't hurt him, but I have some things to say to him."

"Fine," Harry said, "because I don't want to talk to him."

"How's the Ferret?" Ron asked.

Russell shrugged. "He's confused, angry, arrogant, and whiney."

"So, he's pretty much himself," Ron said.

"Exactly."

"Did he have any information?" Hermione asked.

"He confirmed some of Pettigrew's info and of course we already knew most of what he did last year but he confirmed that as well, but nothing new of any importance," Russell said.

"So dump him with the aurors," Harry said with contempt.

"How about the surviving werewolves?" McGonagall asked.

"Much the same," Russell said. "Lots of supporting information, and lots of information of the attacks."

"You seem dissatisfied, John," McGonagall pointed out.

"I am," Russell admitted. "None of them, not even Pettigrew, knows much about the dementors."

"That mist seems to have disappeared since late June," Hermione pointed out.

"That means it contracted into new dementors," Russell said. "That is NOT a good thing."

"I was wondering if I could ask about one of the werewolves," Remus asked tentatively.

"Let me guess, Jason Smith?" Russell asked.

"Exactly."

"Why him?" Harry asked. "Who is he?"

"You saw him before," Remus told him. "He was the newly-bitten werewolf who was at St. Mungo's when Arthur was there."

"And was he already Dark or did he turn that quickly?" Ron asked.

"He lost his job, his family, and his friends in less than six weeks," Remus pointed out. "He was literally starving when Greyback approached him a year ago June." He turned to Russell. "Has he killed?"

"Apparently not," Russell said. "The other two have, but Greyback didn't think much of him as a person or a werewolf. This was his first real mission. Before that, he was left back as a sentinel."

"No offense, Remus, but I didn't think werewolves could act like that without being on the wolfbane potion," Hermione pointed out.

"Individually, they, we, can't," Remus agreed. "In a pack, however, they can be that organized." He turned to Russell and Harry. "Can you save him?"

"Save him?" Harry asked.

"Pettigrew goes to prison in South America and Malfoy joins his father," Russell said. "Werewolves are questioned and then destroyed."

"But this guy hasn't killed anyone!" Ron exclaimed. Hermione nodded her agreement, too shocked to say anything.

"The Ministry doesn't care," Tonks spat.

"They do now," Harry said firmly. He turned to Russell. "The other two werewolves are killers?"

"Long-term killers and biters," Russell confirmed.

"Then we turn them over to the Ministry, and we don't complain about their execution," Harry said.

"I will tell the Minister and his people that they must cancel out most of the restrictions on other werewolves. . . ."

"Most?" Hermione and Tonks asked together.

"We still need to be registered and tracked," Remus said sadly.

"And, if they are going to keep killing killer werewolves, they're going to have to consider executing Death Eaters who are captured in the field," Harry added. There were some factions in the Ministry still fighting that idea. "No double standard. Plus, if they execute those two while letting up on the other restrictions, they won't be seen as being soft on werewolves while any other werewolves might be less interested in following Voldemort."

"I'll talk with the Minister," Russell agreed.

Hermione was obviously dissatisfied, but said nothing.

"When do you turn them over to the Ministry?" Moody asked.

"In a few more days," Russell said. "Pettigrew will likely be sent off to South America in early September."

"Luna?" Harry asked, dismissing Voldemort's minions from his mind, "how are you doing with the Headmaster's notes? Any clues?"

"Not for where we should look," she admitted. "The Headmaster spent a great deal of time tracking down Tom Riddle's past, of course. Most of the people close to him at Hogwarts are, or were when they were alive, Death Eaters, so he could get little information from them. Most of his recurring work was with the Muggles Riddle was raised with. He kept coming back to them."

"The orphanage," Harry said.

"Exactly. The Headmaster interviewed all the orphans and staff who were still alive that he could find, which is how he tracked down the locket location."

"How about the building itself?" Remus asked.

"That was destroyed in the spring of 1945. The Muggles list it as being destroyed by something called a V-2 rocket, but the Headmaster believed that Riddle destroyed it. A commercial building was built on the site in 1952, and all the businesses failed. The Headmaster wondered if the site might have been cursed."

"Is that building still there? Did the Headmaster search it?" Ron asked.

"The Headmaster traced the property," Luna said. "The building and site were bought in 1979 by a Muggle Trust located in the Bahamas, but which is actually owned by the Malfoy Trust. The building was torn down in the summer of 1980 and it is currently just paved over and used for the day parking of Muggle automobiles."

"Did Albus search it at all?" McGonagall asked.

Luna nodded. "He searched the building twice, once in 1976 and again when it was partially demolished. He also searched the property itself in 1987 and twice last year."

"Why so often?" Moody asked. "Did he suspect something was there?"

"No," Luna said, "he was just being thorough. Each time the Headmaster came across a new set of spells, he rechecked all the sites. He had looked for the cave three times before he located it, because it was hidden by unusual wards. I have a list of all the spell sets he used."

"So, no leads?" Hermione asked wistfully.

"Not on new locations, at least so far," Luna said. "We now know what the Horcruxes are, and that was over half of the Headmaster's notes. I've skimmed all of it anyway I could decode, just in case there were any clues."

"How far are you with them?" Russell asked.

"About eighty percent," Luna said. "Some of what he wrote was in codes as well as under enchantments, and I've had to break them. I have all but three finished. I have two more to decipher." Russell nodded approvingly, impressed. The group sat in silent thought for a few moments.

"Has the Headmaster said anything about the Chamber of Secrets in his notes?" Harry asked. "Did he search there at all?"

"Not really," Luna said. "He thought that the diary was the Horcrux linked to the Chamber, and that Riddle wouldn't have had any chance to infiltrate the Chamber after he left Hogwarts."

"That would depend on if there was anyway of getting into the Chamber from outside the school," Remus said.

"The Headmaster wrote that if that were true, Riddle should have tried to join his disembodied self with any Horcrux fragment," Luna said simply.

"Are you finished with that section?" Russell asked.

"Yes, but the Headmaster wasn't," Luna admitted. "His speculations were interrupted because he started on the trail of Slytherin's ring and he left it incomplete."

"The Headmaster was the world's leading alchemist authority," Russell admitted. "Still, I would have thought that Voldemort would have had a difficult time restoring his body with the Philosopher's Stone and just his last soul fragment."

"The Headmaster's notes seem to refer to some other notebooks he needed to refer back to," Luna said. "Could there be some other notebooks where he might have information about the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Not here," McGonagall said. "I shall ask Aberforth."

Remus turned to Harry. "I think we ought to search the Chamber by early August. Even if there isn't a Horcrux there, there could still be a way into the Chamber from outside."

"Wouldn't Voldemort have used that way to get his Death Eaters and werewolves in for the attack, then?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe not," Harry said. "The Chamber is very important to him. He might not have wanted just anyone, even his followers, going through it."

"Especially Greyback and his werewolves," Remus agreed.

"So," Hermione said, "the wedding, Harry's birthday, the Chamber search, and then Ginny's birthday?"

"Plus we continue our training," Russell agreed, which made Moody grin.

Chapter IX

Voldemort looked out onto the devastation in the quarry, stunned. He had not realized that any of his followers had known the exact location of the quarry, and so while he had known the mission of the night before had somehow failed, he had not thought to move his main base. He had thought himself and his followers protected by his brilliant warding.

Twelve streaking cruise missiles filled with high explosives and incendiaries had proved him wrong.

The floor of the old quarry was strewn with large burnt chunks of giants and trolls, and smaller pieces of most of his followers. His active Death Eaters were now reduced to fifteen.

Voldemort looked over at the three figures coming towards him. Severus and Bella had been with him inside the small cave when the attack came, and they could not have feigned the terror they had felt when it had occurred.

"No survivors?" Voldemort asked. The pair shook their heads. "Very well. Severus, do not return to your potions. If it was Wormtail who betrayed me, then he would likely have been able to betray you as well."

"Yes, Master."

"We shall retreat for a time and regroup, and train some new recruits," Voldemort said. "The dementors are still in hibernation. When they come out after the equinox, we shall be back on the attack. Let Potter and his allies flail away and believe they are winning. Our return will only feel all the more devastating."

Voldemort picked up a broken board and turned it into a portkey while Snape, Bellatrix, and Vincent Crabbe, the only human survivors at the camp, packed up the few salvageable items.

Voldemort glared at Bellatrix when she came up to him. "Do you have something to say?"

"I was wondering if we might not leave Potter a going away present, Master," she suggested.

"Tell me about it tomorrow." Then they, and Voldemort's snake, portkeyed away to where the other Death Eaters were located.

Draco Malfoy paced in his room, or rather his cell, wondering where things had gone wrong.

For a cell, it was not bad, although Draco could not acknowledge that yet. It was a fair-sized bedroom with a toilet and shower in a separate room. There were books, a comfortable bed, a desk, and two comfortable chairs. However, there were no doors, and a silent Hogwarts elf was keeping an eye on the young wizard.

Draco could not move past the threshold, and the elf would not pay any attention to him, let alone obey him.

So, Draco paced.

His life had obviously gone very wrong at some point (or perhaps more than one point), but he just could not admit to having had made any errors. Obviously, it was Pettigrew's fault that he was where he now was in the first place. Beyond that, he could not blame himself, he could not blame his father, and he certainly could not blame that monster that he had been taught to nearly worship his entire life.

Could he?

"Wearing out the carpet, Ferret?"

Draco turned on the voice and reached for the wand that was no longer there. "Fuck you, Weasel."

"Well, that's two things you don't have to ever worry about," Ron sneered.

"What are you talking about, you idiot?" Draco snapped.

"You reached for your wand. You'll never use a wand again, Malfoy. And you won't be having sex where you're going." Ron grinned nastily. "Or perhaps you will. Some of your father's friends will probably enjoy using a pretty boy like you."

Draco was speechless, although he sputtered at Ron.

"Nothing to say?" Ron asked. "You might be interested to know that all the Malfoy estates and the Malfoy Trust are being confiscated, right down to the Gringotts vaults here and abroad."

"You're lying," Draco breathed, horrified.

"Nope. If you ever do get out of prison, which won't be for at least fifty years, you'll be poorer than any Weasley ever worried about being. And just think, if you had really tried, if you had had a decent, friendly bone in that arrogant body of yours, you could have been Harry's friend, too. You could have been on the winning side. YOU chose the Darkness, Malfoy. You chose to take that Dark Mark on your arm when you weren't even of age."

"I had no choice!" Draco yelled.

"You did," Ron retorted. "You could have said 'no'."

"I could not!" Draco snapped. "Aunt Bella insisted! I couldn't have said no!"

"You could have," Ron retorted. "You either didn't want to say no, or you were too afraid to say no. So, you're evil, a coward, or both. Think about that for the next fifty or eighty years." And with that, Ron walked away.

"This isn't over, Weasley!" Draco yelled. "I'll win in the end!"

Voldemort watched his exhausted Death Eaters pack away the remaining supplies and other odds and ends they would need in their exile. To them, he looked much as he had since his return. If any had any doubts of his power or their mission, none dared to express them.

To himself, Voldemort had to admit surprise that Wormtail, of all his followers, had betrayed him. It was not that Voldemort had ever thought Pettigrew was all that loyal a follower. He was a follower from fear alone. Voldemort had believed, however, that as powerful a motivator greed (for gold, power, or anything else) might be, fear was more likely to produce results.

He could not believe that Pettigrew had suddenly found a backbone. That meant that the rat had decided that he was more afraid of Potter winning than he was of Voldemort's wrath.

And that was a bit worrying, even for Voldemort.

Tuesday, July 22, 1997

A very tired John Russell met with Harry, McGonagall, Remus, Tonks, Moody, and Hermione that evening.

"You look more tired than I am, Prof," Harry said lightly. "And you weren't even being tortured by Moody all day."

Russell looked at Moody, who simply said, "Had 'em doing sprints and hexes all day."

Russell sat down heavily. "Whereas I was dealing with the Minister all day, which was equally tiring, if for very different reasons."

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"The attack on the quarry went off well, by all the evidence. They found the remains of giants, trolls, and people. No sign of Voldemort or his snake, though, or of any of his effects. The Ministry and Order emissaries to the remaining giants have already reported that they are back leaning towards neutrality, so that's good, anyway."

"I take it there are no clues as to where Voldemort went, or how many followers he might have left," Moody put in.

"No and not really," Russell answered. "There were a lot more bodies than they had anticipated. With luck, Voldemort might be down to under two dozen Death Eaters, but as we found out, he seems to have tapped into a new source from central Europe. We're still waiting to hear about where that might be and how many that might include."

"Durmstrang," Harry muttered.

"Very possibly," Russell agreed, "although that is far from certain. More likely, while they might have graduated from Durmstrang they probably aren't affiliated with it."

"When do we transfer the prisoners?" Moody asked.

"The two werewolves to be executed go tomorrow morning, right after dawn," Russell answered. "Pettigrew is staying, but he will be going straight to South America, accompanied by a group of Ministry people who are going to continue to question him through early September. Jason Smith and young Malfoy are going with him. Pettigrew has a life sentence, Malfoy fifty, years, and Smith has ten years."

"The Ministry didn't kick up a fuss about Smith?" Remus asked.

"Not really. The giants going neutral so quickly encouraged Scrimgeour. He agreed, albeit without any enthusiasm, that executing the two werewolves while sparing Smith might encourage some of any remaining werewolves to leave and keep the others neutral."

"Did the Minister agree to lifting most of the impediments?" Hermione asked.

"More-or-less," Russell said. "The employment bans are lifted, but the registration requirements are going to be somewhat stricter, unless the werewolf can get sponsored by six people who are Ministry employees or who they define as 'people of high character.'"

"Do I know any?" Remus asked.

"Quite a few," Russell said with a smile. He unfolded a sheet of parchment. "If Harry, Hermione, and Minerva would care to sign, you're taken care of."

"It's only half a solution at best," Hermione said with a sniff.

"Half a solution is better than an entire problem," Remus retorted.

Saturday, July 26, 1997

Fleur was, of course, being married from her home in France. This caused a fair amount of teasing of Ron and Ginny, who had assumed that the Burrow was the center of Fleur's world just as it had been their's.

It was a small wedding party that gathered at the small estate in the Luberon mountains of Provence. From Fleur's side, there were her parents and younger sister, a younger brother whom they had not known about (he was a rather morose Fifth year from Beauxbatons), and a dozen other relatives and a dozen of Fleur's friends.

All the Weasleys, even Percy and Penny, were present, as were Harry, Hermione, Luna, and Neville, plus a few of Bill's friends from school and work. There were also two dozen security wizards, most of them French plus a few members of the Order.

The wedding was still an hour off, and Bill was being teased by four of his brothers, while Harry and Arthur tried to stay neutral. It was at that point that Percy came into the room where they were waiting.

It was clear that Percy had had a few too many samples of the local marc and was feeling no pain. He staggered up to Bill and stared at his face.

"Problem?" Bill growled.

"Not with you," Percy stated. "You used to be so handsome, so smart. Where did it get you?"

"Percy. . . ." Arthur warned.

Percy sneered at his father. "You had the talent and blood, if not the connections, to go far in the Ministry, and you preferred to stay in your odd little niche, never mind that your lack of ambition hurt your family. You all preferred to take risks for that crazy old coot instead of helping the proper authorities. . . ."

"Fudge wouldn't listen. . . ." Ron started.

"And Dumbledore never told the whole truth!" Percy yelled. "He gave out cryptic little hints or bald statements with no evidence and demanded that everyone follow him! That is no way to run a government!"

He turned to his father. "You have some contacts now with the Muggle government, don't deny it! Ask them if they allow one person to run things on their personal whims and personal information, without accounting to anyone. They'll tell you, of course not! They call that dictatorship, tyranny, autocracy! They hate it and so should we! People make mistakes, governments make mistakes. It's better to have collective government because that protects the collective rights! Dumbledore would have run us like a benevolent dictatorship and You-Know-Who would have an evil one, but they both rely on the say-so of one wizard!"

Percy turned on Harry. "And now it's you? I'll never follow you, Potter! You've done nothing but disturb order since you got on the train that first time!"

"Your head is so far up your arse you can't see anything," George said, disgusted.

"If you're so bloody powerful, Potter, why don't you heal Bill?" Percy spat. Bill's scars had stayed fresh, weeping blood and serum, until the full moon. Since then, they had only crusted over slightly.

Harry turned to Bill. "I don't know if it would work, but I can certainly try," Harry said. "I'm pretty certain I couldn't make things worse."

"What? You arrogant. . . ."

At that point, Charlie grabbed Percy in a head lock and covered Percy's mouth with his other hand. Fred grabbed Percy's legs and Ron grabbed his arms.

"Take him to Penny and then hit him with a sobering charm," Arthur said. He turned to Harry.

"Harry. . . ."

"Give it a go, Harry," Bill said. He pulled his handkerchief out and tucked it around his neck. "Just in case it bleeds at all."

Harry laid his hands over the worst of the bites and concentrated. His hands glowed blue for a moment, and then Harry took his hands off.

Harry's hands had blood on them, but they were not covered by any means. Bill's wounds looked a bit fresher, but they also looked healthier.

"That does look better," Arthur admitted. He waved his own wand, and the cuts partially closed and crusted over. "Much better. I think those might actually mostly disappear now." Arthur and Bill looked as awestruck as Harry.

"I wish I had thought of it before," Harry admitted.

"None of us thought of it either," Bill said. He moved his face. "It feels a bit better. Even if it just lasts for a few hours, that's a help."

At that point, the other three brothers came back in. "You look a bit better," Charlie said bluntly. "Harry?" Bill nodded.

"Thanks," Ron said to Harry, who simply shrugged.

"It's almost time," Arthur said.

"I need to talk with Harry in private a moment," Bill said, waving Harry over. "No need to be embarrassed," Bill told him. "This is business."

Harry knew Bill had been largely filled in about the Horcruxes. Having a professional curse breaker working on your side was a great resource. "What is it?"

"At some point, we might get the chance to disembody Voldemort again," Bill pointed out. "He could do less damage, but on the other hand, he could hide more easily that way."

"True," Harry agreed. This had been discussed a number of times over the last month. "But how do we contain him?"

"I don't know if we can, but that's not the point," Bill said. "If he is ever disembodied, that means he'll want to come back. We need to check out his father's grave, and see if any more of the body is missing than the long bone he used the last time."

"I'll tell the Prof to send someone to collect all the Riddle family bones," Harry said.

"That should work," Bill agreed.

"Come on, son," Arthur said, coming back in. "It's time." He placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "You, too. You're a true Weasley, son."

Harry smiled.

Thursday, July 31, 1997

After Harry's birthday party at the Burrow, he and his friends returned to Hogwarts, where they would be meeting so that Harry and McGonagall could hear reports. Besides most of Harry's paladins (Russell, Hagrid, Tonks, Remus, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Ginny, and Neville), Moody and Arthur were there.

"Who should go first?" McGonagall asked.

"I believe I should," Russell said. "Acting on the advice of Bill Weasley, I and some friends investigated the Riddle graves at Little Hangleton. Tom Riddle Senior's body was only missing the left femur. We removed all the Riddle family bones and destroyed them. We are certain we got all the major bones and teeth that were present."

"Major?" Hermione asked.

Russell shrugged. "If any other bones were there, we would have found them. We were missing quite a few of the ear bones, plus two hyoids from the other graves, but are those likely to have dissolved or gnawed into nothing by now. Voldemort would have taken major bones."

"But you found everything else?" Harry asked.

"Right down to the knuckle and toe bones," Russell agreed. "Voldemort may have other ways of reanimating himself if we disembody him, but he won't be able to redo the last ceremony."

Everyone nodded their understanding and satisfaction.

"We also searched the Riddle House," Russell went on. "I doubt we missed anything significant, and he didn't hide anything there or on the grounds, or the graveyard, or at the Gaunt shack." Russell could not mention the Horcruxes in front of Arthur or Hagrid, who did not know the details. Since none had been found, he could skip over that aspect.

"Good job," Harry said.

"Next," McGonagall said.

"Professor McGonagall got the Headmaster's notebooks with his speculations on the Philosopher's Stone and the Chamber of Secrets," Luna said. "He believed that Voldemort could have recreated himself by himself with the Philosopher's Stone alone, although that would have destroyed the Stone. He was unsure about the Chamber."

"We'll search the Chamber Saturday," Moody said.

"Exactly who will?" Ginny asked nervously.

"Myself, Russell, Harry, Granger, your brothers Ron and Charlie, Lupin, Tonks, Hagrid, McGonagall, and Flitwick. Slughorn will be along to help deal with the basilisk carcass. Those twin terrors will be along after their shop closes as well if we're still there."

Everyone nodded, Ginny for once with satisfaction that she was not being called on to go somewhere.

"Ginny," Harry asked, "did you want to come?"

"No, not especially," Ginny admitted. "I don't think it would help me 'get past' what happened. If you need the help, though, I'm happy to go."

Harry looked at Moody, who shrugged. "No, not really," Harry said. "I just wanted to give you the opportunity if you wanted it."

"May I come?" Luna asked. "If I wouldn't be in the way, I'd like to do a little piece for The Quibbler."

"Sure," Harry said.

"Can we take Lockhart down?" Ron asked.

"What for?" Russell asked, before anyone else could.

"I figured I could hit him on the head with a rock again," Ron answered with a straight face.

"I rather think that curing someone with a head injury by hitting him again is a myth," Hermione said drily.

"Cure him?" Ron asked. "Naw, I'd just like to wack the git a few more times."

Hermione and several others rolled their eyes at that. "Next!" Harry said.

"The centaurs 'ave finished markin' their territories," Hagrid spoke up. "They took a bit more than I thought they should've, but not nearly as much as we were afraid they might. I think they an' the spiders will have some problems, then that's none of our concern no more."

"Probably not," Harry agreed. "You don't think those spiders would side with Voldemort, do you?"

"I don't know what they're likely to do," Hagrid admitted. "Still, I did mention to them that he were the one behind the basilisk, so I don't think they would 'ave anything to do with him if they knew it were him."

"Are they settled into a set territory?" McGonagall asked.

"Aye, that they are," Hagrid said.

"Remus?" Harry asked.

"It seems as if all the rogue werewolves were either captured or killed the other day," Remus admitted. "The few remaining fence-sitters are still sitting as far as I can tell. Once the news about the lifting of some of the restrictions become generally known, I'm sure we won't have any trouble with them."

"That will go down well in the Minister's Office, although I can't say it will be popular in a lot of other places," Arthur said.

"I'm hardly shocked," Remus said drily.

"The Minister seems . . . well, not happy or satisfied, but he seems to think things are going moderately well," Arthur said.

"I think he's getting a bit too heavy-handed in using Harry's name," Hermione said.

"I told him that last night," Arthur said. "He agreed to cut back a bit."

"Has he contacted the Muggle Prime Minister yet?" Hermione asked.

Arthur shook his head, "Not directly. Kingsley has been briefing him, and the Minister knows that."

"Anything else, Mister Weasley?" Harry asked. Arthur shook his head.

"Hermione?"

"Nothing new," Hermione said.

"Ron?" Ron just shook his head. Ginny and Tonks did as well when they were asked.

"Neville?"

"Not really. We have the new greenhouses up and working, if you think they're still necessary."

"I would think so," Harry said. He looked at McGonagall and Russell.

"The dementors are still out there, stronger than they were a year ago," Russell said.

"The Minister has had the aurors do a new home defense manual," Arthur added. "There are going to be Patronus classes offered starting in September."

"And that's one reason why the Board decided to keep the school open only to First through Fifth years," McGonagall agreed. "They and the Ministry seem to be hoping that the older teenagers can help defend their homes against dementors."

"The new suggestions include asking extended families to spend the nights together, so that there would be enough people to stay awake in the night," Arthur told them. "Groups are more difficult to overwhelm than an individual."

On that note, the group broke apart.

Chapter X

Saturday, August 2, 1997

"It's not like Moody to be late," Charlie complained. The others, Russell, Harry, Hermione, Ron, Luna, Lupin, Tonks, Hagrid, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Slughorn, were waiting outside Myrtle's toilets.

"I hear him coming," Remus said, and a few seconds later, they all heard the peg leg coming down the corridor.

When he turned the corner, Moody called out, "Potter! I need a word before we get started."

Harry came forward. "What's happened?"

"There was an attack on your aunt's just before dawn this morning," Moody growled softly. "Bellatrix Lestrange and three other Death Eaters attacked just after midnight."

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"Your uncle had some good Muggle alarms, which the Death Eaters tripped. He shot and killed Lestrange and one Gregor Bach, known to be a minor member of a neo-Grindelwald coven. Another Death Eater then killed your uncle. At that point, the guards on duty finally attacked them from the rear. Your cousin tackled Vincent Crabbe and beat him pretty badly."

"Oh . . . bother," Harry spat.

"Your aunt and cousin want nothing to do with you, they said. They're moving as soon as they can sell the house, and if there is no contact with you, then the Death Eaters probably can't track them down in the Muggle world." Moody was uncertain how Harry would react to all this news.

Harry gave a deep sigh. "Fine. Let's just get this search over with, and can will worry about the attack later." He spun around and led the group into the toilets, not caring that half the group had overheard. Hermione and Ginny both made moves to comfort him, but Luna stood between them and Harry and shook her head.

"Come to attack a friend of mine?" Myrtle shrieked at Harry as soon as he entered. "Oh, that's right, you already tried to kill him!"

"Myrtle, how would you like to be trapped in a u-bend for a few decades?" Hermione snarled, still smarting from Luna's interference.

Myrtle gave the group a sniff and retreated into her toilet. Harry went over to the sink that marked the entrance. "Open," he commanded. The sink retreated, revealing the long stone slid.

"I don't know if I can go down that," Moody admitted. "I certainly couldn't get back up."

"Try the command 'stairs,' and see if that does anything," Russell suggested.

Harry shrugged and did so. A set of winding stairs appeared. "I guess it makes sense that there would be an easier way up," Harry said.

"How far down is it?" Luna asked.

"It felt like at least a hundred feet," Harry said. Ron nodded his agreement.

"Then it might be faster if we slid," Luna said. "If someone could conjure and charm us some toboggans, it should be safe enough. If we charm them, they could go down the spiral."

"Excellent idea, Miss Lovegood," Flitwick said. He and McGonagall conjured the toboggans and charmed them to slide slowly, together, and under the simple control of their riders. Hagrid went first, Remus last, with Charlie and Russell helping Moody and Slughorn aboard theirs.

The ride took just five minutes. It took another half an hour to clear up the subsidence that had partially collapsed the tunnel, and another fifteen minutes to make certain that the tunnel was fully supported.

Harry approached the sealed door, and then stopped. "The basilisk's body was huge. It's been decaying for four years. Would it be stripped down to bone by now?"

The others looked at each other and shrugged. "There's no way of knowing," McGonagall finally said. "If vermin and bacteria could feed on it, it might be gone. If the body poisoned them, it could be . . . very nasty in there."

"Bubblehead charms for everyone then, I should think," Slughorn suggested.

They were very glad they had done so. The huge snake was fully rotting, but only partially eaten away. The stench would have been unbearable.

The group worked under Slughorn's direction for nearly an hour, preserving what little they could for potions ingredients. It took another hour to freshen the Chamber enough to make it bearable and to scourgify themselves for the same reasons. By then, it was into the afternoon, and the group took a welcome break. After that, Slughorn, Hagrid, and Charlie took their leave, taking the potion ingredients and the basilisk skeleton with them.

Afterwards, the remaining group took nearly hours to completely map and search the Chamber. George joined in around 3:30, while Fred would come along after 5:00.

The group found five hidden exits. One led into the Hogwarts drainage system, and had obviously been the basilisk's preferred way in and out of the Chamber. Two led to small rooms, completely empty except for shelves. It was clear that if there had been anything in them fifty years before, Riddle had cleaned them out.

The fourth also led to a small room, and this one was full of scrolls and manuscripts. It took a concerted effort on the parts of most of the group then present to clear the room of hexes and traps. Hermione, Luna, and Flitwick took the papers back to the bathroom just as Fred was coming to join in.

The final exit was the one they had been afraid they would find. One leading further under the lake, towards the far side the unbroken forest.

Shortly after 6:00, the group cleaned up, ate, and took stock. "The question is," McGonagall said, "do we collapse the tunnel under the lake now or follow it first?"

"I'm not certain we dare collapse it, at least right away," Russell pointed out.

"Why is that?"

"We are certainly at least partially under lake level," Russell said simply. "The collapsing tunnel might let in lake water, and this entrance might not seal off the water. I grant you, flooding the Chamber might not, in itself, be a bad idea. However, that could undermine the foundations of the castle in time."

"I suppose that is true," McGonagall said wistfully. "I just hate leaving it like this."

"True."

"Fred, George, Ron, Remus, Tonks, and I should go on through," Harry said. "The Headmistress and Moody can go up-top. Prof, which do you want to do?"

Russell sighed. "I want to go up-top, but I'll come along with you."

"Remember," Remus said, "the tunnel could still be impassible at some point. We might have to double back." With that, the group nodded and separated.

It took an hour to work their way down further under the lake, and then walk the turn that took them deep under the Forbidden Forest, all guided by their wandlight. The tunnel seemed dry and sturdy, but Remus and Russell pointed out numerous places where the tunnel was reenforced by magical wards.

"What's on the other side of the Forest?" Harry asked as they started to climb the slow ascent, "and is that where we are now?"

"I doubt it," Russell said. "You've seen the low mountains to the north and south of the area, of course. The Forest circles both ridges and extends westward into a long narrow vale with a slightly higher and unbroken ridge setting the western border. That's all Forest. On the other side of that ridge is mostly non-magical forest, then an ancient Royal preserve, and a few miles beyond that are a few poor farms -- mostly Muggle but there are a few mixed and magical crofters as well -- then another ridge, and then the coast-line. My guess is that we're either under or just past the far side of North Hog, as the ridge to the north of Hogwarts is known."

"The ridge to the south, nearer Hogsmeade, is of course South Hog," Remus put in.

"So, is that centaur or spider territory?" Ron asked.

"It's nearer the spider territory," Remus admitted.

"Joy," Ron grouched.

The climb became even steeper. After a further six minutes of the climb, Russell muttered, "I think we must be inside the bloody mountain."

Harry took a look at the perspiring Prof. "Since we're at least past the waterline in any event, let's take a break."

Russell conjured himself a soft chair and sat down heavily before anyone else could even comment. "I just hope there is an open exit," he said tiredly. "I don't want to make the walk back if I can help it."

"We could apparate," Ron said with a shrug.

"You don't just try and apparate from deep underground," George reminded Ron. "It can be dangerous."

"And remember, there could be all sorts of warding and other protective magic here," Remus said before Russell, who was massaging his lower calves, could. Harry rolled his eyes, but decided not to remind them of his more powerful version of apparation.

"Right," Ron agreed with a sigh. A long moment passed.

"I was hoping for a bit more excitement," Fred said.

"If you really want to match your wits against both Salazar Slytherin AND Voldemort, you can take the lead," Remus said drily. "Just remember, if you do, we'll give you a proper burial." Russell and Remus had taken the lead from the beginning, and had cleared a few minor hexes along the way. Both knew there was a good chance that there could be some significant traps at some point, most likely at the exit.

George looked around. "Since we have to be well above the water level by now, we could collapse the tunnel at any point, once we know there's an exit."

"Maybe," Russell said. "There seems to be a stream of connected magic all along the tunnel."

"It started at Slytherin's statue," Harry said softly. Everyone looked at him. "It's very . . . not exactly strong, but concentrated and . . . robust."

No one said anything for a moment, then Russell said, "Do you think it would prevent the tunnel being collapsed?" He and Remus knew of the magical connections through incantation and testing,

but Harry's ability was something new.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I've started to sense magic like this, but I have no idea what any of it means."

"Do you think some information might be in that one room with the manuscripts?" Tonks asked.

"There's no way to tell," Remus said with a shrug. "I just wish I knew if Riddle missed it or left it."

"I would think he must have missed it," Harry mused. "It would have to have been pretty irrelevant for him not to have either taken or destroyed all of it."

"You probably have a better idea of how he thinks than anyone else on our side," Remus said.

"From what little I know, I would agree."

Russell stood and stretched. "I do as well. Shall we move on?"

The group moved on up the incline.

Twenty minutes later, the group halted abruptly. "What's wrong?" Ron asked.

"There was a red gleam ahead," Remus, who was at that point in the lead, said. "Or rather, two red pin-points."

"Form a line and hold your wands above your heads," Harry directed. As the group did so, the two pin points were seen more clearly.

"Reflections," George said.

"Most likely," Russell agreed.

"Stay here," Harry commanded, and he walked forward. When he got near the darkness, he added, "Come forward, at my pace." As Harry slowly moved forward, the group followed.

Thirty feet further, Harry raised his hand and the group stopped, although they could no see what he saw. They did hear Harry hiss what sounded like a question.

"Might have known," Fred said.

"Considering who almost certainly built this, yes," Remus agreed.

There was a very soft hiss out of the darkness, and soon there was a full conversation, although they mostly heard Harry's side of things. Finally, Harry turned around. "We've basically reached the end of the tunnel," he said. "Slytherin did build this and left a guardian. According to it, no one has come through this way in centuries, although it has rather lost track of time."

"So no Riddle?" Tonks asked.

"Apparently not," Harry answered. "I am certain it would tell the complete truth to an heir of Slytherin. I am not as certain it would to a White Warlock, even one who is a Parseltongue, but I believe it probably is." Harry smiled as he heard something. "It says it does not lie, although it may not tell me everything it knows without a specific question. It did say that there is a way out from the other side of the entrance it is guarding, but does not think it likely that its counterpart on the other side will let us back into the tunnel."

"So, do we risk it, go back, or split up?" Tonks asked.

"We shouldn't split up," Russell stated.

"Probably not," Harry agreed.

"Forward or back, then?" Ron asked.

"Forward, I would think, my lord?" Russell suggested.

"Stop that, Prof," Harry said with a grimace.

"Harry, you are the commander. Ask for our opinions if you desire or need them, or make your decision."

Harry gestured behind him. "Have a look, and tell me what you and Remus think."

Russell and Remus walked forward, and a wall of stone blocks blocked the tunnel. On the large central block was a carving of a snake, which had two small rubies for eyes. As the pair approached, the stone snake suddenly writhed and hissed at them.

Harry hissed back and then told the two wizards, "Go ahead, just don't direct any magic at the central block."

"But. . . ." Remus started to protest.

"Don't worry about it," Harry said with assurance.

"If you're that certain, why don't we just go on through?" George asked.

"Go on, then," Remus said with a sigh.

Harry smiled, and then hissed at the snake. The wall turned on a central pivot, and the group moved through, Harry hissing his thanks as he went through last.

They found themselves in a long oval cavern, about thirty yards across at the widest point and over a hundred yards long. They were at one of the short ends.

The floor was mostly flat, although, as they searched the cavern, they found a small pile of debris just off-center. This directed their eyes up.

The cavern arched high over head. There was a small opening some two hundred yards above their heads, where they could see the gathering dusk. Other than that, there was apparently nothing in the cavern, other than another carved snake on the cavern-side of the door, this one with emerald eyes.

The group explored the cavern while Harry talked with the snake. After a few minutes, Harry called the group together. "Anything?"

They all muttered their negatives, except for Remus and Russell, who had traced the lines of power to a point along one of the long sides of the cavern. The group walked over as Harry said, "The guardian on this side had a bit better sense of time, no doubt because it wasn't shut up in the dark for almost a thousand years. It also claims that Riddle has never been through the door, and I tend to believe them."

"That might be so," Remus agreed. "After all, it appears as if he did miss that one manuscript room."

"Likely, but not proven," Russell said.

"True," Remus readily agreed.

"Open," Harry commanded the wall in Parseltongue. It did nothing. "Open in the name of Salazar Slytherin," Harry tried next, and this time the wall slid back. Magical torches instantly lit the inner chamber. Harry slipped in, bringing Remus and Russell with him.

It was, in many ways, a tiny version of the Chamber of Secrets -- an empty room with crude but elaborate patterns carved into the living rock, with a statue of the rather monkey-faced Slytherin at the far end.

"Do you think he really looked like that, or was he a poor artist?" Harry asked.

"It's rather stylized, but probably not a totally unrecognizable likeness," Remus said, from the side of the small chamber he was examining.

"But you are right, in that Slytherin carved these magically himself," Russell added from the other

side of the room. "In doing so, he put a bit of himself into the statues. That is what links the statues, and powers the magic keeping the tunnel open and the Chamber and the cavern intact."

"You mean like a Horcrux?" Harry demanded.

"The concepts are not totally dissimilar," Russell agreed. "However, Slytherin put a bit of his life-force into the making, not a bit of his soul."

"I have something," Remus said. He had been examining a ribbon carved into the rock all around the chamber, and had found one small part of it was actually a snake. It did not, however, react to either magic or Parseltongue.

After ten minutes of testing, Harry said, "What the heck," and touched the snake.

It clicked, and the rock underneath it slid open to reveal a cache of more manuscripts, which Remus bagged. An additional hour of thorough searching revealed nothing else, either in the chamber or in the cavern.

Tired and hungry, Harry apparated the entire group back to Hogwarts.

"What a nice Parselmouth," the red-eyed guardian said after the group had left.

"True," the green-eyed one agreed. "I don't just say that because his eyes matched mine."

"It's a shame he did not ask the right questions," red-eye mused.

"Well, the Heir to our Maker did not come through the door," green-eye pointed out. "He stayed on your side when he was at school, and the three times he was inside the cavern, he came in through the top, not through the door."

"I know that as well as you," red-eye snapped. "It's a real shame they did not examine the door more closely."

"Well, I suppose it might not be common to make a hiding place inside a door," green-eye pointed out.

"True," red-eye agreed. "I wonder if what he hid there was important? Important to the people who were here today, I mean."

"That would be difficult to say," green-eye had to say. "I wish we could have told him about it."

"We are not allowed to . . . are we?"

"It's been so long, I cannot remember, either," green-eye agreed. "I do much prefer this one to the one who claimed to be the Maker's Heir."

After several minutes, red-eye asked, "We never did ask for proof that that one was the Maker's Heir, did we?"

"You know, since he never went through the door, we never did," green-eye agreed.

"Do you think it likely you'll see any snakes who could pass on a message?"

"Probably not until they come to wait out the winter," green-eye said.

"Well," red-eye said, "I'm sure things can wait until spring." The pair of magical guardians went back to sleep.

Chapter XI

Tuesday, August 12, 1997

The evening after Ginny's birthday, Harry called together his entire council, plus Professor McGonagall, Alastor Moody, and Arthur Weasley.

"Ron, Hermione, and I have been working very hard these last few weeks," Harry said. "I know we're not ready to directly confront Voldemort, or any of the stronger Death Eaters. However, it is time we left the confines of Hogwarts. Voldemort seems to be holding back. Still, we can't leave all the initiative to him."

He turned to Arthur. "How is the Ministry doing?"

"It's doing what it does fairly well," Arthur replied. "That is, it has dug through the accounts and estates of all the convicted Death Eaters, especially the Malfoys, and are picking up those assets. The Minister and the Senior Heads are pleased, because at this rate we can easily double our efforts for the next four years and still keep taxation at the current low rates. I know that sounds . . . trivial and venal, but even at the height of the last war, there were well-off and powerful sections of our magical community here who were neutral. As long as we keep their taxes low and You-Know, well, Riddle, doesn't directly threaten them, they won't take either side."

Harry frowned, but merely said, "Anything else?"

"There have been a number of reports of possible groups in Central and Eastern Europe which might prove fertile recruitment grounds for Riddle," Arthur replied. "They've been sent on to John and Miss Lovegood. The Ministry has formally signed the agreement with the centaurs and the one that the centaurs arranged with the merpeople -- they want nothing to do with us, but will hinder and likely attack any of Riddle's forces which threaten Hogwarts as well as themselves. The giants and vampires remain neutral, and the main werewolf packs in Europe have denounced the werewolves that followed Riddle. Still, who can say what any of them might do if Riddle gains the upper hand?"

"True," Harry said. "Anything else?"

"The goblins are the most conciliatory they've ever been," Arthur answered in a pleased voice. "They like having a White Warlock around, as it keeps the various Ministries off-balance."

"Any progress on the elf front?" Harry asked.

"The elf-abuse legislation is coming along slowly," Arthur admitted. "Still, it's going better than I had anticipated. The fact that pure house elf slavery was abolished in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand over a hundred years ago helped."

"Dobby?"

"House elves are divided," Dobby admitted. "House elves with good masters see no reason to change, but will follow the law."

"Good. Headmistress?"

"It's taken quite a bit of persuasion, but I am happy to say that all sixty of the prospective First years have agreed to come, as have all but three of the Second through Fifth years. The announcement of your new position no doubt influenced some of them, and Mister Ollivander's return helped a bit as well."

Harry turned to Moody. "Did Ollivander tell you anything?" He and McGonagall had sent the old auror to see the mysterious wand-maker.

"Aye, he said a fair bit," Moody said. "It's been many a decade since I was so fluently cursed out,

and then told to mind my own business in Greek as well as English."

"Should I try and make some time to talk with him then?" Harry asked the group.

'It can't hurt,' was the consensus.

"The new courses for Second years have also been approved," McGonagall said. There would be a course in 'Living with Muggles' for the magically-raised and one on 'Magical Traditions' for the Muggle-raised. "Professor Slughorn has agreed to supervise the potions-contest and work with Professors Lupin and Flitwick to supervise a proper dueling club. The DA will work on more . . . interesting tactics, and that will be open to Fourth and Fifth years."

"Great," Harry said with a smile. "Prof?"

"I have finally made contact with the only known expert on Horcruxes outside of Tibet," Russell said. "He lives on the northwestern coast of Italy, near the French border. He sent word that he will see you and me any time in the afternoon any day next week. I have directions."

Harry nodded. "Good. Will you, Luna, and Hermione prepare a brief for us, so that I know what I need to ask?" All three nodded.

"Fred and George?"

"Your 'special products' are on schedule," George said.

"We sent the invoices for the materials to Tonks, not that we've had any problems getting anything," Fred added.

"Good. Luna?"

"I have translated another section of the Headmaster's notes, and coordinated them with the memories you left in the pensieve of your meetings with the Headmaster. I didn't find anything important, but I did turn some material over to Hermione last week."

"Hermione?"

"I got my mother to do some digging for us. There were eight-three children who spent more than a few weeks in that orphanage at the same time that Riddle did, and there were twelve staff. All the staff are dead but one -- and many of them died under questionable circumstances."

"Riddle killed them?" Ginny asked.

"Possibly," Hermione answered. "There was the largest Muggle war in history going on during this period, remember. Four deaths were attributed to the bombings of London, but they all occurred separately in 1944 and 1945, rather late in the war, but it could have been coincidence. I'm pretty certain one of the others, who had been dismissed for being too rough on the children and who narrowly avoided being arrested for it, was killed by Riddle or by his orders in 1948. He was dismembered, and there were no obvious cut marks."

"And the children?" Tonks asked.

"Eighteen of them met violent deaths," Hermione answered. "Thirty-six of the others are also dead. The Headmaster spoke to twenty-four of those fifty-four before their deaths. Of the remaining twenty-nine, fifteen were under seven when Riddle left the orphanage. The Headmaster had, however, spoken with them anyway, and from his notes they had little to say and none remembered much about Riddle at all since he was only there during the summers, although the older children used his name to frighten the younger ones."

"Quite the impression he made," Ron said drily.

"And the other fourteen?" Harry asked.

"Five boys and nine girls," Hermione said. "The Headmaster managed to track down the five boys and three of the girls. Their evidence didn't amount to much. I have the married names and

addresses of eight of the remaining nine. Four are in Britain, and there is one each in Ireland, the United States, Canada, and Australia. I also have the addresses of the younger orphans, on the off chance they heard anything from any of the older orphans they might have stayed in contact with."

"Any leads on the ninth?" Harry asked.

"Not really. She is younger than Riddle, born in 1935 and orphaned in 1940 during the Blitz of London. An aunt from Canada showed up for her in the spring of 1941. I doubt if she ever even saw Riddle, since he would have been in school the whole time she was there. There are some discrepancies in the information I have on these children, too. Some of the files were damaged during the War and only partially pieced together."

"There must be Muggle agencies who can trace her," Harry said.

"There are," Hermione retorted. "That's how we got the other addresses."

"Keep them on the missing girl anyway," Harry said. "Meanwhile, could you, Tonks, and Ron go see the other eight and any of the younger ones you can run down?"

"Even the ones overseas?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Harry answered. He turned to Tonks. "Make certain you use a glamor on them. They should look to be in their early thirties."

"Not a problem," Tonks assured him.

"Does anyone else have anything?" Since they didn't, Harry dismissed the meeting.

Thursday, August 14, 1997

Harry walked down Diagon Alley in disguise -- a powerful glamor which few could even detect, let alone see through. Despite a few objections, he was basically alone, although Tonks and Russell were not far away.

Harry entered Ollivander's as soon as he was certain that the shop was empty. A distraction spell on the entrance would assure him privacy from anyone wanting to purchase a wand.

Mr. Ollivander was standing in the shelves, restocking the wands rejected by the little girl who had just left. He did not turn, merely saying, "Just one moment, please." He came out front smiling a few moments later. "Ah, good morning, my lord. I was wondering if you would be paying me a visit, or requesting a meeting."

Harry canceled his glamor. "Should I ask how you knew it was me?"

The old man shrugged. "A natural wand maker can detect the most subtle traces of magic. I suppose I should have taken into consideration that Tom Riddle might be paying a visit, or that Albus Dumbledore might not really be dead, but I thought a glamor so powerful was most likely you."

"I suppose I shouldn't complain that you saw the glamor," Harry admitted.

Ollivander smiled, but as usual the smile did not seem to reach his eyes. "Few could detect it."

"Did you refuse to speak with Moody just to get me here?" Harry asked.

"I did not refuse to speak with Alastor, I merely refused to answer his questions," Ollivander said with a shrug. "It is not quite the same thing."

"May I ask you some other questions?" Harry asked.

"You may."

"What kind of wands did my parents first have?"

"Ah," Ollivander said with a more genuine smile. "A reasonable way to establish my identity. And

with that, Ollivander answered Harry's inquiries about 30 different wands, which left Harry satisfied as to the old man's identity.

"Now will you tell me what you wouldn't tell Moody?" Harry asked.

"I suppose I cannot totally get away with saying nothing," Ollivander admitted. "Few know what I am going to tell you. Alastor did not know, for example, and he has a knack of knowing things he should not. Still, you should know, I suppose. Diagon Alley is in many ways a self-contained world, my lord. Your two bumptious business partners have only just started to appreciate that. The two main leaders of the community, in some ways, are myself and Florean Fortescue, as we are direct male descendants from two of the major founders of the Alley and have acquired the other keys of the Alley through nearly a thousand years of intermarriage between the business leaders. I do not mean in terms of the politics, I mean in terms of magic. He and I hold the keys to most of the wards set on the Alley, other than those around the bank and the Leaky Cauldron. Representations came to us from various . . . business people, mostly but not entirely from the Knockturn Alley people. We decided it would be better to disappear. Mister Fortescue should be back in a day or two."

"And the reason why you couldn't tell Moody this?"

"It is none of Alastor Moody's business, as he seemed to represent himself, or perhaps the Ministry or this vague 'Order of the Phoenix'. As I said, I have to admit that you have a right to know."

Harry thought a moment, and said, "If you really didn't know, the Order of the Phoenix may be considered in many ways an extension of my organization."

"I knew it was Albus', I did not know for certain that it held for you," Ollivander replied. "Now I do."

"And the reason why I should trust you?" Harry asked. "You've always seems a rather . . . ambiguous person to me."

"In what way?"

"The first time we met," Harry said, looking into Ollivander's disquieting eyes, "you said Voldemort did great things; terrible, but great."

"Judging him only on the quality of his magic, which is a proper way to gauge another wizard, especially if he is an opponent, he is great, perhaps even stronger than Albus Dumbledore," Ollivander replied. "A thousand years from now, he will still be a well-studied wizard, my lord, just for the elegance of his magic. His evil will be a footnote."

"It's not 'just a footnote' now," Harry pointed out.

"True," Ollivander replied. "Florean and I are scholars as well as tradesmen, my lord. That detachment allowed us to understand the threat, rather than brazen things out and have that cost this community it's freedom from total terror. We knew we could not trust our protection to the Ministry, to Albus Dumbledore, or even to the community. You are giving more direct leadership than Albus ever did, and so the community is rallying around. That we can work with, and help provide safety for us all."

"And you couldn't do that last summer?" Harry demanded.

Ollivander smiled. "No one would follow Florean or myself into battle, even to defend themselves, my lord, let alone Fudge or even the current Minister. Dumbledore would not really lead the community, for reasons I still do not understand. You will, and are. Therefore, the system, poorly constructed as it is, will now work."

And with that, Harry had to be content.

Hermione, Tonks, and Ron came down the stairs of the small block of flats in the East End of London. "Well, that was a waste of time," Ron complained softly, keeping his eyes peeled.

This was not as bad a neighborhood as many in this area of London were. Still, it was a poor neighborhood, a mixed area of solid working class Londoners of all kind -- old families of English and Irish as well as newer families from all over the old Empire. Ron could smell strange cooking and hear even stranger music. There were Muggle sounds, from blaring radios and televisions and the traffic from outside.

He had never realized how strange, how different, how (to be honest) frightening the everyday urban Muggle world was to him. He was only slightly surprised at how easily Hermione took this in stride. This area of London was very different from the posh neighborhood of Norwich he had visited a few times in late June and early July. He was even more surprised at how easily Tonks moved through this world.

"This was just the first visit," Hermione reproved. "We have to cover all these people, even if there isn't anything to find. We have to be certain, one way or the other."

Ron sighed. "I know."

"And then we can cover the ones who were too young to really know Riddle personally," Hermione stated.

"Why did Harry want us to?" Ron asked.

"Riddle was probably a pretty memorable kid at that orphanage," Tonks mused, which made Hermione nod her head. "There were probably stories about him circulating when he wasn't there, and some of these people probably talked to each other long after they left the institution."

"Exactly. We cover everyone," Hermione said.

Tuesday, August 19, 1997

"Pretty coastline, isn't it?" Russell asked.

"Beautiful," Harry said breathlessly. "When all this is over, I think I need to take a few years off just to travel."

"Well, I don't know about two or three years straight, but I can see you doing a fair amount of travel on and off for a few years," Russell agreed.

The pair was in a yacht, which Russell has rented and was running by magic teaching Harry how to do so as they went. They had left London on Sunday, taking a Muggle jet to Marseilles and then a limousine to Monaco. The previous day, they apparated to the small French sea-side village of St. Ludovic. Just before dawn, they had boarded the yacht and moved out to sea. By now, they had just passed San Remo.

"How much further?" Harry asked, noticing that the coastline wasn't heavily populated, to say the least.

"It should be right ahead," Russell said, squinting.

Harry picked up his omnoculars and looked ahead. "There's a white temple and a set of buildings just this side of that small hill," Harry said pointing.

"That should be it," Russell said, steering the yacht in that direction.

"Can you tell me about this person yet?" Harry asked. "There's some reason or fact you haven't wanted to tell me."

Russell sighed. "According to my sources, Voldemort wasn't the first to create multiple Horcruxes after all."

Harry frowned. "This person?"

"Supposedly, dating back a few thousand years by the few accounts. He's dealt with any number of vampires over the millennia."

"I take it he's not some loony who wants to take over the world, then," Harry commented drily.

"Apparently not," Russell agreed.

"But he must be a murderer, or at least a killer," Harry pointed out.

"By definition . . . yes," Russell admitted. "Still, he's ready to talk with us. I had never heard of him, and I don't think Albus had, either."

"And you can trust him?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Russell said firmly. "As I've said, he has dealt with various vampire communities for millennia, and I've dealt with them for over forty years. They say he can be trusted, but that he's very dangerous if crossed."

"So am I," Harry stated.

Twenty minutes later, the yacht was secured to an ancient but well-kept stone dock. It took Harry a few moments to regain his land-legs after hours of bobbing on the water.

"Good afternoon," came a pleasant voice with an Irish accent. Harry looked around, and saw a very attractive red-head, some five-foot four, perhaps a little younger than thirty, and incredibly well-built. This was very apparent, because the woman was only wearing a very thin light green, translucent silk slip and what could barely be classified as sandals. It was also very clear, since the sun was behind her slightly, that these were the only things she was wearing.

"My lord is waiting for you," the woman said. "Please follow me."

Following her was a distinct pleasure.

They moved off the dock and took a path that led up the hill that was off the beach. The path was hidden from the sea by the tall trees that were between the beach and the hill, a space of about thirty yards. Russell was more impressed than Harry, as he recognized the marble and bronze statuary that lined the path as genuine antiquities, dating from various bronze-age cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean through the classical period to the most florid Hellenistic period to the late Roman.

Harry was busy watching the swaying hips of the figure in front of them.

Both men's eyes strayed from what they had been looking at as they gained the top of the hill. There was a small Etruscan-style temple to their far left and a complex of buildings to their right. In front of them was a small pool, where what Russell would describe to Moody as a 'bevy of beauties' were sunning themselves nude -- twenty-three women from between the ages of 18 and 40, representing all types, but all attractive, especially to Harry.

"Our lord is awaiting you," the Irish woman said sternly. Harry and Russell tore their eyes from the women, who had ignored their presence.

The red-head led them to one of the buildings. Russell realized that there were four houses, all in the classic ancient Mediterranean style, built around courtyards and revealing very little to the outside world. They entered a Roman atrium, complete right down to the shrine for the penates and lares.

"My lord is in the library, as it is cool," the woman said. It was only then that Harry realized how warm he had become from the hike up the hill.

The woman gestured the pair into the library, where a figure arose from a chair to greet them.

Chapter XII

As a figure stood in the Roman library, Harry's eyes moved away from the attractive red-head, and Russell's moved away from the perfectly preserved room.

The man was dressed in a light cotton gown and sandals. He was of average height, and rather burly. Harry and Russell saw that his face, once strong if not handsome, no longer looked fully human. Harry realized that the man still looked a bit more human than Voldemort had when he had applied for the position of Defense teacher, but not much more.

"I am Theseus, and I welcome you to my home," the man said in a medium tenor. "May I offer you wine and water, as well as a seat?"

"I don't drink," Harry said.

"Water only?" the man asked.

Harry nodded. The man poured himself a goblet full of water, flavored with wine, and the same for Russell, as well as a goblet of water for Harry, and the three men sat down.

"So, a White Warlock," the man said. "I have not met one since Merlin."

"You knew Merlin?" Harry said, doubt in his voice.

"I was born in what for you would have been the year 1323 BC," the man said, "on the island of Crete. I am from a magical family, and my father sent me to Egypt to study when I was ten. There was once a cult there which initiated one wizard every four years, and the ceremony included making and using what you would call a Horcrux."

After a few moments of stunned silence, Harry asked, "Do you mean there are hundreds, or thousands, of wizards like you?"

Theseus smiled. "No, there are not, but there have been. Living for an extended period of time is very appealing to many many people in theory, and this is one of the best ways of doing so. However, most people find that sooner or later life pales for them. There were 842 other wizards who underwent the same ceremonies that I did. Of the 843 of us, there are 33 left today, most of us still living in the temple in southwestern Egypt where we have always been. We ceased the ceremonies in what you would call the year 9 BC, under pressure from the wizards allied with Rome. To my knowledge, there have been 1002 others who have created Horcruxes throughout history. Of those, 801 have also ended their existences in some way. 80 were much like your Tom Riddle. All like him have been destroyed. Of the 120 others, 96 were destroyed by other enemies, who were no better or worse than they were. Three others were destroyed in natural disasters -- one, for example, lived in Pompeii, and made the error of keeping his Horcrux near by. The other twentyone are still with us."

"So, excluding Riddle and yourself, there are 53 others like you," Russell said.

Theseus nodded. "In that they have at least one Horcrux, yes." He looked at Harry. "You have a question or comment?"

"You all had to kill. . . ." Harry started, then trailed off.

Theseus nodded. "Kill, yes; murder, not necessarily. I have always executed criminals for my Horcruxes."

"You've created how many?" Russell asked.

"A soul portion in a Horcrux contains small parts of your personality and memory as well your soul. Those non-soul portions begin to denigrate after a century or so of isolation. I reabsorb the soul fragment and then create a new Horcrux every 75 years," Theseus explained. "Tell me, what is your primary question?"

"We are fairly certain that Riddle wished to create six Horcruxes," Russell answered. "He created them, but did not know he created the sixth. We have destroyed four. What will happen should he create a seventh, or try to go on and replace the ones we have destroyed?"

"Good questions," Theseus acknowledged. "I do have answers, but I can hear both your stomachs rumbling, and you both look like you are growing weak from hunger -- hardly surprising after sailing here, even working the boat by magic. Let my women feed you, and then I shall answer your questions."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Why feed you, or why answer your questions?" Theseus asked.

"Why answer the questions?"

"There are 55 people living extended lives through the use of Horcruxes. How many did your Albus Dumbledore, how many did your Professor Russell here, two of the better informed regular wizards around today, know of or even suspect before last year?"

"Just Voldemort," Russell admitted.

"Exactly. You might disapprove of our lifestyle, but fifty-four of us harm no one who is not a convicted criminal," Theseus answered. "We are not evil. Hedonistic, libertine, even selfish and sybaric, but not evil. I have the most contacts with the regular magical world, therefore I have been selected to speak with you. If Riddle is destroyed, the rest of us should be left alone. We desire no attention from the regular worlds, magical or Muggle." He stood and made to clap his hands.

"Those women. . . ." Harry started. Theseus looked at him. "They're Muggles, I take it?"

"I currently have an even three dozen," Theseus answered, "all between the ages of fifteen and forty. I tend to retire them between the ages of thirty and forty. Thirty are Muggles, five are what you would call Squibs, and one is a witch."

"And you retire them because?" Harry pressed.

Theseus frowned. "If you must know, beyond the obvious reason of them losing their looks and my becoming bored with most of them after a dozen years or so, many leave because they wish to have children. Creating a Horcrux causes physical changes, some internal and some external, as you have observed in both Riddle and myself. Creating just one causes the ending of the aging process, but it also causes sterility."

"I had wondered," Harry said. "Of all the crimes I've heard Voldemort accused of, he was never accused of rape, even if he encourages his followers to do it."

Theseus smiled. "One change of the fourth Horcrux is a diminution of the sexual drive. The fifth, let us say, leaves a man limp. Still, from what I have heard of Riddle, his drives were never directed towards sex." He gestured them out of the library and towards the dining room. "I have to admit, my drives have always been towards the acquisition of knowledge and the enjoyment of women."

"Just as long as you don't try to distract me with them," Harry retorted.

"Ah, you saw my lovelies by the pool," he said with a smile. "Please," he said gesturing the pair inside a room, "relax and I shall order food, and make certain the servers are wearing something. The golden carafe holds pink wine, the silver one white. The crystal of course holds spring water. Please, excuse me for a moment." Theseus left them at the threshold.

Harry looked inside. "There's no place to sit."

"The ancients ate lying down," Russell answered. "Come on." He led Harry behind the chief couch. Russell kicked off his shoes and sat down, and then twisted himself onto the cushions.

Harry sighed and copied Russell. "I suppose we eat with our fingers," Harry muttered.

Russell shrugged. "Forks were only used for serving, but he might have adopted the practice by now."

Their attention was brought to an interior door, as six attractive women -- wearing very little -- came in, five of them carrying covered platters while the first one held the door. That first one now came over and uncovered the first platter. It had bowls, dishes, and silver. She placed a large and small bowl, a shallow saucer, and a large and two small plates in front of each man, as well as a knife, a spoon, and two small forks.

The woman silently brought each of the other women forward and served Harry and Russell. The large bowl was filled with a warm chicken soup with pasta. The large plates each had a slice of roast beef and a fillet of some sort of fish. She placed carrots and celery on one small plate, poured olive oil into the saucer, and fresh fruit into the small bowl. Lastly, she placed a large pile of bread between the two place settings. The women bowed and silently left.

Harry thought dipping bread into olive oil was a bit odd, but the lunch was very satisfying. Neither Theseus nor his servants came in until the pair was nearly finished.

"Would you care for something more modern for a sweet course, or a traditional cheese plate with some wine?" Theseus asked, coming in. "I shall happily join in either."

Russell looked at Harry's face, and said, "Something sweet, I think."

Dessert was modern in that it was an excellent vanilla ice cream with fruit, served with Turkish coffee. When the three were again alone, Theseus asked, "Shall I give you the answers to your fundamental question now?"

"Yes, please," Harry answered.

"All people are all created different in many ways," Theseus said. "Different abilities and aptitudes, mental and physical; different temperaments and dispositions; different levels of intelligence. Those of us who are magical have different abilities and powers and power levels. Despite all this, we all have about as much of what, for lack of a better term in English, you call 'soul'. It cannot be truly divided in any permanent way, which is why the concept of a Horcrux works. It must all go on to whatever lies beyond this world together."

"You don't know?" Harry asked.

"No one truly does, my young friend. Mystics have their answers, which on some levels are fairly similar, but those are only slightly better than speculations. We cannot explain what the interactions between our finite selves and infinity might truly be." Theseus smiled. "If they had a good, certain answer, even I probably wouldn't still be here."

"Go on," Russell urged. He was uncertain as to how long this ancient warlock would tolerate them, although he was certainly being friendly at the moment.

"Right," Theseus said. "A number of ancients tried to determine what would happen if they divided their soul numerous times. Some did this out of curiosity, and a few tried to see if it would make them more powerful. Well, in short, it made them less human and no more powerful after the first two divisions. Three divisions, into four parts, seems to be the best compromise between protection and keeping some hold on one's humanity. Six or seven divisions, depending on how well the ceremonies are done, seem to be the maximum possible, although one Tibetan master managed a ninth division. What happens at that point is that the remaining soul fragment in the body is unable to animate that body. You simply lie there in what looks like a coma, although your mind does function to some extent. If someone does not add in one of the soul fragments contained in a Horcrux, the body eventually dies. It would take a large soul fragment to reanimate a new body. This condition can also happen if you split your soul into halves each time you create a Horcrux. You seem to need about one eighth of your soul to make a body work."

"So, Voldemort's right up next to the limit, but doesn't know it," Harry mused.

"He has created six Horcruxes, you said?" Theseus asked.

"Yes," Russell informed the ancient. "He knowingly created five. The sixth was created by accident when his original body was destroyed, as that occurred while he was trying to create one. As far as we can tell, he never knew that one was created, and he is planning on creating at least one more."

"At least?"

Harry told Theseus the story of the diary.

Theseus thought about that, and said, "I do not believe he designed the diary to be used other than as it was. He did not tell this Malfoy to send it on to Hogwarts, he set up a situation where Malfoy would be likely to use it if something happened to him. The soul fragment would have reunited with Voldemort once it became fully material."

The trio sat in silence for a few minutes.

"He searched me out nearly fifty years ago," Theseus said, bringing attention back to himself. "I declined to give him much information or help, and to my knowledge, he did not meet with any of the others like me. The basic ceremony for making a Horcrux is not all that difficult to obtain, or wasn't fifty years ago. I believe Riddle has destroyed a number of books with the information in them, and Albus Dumbledore did the same." Theseus' face hardened, and for the first time he looked very dangerous. "I do not care for those who burn books, no matter what their motives."

"I agree," Russell said quickly. "There are other ways to keep dangerous information at least moderately safe."

"I'm sure Hermione would agree with you," Harry said.

"Ah, Miss Granger. I was hoping you would bring one of your attractive associates with you."

Noting Theseus' leer, Harry thought, 'Yeah, I just bet you do, you perv.' What he said, however, was, "They're on other assignments."

"Pity; perhaps some other time."

"Can you give us any other information about Voldemort?" Russell asked.

Theseus thought a moment. "I doubt it. You know even better than I how selfish Riddle is. I have to admit, the man is a savant -- that is, he has a natural feel for magic and a mind like few I have ever encountered. However, he does have what is sometimes called 'the typical criminal mind'. That is, he has difficulty seeing other people's points of view; he has no empathy. The only things that matter to him are his needs, his desires. He cannot really believe that the universe does not center around him." Theseus shook his head. "In many ways, it was a shame that he was so powerful. Had he been an average wizard in terms of power, he might have turned out much better."

"That might be true, but I think it's too late to feel all that sorry for him," Harry pointed out.

Theseus smiled. "You may be correct. Perhaps it is a function of my age, or just my personality. I do tend to think about how history is put together, and how we get to places in history such as this one."

"Could you answer another question about Horcruxes?" Harry asked, to divert the subject back to the important one on hand.

"Of course."

"Did Voldemort feel anything when I destroyed the Horcruxes?"

"Probably not," Theseus mused. "I have never lost one, thank the Snake Goddess. I have known a few who have, however. Only one reported feeling anything, and he was a much more mystical person than any of the others. I have never thought Riddle had anything of the mystic in him."

"True," Russell agreed.

"So, while he might have set wards which might warn him, the actual destruction of the Horcrux, resulting in the destruction of the soul fragment, does not have enough of an effect on the primary fragment for the person to notice. In fact," Theseus added thoughtfully, "considering Riddle is no longer in his real body, he would be even less likely to know you destroyed any of them."

"If all the Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort will be totally mortal, right?" Harry asked.

"Correct," Theseus acknowledged.

"Is there any way to contain the remnants of Voldemort's soul should his current body be destroyed before the Horcruxes are destroyed?" Harry followed up.

"You would basically be imprisoning a soul," Theseus replied. "You would have to create a Horcrux, using Voldemort's blood rather than your own as the essential ingredient. The death you would use to trigger it would of course be Voldemort's."

"Voldemort used my blood to recreate his body," Harry said. "Would that affect a Horcrux to trap Voldemort, or one that Voldemort made for himself for that matter?"

Theseus considered that. "If I correctly understand the ceremony you described in the media a year ago, almost certainly not, since there was also blood in his servant's hand and of course there had to have been some genetic material left in his father's bone for the spell to have worked. However, don't you think creating such a Horcrux might be somewhat dark magic for a White Warlock to create?"

"Maybe," Harry acknowledged.

"I could do it," Russell said.

"I wouldn't like to have you do something I wouldn't," Harry objected.

"How would you get his blood?" Theseus asked.

"Good point," Harry acknowledged. "There isn't any other way?"

"Not under these circumstances," Theseus stated firmly. "There are much Darker ceremonies which, I assure you, you do NOT wish to invoke. However, I shall create a shell Horcrux for you. All it would take to activate it so that it is ready to accept Voldemort will be to blood it and chant a basic incantation. It would then have to be within twelve feet of his dying body."

Seeing the glare Russell was using, Harry said defensively, "It's a last-ditch measure, Prof."

"I would hope so," Russell declared.

"Now, I hope you will both stay the night," Theseus stated. "After all, even you cannot apparate in or out of here, and there is no need to rush away, is there?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "I hope dress is informal?"

Theseus laughed. "Wear whatever you feel comfortable in. Shall I have any of the girls join us?"

"No," Harry said nervously. "I don't think so."

"A little uncomfortable among cute, mostly naked girls, my lord?" Russell teased Harry as they sat in a comfortable lounge between two small bedrooms.

"A little," Harry admitted. "I'm just glad none of the girls came along."

"Why?"

"Because he would be after all of them," Harry nearly snapped. "Ginny would be flattered, and I have no idea how Hermione might react at the chance to be with a three-thousand year old warlock, especially if his library reflects that!"

"And he seems very charming," Russell agreed. "I don't think he has spells on any of the women that I saw, although it could be subtle."

"I don't think he's enchanted them either," Harry agreed.

"I wonder what Luna would think of him," Russell said in an innocent voice.

Harry scowled, but said nothing.

Chapter XIII

"That's three more down, and still nothing," Ron complained as the trio walked out of a council house in Leeds.

"We're plugging holes," Tonks said with a shrug. "We probably won't learn anything, but there's only one way to find out."

"Isn't a lot of auror work like this?" Hermione asked.

"I hope not," Ron muttered.

"Then you hope wrong," Tonks said simply. "This is actually better than many, maybe even most, investigations, because we only have about a tenth of the paperwork to fill in."

Ron wrinkled his nose.

"Sorry if that disappoints you, Ron, but investigation work means a lot of looking into wrong or dead end paths," Tonks went on. "If you read Muggle or magical fiction, they leave out all the hard slogging or just mention it in passing."

"Do you read a lot of Muggle detective fiction?" Hermione asked.

"Aurors are about the only group in the Ministry who read much Muggle fiction," Tonks admitted. "We have to keep up with the Muggles in order to pass through their world. Let's face facts, the magical world isn't very imaginative or innovative. Most 'new' ideas are either from the Muggle-raised or from direct borrowings from the Muggle world. I sometimes think that if there were only magical people in the world, and we were around in the small numbers we are in this world, we'd all be living in huts with an outhouse in the back."

"That's hardly surprising," Hermione said. "Magic leads to shortcuts and doing things the easy way."

Tonks looked up. "It's getting late. Shall we apparate back to Hogsmeade or Headquarters or apparate on to Harrogate for tomorrow's interview?"

"There's a small hotel," Hermione said, pointing at the intersection ahead of them. "I have some cash and a Muggle credit card. Let's have dinner and stay here for the night."

"Right," Tonks said, rolling her eyes. She said nothing as Hermione took only two rooms. Tonks knew she was not going to have to share her room.

This was not the first time.

As the sun set, the three wizards lay in the triclinium, a small feast in front of them. Harry kept his eye on the food. The daylight had cast shadows on the upper half of the room that afternoon, obscuring the frescos. These were now revealed by the lamp light to be extremely pornographic. Russell and Theseus refrained from remarking on them out of deference to Harry.

The discussion had ranged over a wide range of issues and ideas. Harry had been only half listening until Russell asked a particular question. "Would it true that, since magical power continues to grow slowly in us after adolescence, that someone like you would be operating on a very different level from the rest of us?"

Theseus thought about that. "Not entirely. Some would not even admit your basic premise."

"I know, but I do feel I am more powerful than I was when I was Harry's age, or even at forty."

"In large part, we grow into our power," Theseus said. "I would hope that you understand your

magic much better now."

"True, but I don't see why I should be able to, say, levitate a heavier load now than I could ten years ago," Russell pointed out.

"I didn't say I totally agreed with the idea," Theseus pointed out. "Still, I would say that your power mostly grew between the age of twenty-one and today because you understand your powers and the use of magic better. In that respect, I really don't think I understand my magic all that much more than I did, say, a thousand years ago. Still, the world around me has changed. I could not have created that modern plumbing in your suite two hundred years ago, even if I had somehow imagined it. That, of course, is a function of knowledge. When we exercise our magic, we do reinforce that power. If I stopped using magic for a hundred years, even if I still kept studying it, I would not be able to use it to the extent I can now."

"So, you still practice?" Harry asked.

"I think the current idiom would say that I 'workout' for at least an hour every morning. I also practice my dueling once a week." Theseus smiled a bit nastily. "One has to prepared for the dangers in this world."

"You didn't answer my basic question," Russell pointed out.

"True," Theseus agreed. "So, yes, power does slightly increase with age. Of course, as wizards such as yourselves age, you start to lose a bit of endurance and then physical strength as you age as well. How much power you gain is uncertain, since there are no ways to accurately measure magical power or potential."

"Now in my regular life," Theseus went on, "I would guess I was about as powerful as you, perhaps a tad more so. These days, I likely am a bit ahead of where your old mentor Dumbledore was before he died, if I have a good understanding of his power."

"Before he was killed," Harry muttered.

"Yes, before he was killed," Theseus agreed. He clapped his hands, and a platter of cheese and a bottle of Madeira floated in for himself and Russell. A treacle tart came in for Harry. Harry's eyes went wide.

"You have not seen the European newspapers, have you, Harry?" Theseus asked. Harry shook his head. "They have questioned many of the students in your year and older about you and your friends. One Lavender Brown was especially open about your likes and dislikes. I understand that there has been a large outpouring of mail for you, which your friends are dealing with."

Harry sighed sadly and looked at the tart.

"I hope that does not put you off your favorite dessert," Theseus said kindly. "Would you like some double cream, whipped cream, or ice cream with that?"

"No," Harry said, "this is fine. Thank you. I hope it wasn't any trouble for anyone."

"My girls allow themselves few sweets, but they do eat some," Theseus said. "I'm sure Kerri enjoyed making the tart; she does love English cooking."

Tonks relaxed in Remus' arms. "You look content," Remus said.

"That's one word for it," Tonks replied with a smile. She wriggled her eyebrows. "Care for a fourth?"

"You are insatiable," Remus said.

"Most women are, most men just can't keep up."

"I can, however."

"See, there are advantages to being a werewolf." Tonks suddenly giggled. "Maybe you should bite Ron."

Remus scowled, as he always did when Tonks mentioned him biting anyone. Then the scowl softened into a frown. "Where are Hermione and Ron, anyway?" Tonks had phoned Remus, since he had installed the Muggle device for just such situations.

"In a different room."

"'In a different room' or 'different rooms'?" Remus demanded.

"Room, singular," Tonks said. "From what I've overheard, I would say that, like many teen males, Ron still has a control problem."

"Poor Ron," Remus said.

"I'd say 'poor Hermione'," Tonks said.

The discussion had veered over to discussion the fight against Voldemort. After listening to everything the pair had to say, Theseus made decision and said, "You do realize what your major short-term problem will be soon, I hope?"

"You mean, what if Voldemort goes into hiding?" Russell asked. Theseus shook his head.

"Well, there are dementors," Harry said. "We were told they were breeding, but they never made all that many attacks and they seem to have disappeared."

"We were hoping they had left his service," Russell said.

"No," Theseus said. "They would have made overtures to some Ministry or other, so they could at least resume feeding on prisoners somewhere. Dementors are semi-corporeal demons. Dementors breed by merging, which dissolves their forms, which in turn creates that mist. When they start reforming their bodies around the summer solstice, they go into hibernation until the evening after the autumnal equinox. You need to find the caverns where they are hibernating and expose them to bright sunlight or the magical equivalent while casting holy incantations or projecting a powerful wave of love and serenity at them. Once they come out of hibernation, they will be very hungry, and you will be only able to destroy them one or two at a time."

Harry and Russell sighed. "Big job," Harry finally said.

"It's not like we had nothing else to do," Russell agreed.

"I tell you what," Theseus said. "You locate these demons, then notify me. Some associates and I will destroy up to nine nests. We don't like these demons, either."

"Why nine?" Russell asked.

"The particular ceremony we will use can only be used nine times," Theseus replied. He frowned, and added, "In fact, I believe some other associates will also try and track down their hide-aways."

"Voldemort won't like it," Harry reminded the warlock.

"If he dares move against me or mine, my kind will swarm him and torture him for as long as we exist," Theseus replied, looking even less human than he had throughout the day. "If he leaves us alone, we will leave him alone. He should not have allied himself with these demons." Harry decided the man knew what he was doing.

Wednesday, August 20, 1997

The yacht was well-off from Theseus' little harbor. Russell was keeping an eye on Harry, who was controlling the yacht as it ran before the wind. When the wind steadied, Russell came over to where Harry was standing at the wheel.

"Having fun?"

"Actually, I am," Harry replied. Where normally there would be a crew of six to work the sails, Harry could handle the basics by himself. "Tell me, can you drive a Muggle auto?"

"I can," Russell agreed. "Remus and Tonks can, too. I take it that this is yet another thing we should add to the schedule?"

"Do you object?" Harry asked.

"Not really," Russell said. "I wouldn't answer for Neville or Ron, but I can see why you and Hermione should learn."

"Will we have time?"

"Of course. We can let our Ministry and the others keep up the search for Death Eaters and in keeping tabs on the giants. The Order needs to push hard for finding the dementor caverns. I have a dream-learning program for driving, so that you'll at least know all the rules. I have access to a Rolls that runs on magic. You two can drive it around the grounds until school starts. I bet you will be able to take the test before term even starts."

Harry smiled for a moment, and then asked, "Do you think Wormtail and Malfoy are fully debriefed yet?"

"Probably not Pettigrew," Russell agreed. "I saw the interim reports, but they were planning on keeping the rat until next week. Are you thinking he might know something about the dementor caverns? He can't keep anything secret."

"I know, but you said that the questioning had to be exact. He might have been asked about the dementors' locations, but he might have searched caverns without knowing why he was doing it."

"True," Russell said. "I'll take care of it."

"Are we going back tonight?" Harry asked.

"I was thinking about the morning," Russell said. "I'd like a real Marseilles dinner. Don't tell the house elves, but the bouillabaisse they made for the Beaxbatons folk really wasn't all that great. They can't do escargot well at all."

"Escargot?"

"Snails in garlic and butter," Russell said. "It tastes better than it sounds."

"What else? Frog legs?"

"I never cared much for frog legs," Russell said. "There's a place I apparate to about every month or so. A really good bottle of Tavel. . . ."

"Wine, I take it."

"The best area for pink wine on Earth," Russell assured his leader. "A cup of potato soup, a large order of escargot, and a yard of excellent bread to split between us, a kettle of bouillabaisse, a small salad, and a brilliant cheese plate. . . ." Russell's face was blissful.

Harry laughed. "I'll try it, but it doesn't sound that great."

"If you don't like it, they have a full menu of good seafood pasta," Russell said.

"Then let's get there," Harry said. Russell flicked his wand, and the yacht picked up speed.

Friday, August 22, 1997

Filled with curiosity, Harry followed Neville through Hogwarts. Harry and his people (other than Hermione, Tonks, and Ron) had met with Arthur Weasley, Moody, and Professor McGonagall and everyone had made their reports. Harry and Russell's had been the only exciting one, although all reported slow progress on their assignments and from those of the Ministry and Order. Arthur would arrange for Russell to interrogate Pettigrew the next day, and then move on to other senior prisoners the next.

Neville had asked to speak privately with Harry after the meeting, and now they were moving through the dark castle.

"Seems strange not to have to sneak around," Harry said. Harry hoped that Neville was not going to ask him to try and heal the Longbottoms again. Ginny had told Neville what Harry had done for Bill, and Neville had asked Harry to try and heal his parents. Harry had tried, and it had done them some very minor but noticeable good, but not really enough to bring them back to a functional level, physically or mentally. The healers concluded that far too much time had passed for anything to be really effective.

"I'll take your word for it," Neville teased.

"Are we going to the common room?" Harry asked.

"It seems like a good place to talk," Neville said. "We're comfortable there, and for once there won't be anyone around."

"Good points," Harry agreed.

A little more than ten minutes later, the pair were settled into the Gryffindor common room, a fire providing a little warmth in the cool night air, and the only light as well.

"What's up?" Harry asked.

"A couple of things," Neville said. "I don't know which to mention first."

Harry shrugged. "Take your time."

After a few long moments, Neville asked, "Is there any chance of my doing field work?"

Harry considered this. All the teens were undergoing the combat training when it fit into their schedule. Neville had been doing quite well, by any measure. Harry finally shrugged and said, "You've been doing well in the training," Harry said. "I don't see any of us doing any independent work any time soon."

"But?" Neville pressed.

"But I don't know if we need you 'in the field' right now," Harry said. "And, if we let you go, Ginny and Luna will be right behind you."

"And you don't want them out in the field?" Neville asked. "You haven't stopped Hermione."

"I would if I could," Harry admitted. "We need someone doing Luna's work, and only Luna or Hermione could do it. And while I think Ginny could do as well as any of us in a fight, I think she'd have the worst time in many ways if she was captured."

"Ginny's at least a Pure-Blood," Neville reminded Harry. "Hermione would be tortured because of her heritage alone."

"We'd all be tortured," Harry said. "But Riddle took over Ginny. She'd be more susceptible to Voldemort's mind games than the rest of us because of it. Her experience left her a bit weaker there, it didn't inoculate her or anything."

"It's not because you two dated?" Neville asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. Now don't get me wrong, I still think she's cute as anything. I could only see myself dating her or, well. . . ."

"Or Hermione or Luna," Neville agreed. "Because they are part of this, because they know you."

"And because I really like them, and all three are very attractive. But. . . ."

"But Hermione and Ron are together, and you're too shy to ask Luna or Ginny on a date?"

"Or anywhere, even if there was any place we could go, or if there was anything we could do," Harry said bitterly. "But not Ginny. I like her, and going out with her was fun, but it was just. . . ."

"Physical?"

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "It was all hormones on my part. There wasn't any deeper connection."

"So, you wouldn't mind if I tried to form 'a deeper connection' with Ginny?" Neville probed.

"Ginny?" Harry was surprised. "I thought you and Luna were getting together at the end of term?"

Neville shook his head. "No, no that wasn't it. We very much wanted to be with you and the others. We were left behind. . . ."

"I'm really sorry about that, Neville," Harry said, happy that Neville and Luna were not dating after all.

"It's alright now," Neville said. "You've certainly made up for it this summer! Anyway, we wanted to be with you, like Ron and Hermione, and Ginny to a degree." Neville took a deep breath. "And I really wanted to be with Ginny. And Luna very much wanted to be with you."

"Really?" Harry frowned. "I didn't lead her on at Slughorn's party, did I?"

"No, I don't think so," Neville said thoughtfully. "She really cares about you, but she doesn't know how to tell you about the special connection you two share."

"What special connection is that?" Harry asked.

Neville smiled. "Do you know why you were able to break the Headmaster's spell to allow Luna to read his notes?"

"No, why?"

"Because you have created a magical connection with her, the kind of connection that usually only a few lucky married couples have. You share some bits of your magic."

Harry was shocked. "How could I have done that, especially without knowing I did it?" Harry demanded.

Neville shrugged. "I don't know how you did it. I just know you did. In fact, we all know it. You shared the magic that allows you to read those notes, just for one example."

"You all. . . ?"

Neville nodded. "We also all know that you were unaware of it. If Hermione had made it back, I'm sure she would have brought it up. She's been talking about it for weeks. It's been really hard on Luna, knowing there was a magical connection but not knowing if it was somehow accidental and even irrelevant to your feelings, or if it's real."

"Ah . . . shit."

"You don't love Luna?" Neville asked, surprised.

"I don't know how I feel about her," Harry admitted. "I like her, I'm attracted to her." He shrugged. "What is love?"

"You know what it is, Harry," Neville assured him.

"Until I figure this out, please don't tell Luna you've talked with me."

Neville agreed, but reminded Harry, "Hermione might not let you off so easily."

"Hermione isn't here."

"Yet."

Chapter XIV

When Hermione, Ron, and Tonks returned to Hogwarts early the following Monday, they had found nothing new about Tom Riddle. Ron was disappointed, and he was also questioning his desire to become an auror. He was still planning on trying for the training, as the job of hit-wizard, a group of elite aurors who were more of a para-military group than law enforcement, still interested him and auror-training was a first step. He complained very loudly when Ginny dragooned him into helping to sort through all the mail that was coming for Harry, not that his sister paid him any attention. Ginny and Professor McGonagall had already brought in two of the Hogwarts' elves to check for curses and such, and had hired Eloise Midgen to go through most of the mail and send polite replies to those which deserved them.

Harry and Hermione spent that afternoon and the next two practicing their driving. Hermione had also come back with a plan and a schedule. To the amusement of Harry and Professor McGonagall, Hermione rolled over all the other schedules and plans of the other leaders. Harry had not made any specific plans himself, and so was willing to watch the infighting with an amused detachment. He, and Hermione, knew that he might be called on to join in on attacks on the dementors' caverns, if more than nine were located.

Hermione had decided that she and Harry both needed a short break from the magical world, and they would go to visit her parents from the 28th until the 31st. Luna would join them on the Sunday, and they would go over some more of the Headmaster's notes at that time.

Thanks to Neville's warning, Harry had some idea of what else Hermione might have planned.

Thursday, August 28, 1997

Harry and Hermione had arrived at her parents' house in the late morning. The pair had walked to the high street and back, getting some Muggle treats. Harry sat docilely in the bright kitchen and smiled at Hermione as she called the driving instructor who was going to go out with them later that afternoon. If he gave them the okay, Hermione's parents would let them take the driving exam the next morning.

"And what are you smiling at, Harry James Potter?" Hermione asked as she hung up. "And stop eating that Mars bar! It's the third one!"

"Fifth," Harry muttered. "I haven't had one in years!"

"That is no excuse!"

"I thought you said you couldn't see yourself scolding the White Warlock?" Harry teased.

"Very funny, Harry!"

Harry leaned back on the chair, lifting the front legs off the floor. "And you're also going to try to match me up with Luna, aren't you?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "If Ginny said anything to you. . . ."

Harry shook his head. "Neville, when he was wondering if I still had a thing for Ginny."

"I hope you told him he could try?"

"Of course," Harry said, surprised. "Have I ever tried to keep you and Won-Won apart?"

Hermione's eyebrows nearly disappeared. "You . . . me. . . ?"

Harry shrugged. "Unlike Ron, I've always known you are a girl, and a very cute and adorable one at that. You never seemed interested."

"Oh? And did Cho?"

"No," Harry admitted. "But I didn't know Cho. I know you. I would never risk hurting you, Hermione." His eyes went serious, and he set his chair fully on the floor. "You are my Conscience, Hermione Jane Granger, and you were long before I became the White Warlock."

Hermione sank to her knees. "I . . . I am the Conscience of the White Warlock?" She knew that this was one of the two highest offices in a White Warlock's Council.

Harry got down on one knee and then stood, bringing Hermione with him. "Hermione, you know that you are all that and more. Ron is my best mate, but you're my best friend."

Hermione hugged him. "And you don't mind that Ron and I are dating?"

Harry shrugged. "No. I love you, but we've never crossed the line to being in love."

"True. How about you and Luna?"

Harry shrugged again. "What little I know about love, I learned from watching you and the Weasleys. I don't know how to love people in that way."

"Luna is more than a bit odd, but I think she could teach you, Harry, if you let her," Hermione said seriously.

"She and I should talk about this," Harry said, "not you and me."

"Good point," Hermione agreed, letting go of her friend and leader.

Monday, September 1, 1997

"I don't know why I'm here," Ron complained. "I'm not a student any more."

Ginny slapped his arm. "Death Eaters could still attack the train. You just have to patrol. Neville and I have to address the students."

"Along with Anthony Goldstein, Ernie Macmillan, Susan Bones, Loony, and those two Slytherins," Ron agreed.

"Mark Stover and Carla Brown," Ginny agreed.

Ron's eyebrows went together as he frowned. "Where is Loony? and Harry and Hermione for that matter?"

"There," Neville said with a nod. Ginny heard something in his voice, and looked more quickly than Ron. She saw Harry walking in, holding hands with both Luna and Hermione. She looked at her brother, and saw the wave of shock and jealousy pass over his face before it disappeared. Glancing back, she saw that Hermione had let go of Harry's left hand and was coming over to give Ron a hug, although she refused to give him a kiss in front of all the students.

"Have a good weekend?" Neville asked.

"Very good," Harry said. "Hermione and I passed our driving exams Friday, we got all of Dumbledore's notes deciphered (although we didn't learn much that we can use as far as I can see). . . ."

"And you and Luna?" Ginny asked.

"Are going to try and see if we can make it as a couple," Harry admitted.

"Way to go," Neville said sincerely.

"Thanks, Neville. How are your parents?" Neville had planned on visiting his parents the previous day.

Neville shrugged sadly. "The same as the last time, I'm afraid. They seem to have a bit more . . . purpose, but they still aren't really there."

"Your Mum smiled at me," Ginny pointed out.

"True," Neville agreed.

"She gave me a gum wrapper, too," Ginny added. "If you don't mind, I'll take that as a sign of approval."

"Well, she rarely gives them to anyone other than me," Neville agreed.

At that point, Mad-eye Moody stumped over. Harry noticed that most of the children were looking more at him than they were at Moody, which made him wince internally.

"May I speak with you, Mister Potter?"

"Of course, sir," Harry said. The pair moved over to an isolated spot. "The dementors?"

"The dementors," Moody agreed. "It turns out that, as best we can tell, they are in thirteen caverns, spread over Wales, Scotland, the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Balkans, and one small group in Norway."

"And?"

"This contact of Russell's is taking care of the ones in the Balkans, the Alps, and the Pyrenees. That leaves two groups in Wales, one in Scotland, and the smallest one, in Norway."

Harry nodded. Moody went on. "All of them have powerful magic defending them. Russell's contact assures him that he and his group, whoever they are, can take care of the nine they are assaulting."

"I'm sure they can," Harry agreed.

"Well, that's good, because we can't."

"We can't what?"

"We can't break through the defenses," Moody admitted with distaste. "Russell thinks that between the two of you, you and he can, with some help."

"But that would leave three groups," Harry protested.

"Russell says that it should be possible to take them in sequence-- that is, we would not have to make four attacks in one night or two nights. That's what his contact group will be doing -- hitting three a night over three nights."

Harry thought about that, then said, "Then that is what we'll have to try to do."

"The first should be Friday night," Moody said. "That's when the contact group first attacks."

"We'll talk about it after the Feast tonight," Harry said.

While Harry and Moody were talking, Luna was being congratulated by Ginny and Neville. Ron, however, looked dissatisfied.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked him.

"I don't know," Ron answered with a shrug. "I just never saw what Ginny saw in Loony. . . ."

"Luna," Hermione said firmly. "She's an important part of the fight against Voldemort, a vital part of Harry's Council. She proved her loyalty when she and Neville were the only two DA members who came to help us. She had been helping me study and research all last year. Now Luna and I look at things very very differently. If she and I can get along, so can you two."

"She never had a crush on you," Ron muttered.

'If you only knew she had a crush on all three of us at different times,' Hermione thought. She and Luna had worked through their feelings for each other, and she knew that Luna had gotten over her

childish crush on Ron over a year before. "She's interested in Harry, not in you. She hasn't flirted with you in over a year and a half. Harry likes her, and I really think she'll be good for him."

"I had hoped he and Ginny would get back together," Ron admitted. "I mean, Neville is nice enough, but I guess we'd all hoped that Harry would be part of the family in a more . . . official sort of way."

Hermione smiled. "I don't think your Mum will let him get away no matter whom he marries."

Ron snorted. "You're probably right at that."

At that point, Harry walked by. "You two will be meeting with Russell and myself after the Feast."

"Right," Ron said, while Hermione nodded.

"Welcome," Professor McGonagall said to the assembled students, staff, and others after the Sorting, "to another year at Hogwarts. I cannot deny that this calendar year has been one of the more difficult this school has had this past century and more. For those of you who are Muggle-raised, we will be having an assembly in the morning to explain the conditions in the magical world." She glanced around the hall. "To combat any rumors, we will all be present at that meeting." She then went on to introduce all the staff, the Order members who were to be stationed at Hogwarts, Harry and his Council, and the Proctors. She then made certain that all knew the chains of command.

Only then did the Feast begin.

It wasn't just Hermione and Ron who were meeting with Harry, Moody, McGonagall, and Russell. Neville, Tonks, and Luna were there as well. "I've been told a great deal of information over the last month, especially the last week," Harry said. "It is time I make more detailed deployments. Prof, could you start filling Luna and Remus in on all the information and intelligence that comes through you?"

"All of it?"

"All of it," Harry said. "You're likely to be busy most weekends. You're in charge, but I want these two fully in the loop."

"As you command," Russell said with a smile.

"Hermione, do you think you should track down any remaining orphans?"

"It's a small point, but I'd like to cross them off," Hermione said, "unless you think there's a crisis coming soon."

"Be back by the night before the equinox," Harry said. Seeing the look on Ron's face, Harry went on, "Tonks, can you handle the security alone, or would you like Ron to come along again?"

"Considering where we're going, we won't need him if the Minister would write us security passports."

"Harry's paladins don't need those," Russell objected.

Harry shrugged. "Ask anyway. It can't hurt to have them and it will make the paperpushers like Percy, here and abroad, happy." Harry frowned. "Go through Mister Weasley right from the start, though. Ron? Moody, Russell, Remus, and I will be on a mission Friday night, and maybe a few more after that. Want to come along?"

"Yes!"

"Neville, some Order members will be along to form a parameter guard. Would you like to join

them?"

"I would," Neville said.

"We're under Moody's orders until we arrive at our target," Harry warned. "After that, we're under the Prof's directions."

"I understand," Ron said, holding his hands up in protest. "Honest." Neville merely smiled and nodded his agreement.

"Can't my mission wait?" Hermione protested.

"The dementors are in hibernation until the equinox," Harry said. "We're attacking one of their thirteen nests. If it works, our group will have three more to take out over the following fifty hours or so. If the attacks succeed, that might bring Voldemort out early. If we fail, we'll all be busy with the dementors by the end of the month and you'll likely never get back to the orphans. If they are going to be interviewed, you have to go now."

"Very well," Hermione agreed.

"I expect to be used in later attacks," Tonks said quietly.

"I expect you will, too," Harry said simply. He turned to Hermione, cutting her off before she could do more than open her mouth. "You, too." Hermione closed her mouth and nodded.

Hermione and Tonks left for the Muggle airport in Glasgow Tuesday afternoon. Russell coached everyone through the rituals they would be needing to use that Friday evening, while Moody, Remus, and Russell speculated on how Harry might get them through the wards and other defenses.

"Should we ask Bill to come along?" Harry asked finally that evening.

"As far as we can tell, the wards are nothing unusual, other than their power," Moody pointed out. "It's your power that will get us past those outer wards. Once past them?" He shrugged his shoulders. "We might need him."

"Ron," Harry said.

"Yeah?"

"Go see your brother tomorrow morning before he goes to work."

"What? Go to his and Fleur's flat?"

Harry rolled his eyes. Russell merely said, "He apparates to Diagon Alley at 8:45. He told me he can be contacted any time after 8:00, and that even though they are living in a Muggle apartment building you can apparate to in front of their front door without setting off his alarms or startling the neighbors."

"Fleur doesn't need to know," Harry said. "Apparate there and take him to The Leaky Cauldron." He turned to Moody. "Book them a room from Eight to Nine, and have Tom leave them tea, and some breakfast for Ron."

"Right."

"Tell him everything?" Ron asked.

"Tell him what we told you tonight, and that I would really appreciate his coming with us," Harry said drily.

Ron flushed slightly, but nodded. The group broke up shortly afterwards. Harry walked back with Remus. "So, when are you going to marry Tonks?" Harry asked. "Come to think about it, what will we call her then? Tonks-Lupin?"

"She's beginning to thaw to the idea of 'Dora'," Remus answered. "We thought about just a quick ceremony sometime, maybe next summer. Once you're eighteen, you and Hermione could stand with us and witness a Muggle ceremony."

"Why do the Muggle form?" Harry asked.

"Tonks is close to her father's sister and her family, who are Muggles, and gets along with his parents, too. My mother has two sisters with their children who would also like to come."

"Fair enough," Harry said.

"So, you finally found something easy for Ron to do on his own."

Harry nodded. "I worry about all of us, but especially Ron. He tends to be even more reckless than I am, and he doesn't have the power and dumb luck I have. Still, he needs to be trusted, and this needed to be done. Plus, well, both he and Hermione told me some things, personal things, that they don't know the other told me. Ron might need to speak with his big brother."

"Tonks told me that Ron is, well, quick on the trigger."

"I don't want to know anything more about it," Harry said.

"Me neither," Remus agreed.

Harry was not surprised that Ginny had found out that Ron and Neville would be going on a mission Friday. "Harry!" she snapped the next morning at breakfast.

"See me in my office at Nine," Harry said simply. Ginny glared, but nodded.

When Ginny showed up at the small room Harry called his office (Luna had set up her own office plus a large room with library tables adjacent to Harry's room). Before Ginny could say anything, Harry raised his hand. "I know, I know, you're upset because I didn't ask you along Friday."

"You bet your wand I'm upset," Ginny snarled.

"I'm not going to say you're not going to see combat before you turn seventeen," Harry said. "After all, you're more likely than Neville or Luna to lead the DA into combat if the castle is attacked. . . ."

"Really?" Ginny said, surprised.

"Really," Harry said. "Luna is staying in and around the castle. . . ."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Harry said, rolling his eyes at the interruptions. "The Prof and Remus are bringing her up to speed on the intelligence front. If anything happens to either of them, she'll still know what we have."

Ginny's eyes went wide. "Are you thinking. . . ."

"This is a war of attrition until we can destroy the Horcruxes," Harry said. "People are likely to die, as much as I hate to think about it. I can't allow us to operate in the dark. Just imagine how screwed we'd be if Dumbledore hadn't left those notebooks? Luna is going to make certain we don't have that problem. As for you," Harry said, "you have lots to do. I don't think you need the ego boost that Neville can use."

Ginny nodded her understanding. She didn't like it, but she understood the situation, and accepted it, for now.

Bill Weasley, his scars now nearly invisible, scowled. "Of course I'll come. Why all this build up?"

he asked, his hand waving around the private parlor at the Leaky Cauldron.

Ron flushed as he realized why Harry had set this up for him.

"Ah, something personal. . . . Is everything fine between you and Hermione?"

Ron flushed even more.

Chapter XV

Friday, September 5, 1997

The group from the Order port-keyed to the first location just before dusk, deep in the Welsh mountains and high above the level of the cavern entrance. There were Harry, Remus, Russell, Ron, and Bill, plus Neville, Moody, and five others from the Order. The group split into groups. Neville and two Order members stayed near the top, the others swept down the hillside. The other three Order members stayed about twenty yards below the entrance to the cavern. Moody followed the assault team to the mouth of the cavern.

Russell, Remus, Ron, and Moody started a low chant in Latin, designed to weaken the first line of wards without allowing any triggers. Bill stood well back, ready to act if something went wrong. That left Harry to approach the mouth of the cave system alone.

Harry, feeling nothing, frowned as he wondered if this could be the right place. He took two more steps forward, and felt himself pass through some sort of magical boundary.

A wave of fear wafted through Harry, which then came back and hit him hard. He was suddenly in the middle of a different cavern. He was forcing Dumbledore to drink the poisonous liquid from the bowl containing the faux Horcrux.

"Harry!" Bill hissed.

Harry realized that he was being influenced by the dementors in the cavern. Russell had warned him this would occur. Harry could not fight this with his Patronus, at least not directly.

Harry stretched out his hands, and thought about his positive feelings. He thought about how he felt about his friends, his followers. He thought about his positive feelings for Dumbledore, rather than the frustrations. He thought about the feelings he had for Luna, although, since those were still new to him, he didn't dwell on them.

The bad feelings receded from Harry's mind. He continued to think what he termed 'happy thoughts'.

From the rear, the assault team saw a dim blue light start to extend from Harry's hands. As it grew, it seemed to draw a sickly green light from the air in front of him. Where the two lights interacted, the colors swirled into small vortices.

Time slowly passed. After some five minutes, Bill whispered, "Look!"

The blue was slowly dissolving the green in the swirls.

The group continued to watch.

Suddenly, there was a silent explosion of bright blue light. Harry fell to his knees and Bill walked forward, waving his wand and muttering under his breath. "It's clear!" Bill said.

Ron hurried forward and helped Harry back to his feet. He saw that his friend and leader was heavily sweating, and looked very tired. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I just ran five miles while puking and trying thinking good thoughts," Harry replied honestly.

Harry felt Ron put his arm around his shoulders. "I know," Harry said. "We have to go in there and destroy those things."

"We do," Ron agreed. "So come on. I know you hate it, but we need you, Harry."

"I know," Harry agreed, letting Ron help him to finish straightening up.

"Harry, Bill, and I will keep the dementors together if they start to move," Russell said. "Ron, Remus, you'll use these ultraviolet lights to start burning those things. We'll join in when we can."

"Let's go," Harry said grimly. The group marched into the cave opening.

Moody gathered the group together up near Neville's position at the top point. Harry and Russell sat heavily on the ground. Bill, Remus, and Ron looked nearly as tired. Seeing that Moody was looking around and that Harry was only two feet from his boots, Neville crouched down. "Is there anything I can do, Harry?"

"How's your canteen?" Harry asked. Conjured water, after all, didn't really quench thirst well, as it disappeared from your system at some point. It was really only good for washing.

Neville silently unhooked Harry's canteen and shared a quarter of his own remaining water with Harry. "Thanks, Neville."

Neville looked over at Ron. "Bad?"

"Bloody awful," Ron agreed. "Seeing my own worse fears and memories was bad enough, but our fears sort of bled over to each other."

"Don't worry, lad," Moody muttered. "If you won't think any worse of me, I won't of you."

Ron shuddered, remembering how Moody had felt as his eye had been torn out. "Thanks," Ron said, looking pale even in the dark.

Harry stood up shakily. "Remus?"

Remus shook off the bad memories and handed out chocolate. After Harry had eaten the piece Remus had given him, he fished out a Mars bar, the sole survivor from the box he had purchased while at Hermione's.

"There's more chocolate in this," Remus said, holding up a bar of Honeyduke's.

"Yeah, but there are better memories in this," Harry retorted. He surveyed the group. "You're Brian Richards?" Harry asked one of the Order members.

"Yes, sir," the wizard, in his mid-twenties, agreed enthusiastically. Ron and Neville grinned at Harry's slight discomfort from the form of address from the older wizard.

"Neville, could you and Brian take a port-key back to Hogwarts? We need more chocolate and more canteens of water."

"You intend to take on the next cavern?" Moody asked.

Harry nodded. "This was horrible, and the next one could be worse. Still, it's better to take these out as soon as possible. We don't want Voldemort to reenforce any of them, and we can't afford to allow them to come out of hibernation." Harry looked at the assault team. "Does anyone want to rotate out?"

None did.

"Neville, Brian?"

"On our way, Harry," Neville assured his friend.

"If we can, I want to take out the other Welsh cavern and the Scottish one tonight," Harry said.

"Ambitious," Russell pointed out.

"The Scandinavian one is supposed to be the smallest nest," Harry answered.

"Go on," Remus told Neville and Brian, offering them a portkey. "Professor Flitwick should be on duty. Have him summon a house elf and have the elf bring the large box of chocolate bars I have on the bottom of the book shelves in my office."

"Right," Neville agreed. He took the proffered port-key, and the pair took off.

"Harry. . . ." Remus started.

"You know we have to take out as many as we can tonight," Harry replied wearily. "If that means I have nightmares for the next week, so what? The dementors are the last major weapon we know for certain Voldemort has. We either take them out tonight and tomorrow, or we could still lose even if we win the war."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"The Muggle governments know about dementors," Russell answered. "They can fight them with ultraviolet light, but they still can't detect them. If they start taking heavy losses, they will start pressuring us, and we could lose our secrecy."

"I forget the exact number of Muggles in Britain," Moody started.

"About fifty-nine million," Harry put in, "and about three and half million in Ireland."

"Right. So say sixty-two million Muggles. We number a little under thirty thousand in Britain and Ireland. We're outnumbered more than two thousand to one." Moody shook his head. "We had to hide when we had magic nearly equal to what we have now and the Muggles had pitchforks. What could they do to us now?"

"You almost sound like you agree with Riddle about Muggles," Ron said. He shuddered at the look Moody shot him

"One difference is that I don't think we could or should kill off or enslave the Muggles," Moody snarled. "I also know perfectly well that we emerged from the general Muggle population, and continue to do so."

"We are the next stage of human evolution," Russell said. "The Muggles are equal to us in every respect except for magic, and that makes them, culturally, more imaginative and creative. I honestly doubt, with our low numbers, if we would ever have even invented agriculture without Muggles. They advance, and we copy. We need the Muggles, they don't need magic. If every magical creature died tomorrow, the Muggles wouldn't miss any of us. They would only miss wizards if we disappeared and magical dangers, like dementors, didn't disappear at the same time."

"At our historical numbers, we would have died out long ago," Remus pointed out.

"True," Russell agreed.

At that point, three figures appeared via port-key. "Luna?" Harry demanded. "Why are you here?" He gave Neville a dirty look. Neville shrugged helplessly.

Luna walked over to Harry and knelt beside him. "From what I heard, you had a difficult time fighting the dementors' evil. I thought, perhaps, you needed some more powerful good thoughts than what you have. I will go back if you insist before you go to your next cave, but first. . . ." Luna leaned forward and whispered intently in Harry's ear.

Even in the near darkness, it was possible to tell that Harry was both embarrassed and incredibly turned on by whatever Luna was whispering. After more than a few minutes, Luna stopped speaking, kissed Harry's ear and then his cheek, leaned back and smiled.

"Ready to go on?" Remus asked, smiled.

Harry recovered his wits and smiled grimly. "Yes, I'm ready. Let's take those caves out." He turned to Luna, silently begging her to go.

"I'll port-key back to Hogwarts," Luna said. "I'll be waiting for you when you get back." Harry took and kissed Luna's hand. She helped Harry stand, and the group went on to tackle the next nest of dementors. Harry was so inspired that they managed to take out the remaining all three nests that were their responsibility fairly quickly, rather than just the two, although when they emerged from the cave in Norway dawn had already broken.

Everyone was tired; Harry more than the others. The last port-key took them back to the front of the great doors of Hogwarts. As they came into the entrance hall, the first students were already coming down for breakfast. None of the group felt like eating, and so they split up to go to their individual quarters.

Harry and Ron went back towards their quarters together. They had suites in the back of the castle. Harry patted Ron on the shoulder in silent thanks, and Ron hesitated in front of his room but finally went in. Seeing Hermione wasn't there, Ron went to take a shower. He would knock on Hermione's door later to report, and then he would fall into bed.

Harry went into his room and was about to clap his hands for Dobby when he saw Luna asleep in his bed. He tried to quietly shut the door, but he had come in too noisily. Luna was sitting up in the bed as he turned around.

Luna slipped out of bed, nude, and walked over to give Harry a kiss on his forehead. "Dobby has a magical bubble bath ready," she said. "You soak for a bit and I'll come and wash your back. Shall I order you something to eat or drink?"

"I could use lots of hot chocolate," Harry said, trying not to stare.

"How about a cup of hot chocolate, and then a cup of camomile tea to help you sleep?" Luna suggested. "After you drink the hot chocolate, I will wash your front, and after you drink the tea, I'll dry you off, massage your back, and we can cuddle as you fall asleep."

Harry smiled. "That sounds wonderful."

Luna knelt and started to untie Harry's dirty trainers. "You don't have to wait on me," Harry said.

"I know," Luna agreed. "If I've learned anything about you, Harry, it's that you have never been pampered in your life. If you really took out two or three nests of dementors. . . ."

"We took out all four, actually," Harry said.

"Then you certainly deserve to be pampered," Luna said firmly.

"Do I really?" Harry asked plaintively.

"Yes," Luna said firmly, her expression not dreamy in the least. "You are a very good person, Harry Potter. I care for you very much. Now, just follow my lead, and by tonight, there will be no room for nightmares left."

Harry smiled. "I'm in your hands."

"Well," Luna said in her matter-of-fact way, "you will be soon."

Harry arrived at the situation room alone late that afternoon. The only person there was Remus.

"Did you rest well?" Remus asked.

"Very well," Harry agreed.

"Shouldn't Luna be here to oversee any new information?" Remus teased.

"With you and the Prof in the castle?" Harry asked with exaggerated innocence. "Seriously, any news?"

"John received an owl, but it let me take the message. Part of it was in a code he taught me, and part is in one I don't know. Our allies took out five of the dementor nests last night, and presumably will attack more tonight. The locations might be in the portions I can't decode."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "So, that would mean about three quarters of the dementors are already destroyed."

"More like two thirds," Remus rejoined. "Except for the second nest we hit last night, this other

group was taking on the largest six. Still, even if this mysterious group doesn't finish them off. . . ."

"They will," Harry said with confidence. "They don't like dementors."

"And they aren't afraid of Voldemort?" Remus probed.

"Not really. Voldemort will know they won't go after him directly, either, unless he attacks them. He'll no doubt mark them down for future action, but I can't see him attacking them when he still has us to deal with."

"So we can't count on any more help from this group?" Remus asked.

"I can count on one more thing," Harry answered, "but then that is it."

"And that is?"

"An empty Horcrux," Harry admitted. "It might not be the best solution, but we can try and disembody Voldemort if we can't find the missing Horcrux. We can entrap the soul fragment left inside him in this new Horcrux until we destroy the missing one and the one inside the snake."

"That's potentially fairly Dark magic," Remus warned.

"It is," Harry agreed. "Still, I won't be making the thing, and either way, I have to kill Voldemort's body, no matter if what's left of his soul is destroyed then or later. I don't see much of a moral difference."

"I suppose there's some truth to that," Remus agreed reluctantly. "I still don't like it."

"I don't like it either," Harry retorted. "Still, it's another option. We can use all the options we can get."

"I can't disagree with that, either," Remus admitted.

"Come on," Harry said, standing.

"Where are we going?" Remus asked.

"Dobby promised to have some double dark chocolate custard with chocolate whipped cream atop something called American chocolate chip brownies. Let's go get a sugar rush and a chocolate buzz before Ron eats it all."

Remus stood up. "That sounds like a good plan."

Draco Malfoy sat across the long scarred table from his father, having described all that had happened to him since they had last talked. Lucius was just looking at his son, considering the tale. Finally, he said, "I cannot say you did well, Draco. However, given the circumstances, you did not do badly, either."

"Yes, Father." Draco's eyes roamed around the large room. There were a number of these long tables, empty at the moment. The room was made of a dull concrete-like material, and twelve feet above floor level there was an observation gallery for the guards that went around the room. There were three looking at them, even now, holding Muggle weapons.

"They said you would explain things to me, sir," Draco hinted.

"Such as?"

"The routine, whatever that means. And, I would hope, where we are, and why we're being guarded by Muggles."

"I'm not certain where we are," Lucius admitted. "Some high, cold latitude, that's all I know. We aren't allowed outside. You went through that orange mist and then a shower?" Draco nodded.

"That suppresses our magic, and we have to go through it every day. There are similar potions in

the food and drink. You'll notice we are fed soggy foods -- oatmeal and mush for breakfast, soups for lunch, stews for dinner. Many are actually palatable, but they are also a means of holding us. Refuse the food, and by the time the potions weaken enough to access any real magic you'll be too weak to use any wandless magic you might be capable of. The walls contain both nickel and platinum ores, impossible to apparate through in any event. The guards may or may not be Muggles or Squibs, although my guess is Squibs and low-powered wizards. They have Muggle weapons because they are certain to work in this environment."

"Oh."

"As for the routine. . . ." Lucius shrugged. "We have to awaken at Six. Breakfast is at Seven, then we're misted again. We work either from Nine to Eleven, One to Three, Four to Six, or Seven to Nine."

"Work?" Draco asked, shocked.

"Work," Lucius said. "We do some of the cooking except for breakfast and all of the cleaning. It is somewhat degrading, but it isn't difficult. I'll get you assigned to the cooking. It is slightly less degrading than the cleaning up."

Draco looked uncertain about that.

"The other times, well, we can exercise, we can study, and we are allowed to talk in small groups. Then we are run through a group shower and to bed at Ten."

"Father, why are you still here?"

"I am here because I have not yet discovered a way out, and the Master prefers to make me suffer for my failures."

"Why did you serve an inhuman, insane, half-blood like him?" Draco hissed in a whisper.

Lucius nervously glanced around, although he knew no other prisoner was nearby. He considered several options, but finally opted for part of the truth. "Tom Riddle is a genius, greater and more powerful than Albus Dumbledore was. He attracted a number of influential followers despite his birth because he is the Heir of Slytherin. He was not as inhuman as he is now. In fact, he was more human right up to his bodily destruction by Potter. By then, there was no way to back out. There may be a way out of here, I am not certain. If we take it, we will be committed to serving him still or hiding from both him and the authorities. Everything else means an even quicker death. Are you still in a hurry to leave?"

"I . . . I'm not certain," Draco admitted.

"If the Master wins, he will reward us for staying faithful. If he loses, well, I have arranged certain payments to be made, and we will be out within three or four years of his defeat."

"But I told you what Weasley said. . . ."

"No Weasley understands finance," Lucius snapped. "Your mother has money, and that is not being touched. I have other moneys, which will not be discovered, although I must admit they have found a bit more than I had anticipated. Even if they did track down every knut I have squirreled away, I have other monies hidden in the Muggle world they do not suspect yet, and your mother would insure that you would not be poor, even if you would no longer be rich. Now, try and forget everything I have said since you asked that question. If we are freed by the Master, and that is in the forefront of your mind, we are both dead."

Draco swallowed nervously.

"And practice your Occlumency. That is one magic still left to us. Practice it now, and you will survive this ordeal. Fail to do so means the end to us both."

Draco nodded. "Yes, father." He glanced up at the guards.

"Don't worry. They cannot hear us. Magic doesn't work down here," Lucius said. Draco nodded, as unaware as Lucius that while magic indeed did not work in this prison, Muggle eavesdropping devices did.

Monday, September 8, 1997

Voldemort stormed out of the room he used to grant audiences to his remaining Death Eaters and potential allies and recruits. He now had six fewer allies, having just finished torturing them to death. He crashed into the potions lab, sending bottles, cauldrons, retorts, and flasks flying.

Severus Snape turned angrily around, but his anger instantly turned into fear when he saw who had invaded his laboratory. "Master!" He fell to his knees. It was clear that he wanted to ask what had happened, and equally clear he knew his life would be at an even greater risk if he asked for any information.

"Gone!" Voldemort shouted. "They are all gone!"

Snape couldn't hold himself back. "Gone, my lord?"

"Yes! Somehow, all the dementors who came to me have been destroyed!" This was the first time Snape had ever seen the Dark Lord rage like this, and he hoped it would be the last. "All thirteen caverns where they were hibernating, waiting to emerge in their larger numbers, hungrier than ever, invaded! How could anyone have gotten into those caverns? I cannot believe even Dumbledore could have forced his way into more than one, and I doubt he and all his Order would have come out alive had he done so!"

Voldemort halted his tirade. "It must have been someone new, someone allied to the Ministries and that stupid boy!"

"But who else could it be, Master?" Snape dared to ask.

"You may know even more about potion theory than I do," Voldemort allowed, "but you know little of the deeper workings of the magical world. There are covens and cults that hide away from the magical world as assiduously as the common wizard hides from Muggles. There are individuals of great age and magical power who have never striven for the real power, such as I have." Voldemort halted. "No, no! I cannot believe they have moved against me."

"Perhaps they did not move directly against you, Master," Snape suggested.

Voldemort turned angrily on Snape. "What do you mean?"

"Perhaps they hated or feared the dementors themselves, and so moved against them while they were finishing their reformation," Snape suggested.

"Perhaps, but they still have disturbed my plans, and destroyed my allies! But who?"

"Is there any particular group that feared or hated the dementors more than any others?" Snape suggested.

"All but I hated and feared dementors," Voldemort declared. Then he thought about that idea. "Still, vampires certainly particularly loathed dementors. Perhaps a combination of the oldest, more powerful magical vampires?" Voldemort frowned, thinking of other, more dangerous powers that might have struck against the dementors. He dared not mention them, not to Snape nor even really to himself. Voldemort turned his frown onto Snape. "Comment, Severus?"

"I am at a loss," Snape admitted. "If any ministry or whomever the people are who are fronting Potter were behind this, they would have announced it by now."

"It will be in tomorrow's Prophet, although so far as my informant knew there are no details as to who was behind this," Voldemort snarled.

"Would this person know exactly what was in the article, my lord?" Snape asked.

"Actually, no," Voldemort admitted. "Assume a disguise and bring me an early edition."

"Yes, my lord," Snape said with a bow.

Chapter XVI

Monday, September 8, 1997

Harry met with all his Council, plus Moody, McGonagall, and Arthur and Bill Weasley, after lunch. "First of all, Mister Weasley, Luna has a press release for you. The first three pages will be printed in tomorrow's Prophet, and those and the next five pages will be printed in the next issue of The Quibbler. The full twelve pages are for your eyes and the Minister's only." Arthur nodded.

"Basically, just so you and a few others know now, all the known dementors which went over Voldemort have been destroyed."

Arthur, the twins, and Hagrid were totally stunned. Hermione and Tonks, who had only come back from their overseas trip that morning, were elated by the news. Harry went on. "In a joint mission some of my Paladins and the Order took out four of the nests. We arranged for other allies to destroy the others."

"Don't forget that you were the main reason why those four nests were destroyed," Remus pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "I was there, and so were others. We were all needed."

"Right," Arthur agreed, somewhat doubtfully. "Still, the dementor threat is over?"

Harry looked at Russell, who answered. "If our estimates, which were thirty percent higher from any we got from the Ministry, were correct, then we eliminated all the known dementors which went over to Voldemort and then bred for the past year. There could have, of course, been more. If so, then we could have more attacks, but nothing on the scale of the summer and autumn of '96."

"We also have to remember that while all the dementors our Ministry employed went over to Voldemort, that was not all the known dementors," Remus added. "They perhaps accounted for seventy percent of the world's known dementors. We have no idea what the so-called 'wild' dementors might do."

"The Prophet press release mentions that, and the Quibbler's goes into more detail," Russell put in.

"The rest of the meeting is for our ears, and those of the Minister's, alone, at least until we release it," Harry warned the group. Everyone nodded. Harry took their eyes in, and then turned to Luna.

As Luna took out a stack of parchment, Harry said, "As you all know, on the Second of August, a group of us went back to the Chamber of Secrets and we did a very thorough search. We found several hidden doors. Some led to rooms which had been cleaned out. One led to a passage under the lake and up into the mountain to the northwest of Hogwarts. We also found one room that was filled with parchment. Luna, aided by Professors Russell and Lupin and Hermione in their spare time, has gone through the material."

Luna was very matter-of-fact for her. "There is no way to tell for certain if Voldemort entered this room while he attended Hogwarts. As far as we could tell, however, his avatar did not enter this room. The tracking spells we used can only be certain back some forty years or so with certainty. Professor Russell and Mister Moody, however, judged it likely that the room had been closed for centuries, but they cannot be totally sure." Everyone nodded their understanding.

"There doesn't seem to be much in the archive that would directly relate to the war or to understanding or stopping Voldemort," Luna went on. "However, it did include Salazar Slytherin's personal memoirs and diary, as well as letters to him and copies of his responses and some later material. If there is a qualified person we can turn these over to, it would really be a major historical document. May I please give a brief summary?"

"Very brief," Ron muttered. Hermione gave him a dirty look, but said nothing.

"In short, Slytherin's House was supposed to be for the ambitious and the politically minded. That changed forty-eight years after the school was founded, but was still being built."

"Hogwarts: A History says that the castle was built over a forty year period," Hermione said.

"Slytherin's notes show that the first students were admitted before the castle was built. They had a series of wooden lodges for the students of each House and a large wooden meeting hall for eating and some classes," Luna said. "Slytherin was building and reinforcing the foundations for sixty years. In the forty-eighth year of the school, Slytherin's only granddaughter was raped by a group of Muggles. From the time frame, it could have been a late group of invading Scoti or possibly a group of Vikings. Whomever it was, they were able to overcome her because there was a Muggle-born wizard in the group, educated, it says, 'in foreign lands and foreign ways'. This was just two years after Gryffindor had proposed that Muggle-born wizards of non-British and non-Saxon ancestry should be sought out and offered admission."

"And that started the breach between Gryffindor and Slytherin?" Neville asked. "The fact that Slytherin wanted to blame an entire group for the crime of one person?"

Luna nodded. "It was made worse when the granddaughter died giving birth to a son. Slytherin was not kind to the child, and when the child entered Gryffindor's House, Slytherin broke with the other three and left Hogwarts. A great grandson of his, through his second son, also left notes. He was apparently the first direct male descendant to attend Hogwarts after Slytherin left, and he taught for a few years afterwards. When he was not made Headmaster in 1206, he left the school and helped in the early years of building up Durmstrang, and it seems as if it was he who hatched the basilisk, not Slytherin himself. He had a younger sister, who married the wizard who took over Slytherin House after John Slytherin left. His name was Sylvester Gaunt."

"Riddle's connection with Slytherin," Harry pointed out for those who were not as familiar with Riddle's ancestry.

"Exactly," Luna agreed.

"I know a scholar in Canada who can take on the editing and annotations," Russell said.

"Why Canada?" Hermione asked.

"Almost any North American would be harder for Voldemort to influence," Russell pointed out.

"She would also be harder to discredit by his supporters and Pure-Blood activists in general."

"Look into it," Harry said. "Anything else?" Luna shook her head. "Hermione?"

"We've tracked down all the orphans still alive who the Headmaster had failed to track down," Hermione said.

"Even the one you said you couldn't find anything about?" Ginny asked.

"Yes. I found her in Winnipeg, Canada. As we thought, she was too young when she was there to have any useful information. The same was pretty much true of all the others. Still," Hermione said with a small smile of satisfaction, "we did find one in Salt Lake City who at least knew and remembered Riddle as more than an aloof teen who went away to school most of the year. Better still, she was not on the list of those the Headmaster had looked for and interviewed."

"And?" Harry asked.

"Deborah Ann Johnson, Childs as she was then, is a little older than Riddle. She was born in 1917. Her father died in the Great War and her mother and other near relatives were killed in the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918-1919. She was placed in the orphanage in early 1919 and she stayed until 1933. She came back as a part-time cook in 1936 and she stayed until the orphanage was destroyed in 1945. Since she was only a part-time employee, she wasn't on the list the Headmaster had, and he didn't have her married name."

"Isn't eighty awfully old for a Muggle?" Ron asked.

"It can be," Hermione agreed. "She's pretty alert, and showed no sign of mental problems."

"So, she knew Riddle from the time he entered the place, and could have heard about how he acted both before and after he entered Hogwarts," Harry summed up.

"Exactly."

"When was Riddle there?" Neville asked.

"Riddle was born in 1927 and was at Hogwarts from 1938 through 1945. He left the Muggle orphanage during the summer of 1944. He and Deborah therefore overlapped from 1927 through 1933 as orphans, and then from 1936 and 1944. She worked part-time taking care of the younger orphans from 1930 through 1933 while she was still there as an orphan herself."

"So, what did she remember of Riddle?" McGonagall demanded.

"First of all, that he was very smart," Hermione admitted. "He learned to read by the age of four with just a little help from herself and one of the other workers. He was never popular with the other children. She said that most children formed cliques, while Riddle was a loner."

"She seemed to have mixed feelings for Riddle," Tonks mused.

"In what way?" Harry asked.

"Mrs. Johnson rather liked him, and said that she never had anything to complain about him. He was smart, polite, and he even gave her a small gift when he left the orphanage in 1944."

Those that knew about the Horcruxes looked stunned for a moment, but then saw Hermione shake her head slightly. "Not to draw out the suspense, it was a magical object in the form of a silver locket. It was enchanted to be something called a comitatus pledge."

"Well," Russell said, "that's an old-fashioned item."

"Fine," Ron said, "what's a commie-whatever do?"

"Warlocks used to give them to Muggles they found worthy," Russell explained. "A thousand years ago, in a few places, warlocks used to hunt Muggle peasants for sport, and weren't above going after the knights when they thought they could get away with it. Some gave these items to Muggles they wanted to keep safe, usually because they worked for the wizard. If you wear it long enough, say three years non-stop, you give off a faint magical signal for the rest of your life."

"She still does," Hermione agreed. "Her granddaughter wears it these days."

"I never heard of such a thing," Ron said. "I'm not surprised Riddle knew about these things, but is anyone besides me shocked that he actually made one?"

Everyone looked at Harry, who shrugged. "Did the woman know if Riddle made any others for anyone at the orphanage?"

"Not as far as she knew," Hermione answered. "I would say that she was the only one who ever went out of her way to be nice to Riddle at that orphanage, at least who wasn't weaker than he was."

"And being a natural bully, he no doubt just harassed them," Harry agreed, who knew about bullies.

"I take it that's why she had mixed feelings for Riddle," Remus said thoughtfully.

"Exactly," Tonks jumped in. "She never saw any evidence that Riddle picked on, let alone abused, anyone at the orphanage. She did know, however, that most of the children around his age and younger were afraid of him."

"What did she have to say about that?" Harry asked.

"That in that orphanage, you were either the biter or the bitten," Hermione said. "From what I could

gather from all the people I met and the records my Mum dug up, this orphanage was not a good place to live, even as far as these places went, but that it wasn't the hell-hole some were at times. Riddle was a survivor, and as he gained some magical power, he used it to put himself at the top of the dirt pile."

"To go back to Ron's question," Harry said thoughtfully, "I guess we shouldn't be too terribly surprised he gave one of these out. It was more a gesture of the superior wizard than any sign of real compassion. By admitting there was one good Muggle, he probably just wrote off all the others. If there are any other worthwhile Muggles, then some other wizard should mark them as their property."

"That could be true," Russell said. "Unfortunately, that was the old attitude." He looked at Hermione. "So, we can ignore the orphans for any leads?"

"It looks like it," Hermione agreed. "I wish it hadn't taken so much time."

"It was a lead that just didn't work out," Harry said firmly, moving things forward to new business. "One of two things is going to happen once he finds out his dementors are gone. First, Voldemort lashes out. Second, he stays underground for a while. If the first, we're going to be very busy. If it's the second," he added to Hermione, who was still looking a bit down from her lack of success with the orphans and staff of the orphanage, "you, Luna, Remus, and the Prof are going to have to sift through tons of mostly useless information, looking for clues."

"Then let's hope we sift through tons of information, instead of dead bodies," Hermione said.

Tuesday, September 9, 1997

"This tells us next to nothing," Voldemort snarled, tossing The Daily Prophet to the floor in disgust. When Snape said nothing, Voldemort looked at him. "What do you believe you discovered?" Snape almost looked afraid. "Speak!"

"I know this information is likely inaccurate," Snape managed to say.

"But if it isn't? there is no clue about who destroyed my dementors!"

"Well, if it's accurate, we know who destroyed nearly a third of them."

"Potter!" Voldemort spat.

Snape nodded. "I know the Order. Unless there was some way to sneak past the natural wards generated by the hibernating dementors, Potter had to have broken them down. No one else in the Order could have broken through." It was a bitter pill for Snape to swallow, but logic suggested no other likely explanation to him.

Voldemort, however, thought of another. "Dumbledore could have broken through." He hadn't believed that possible, but he could not believe Potter could have done it, since he knew that he could not have done it at Potter's age.

Snape took a step back in fear. "Dumbledore is dead."

"I am certain Dumbledore, aided by you and others, could have fooled my idiotic followers!" Voldemort snarled. He raised his wand.

"Master!" Snape pleaded.

"It is time I made certain that I know all your deepest secrets, Severus Snape. Legilimens!"

Minister Scrimgeour glared at Harry, who, unrepentant, merely looked up at him. "And this is all

you're going to tell me?" Scrimgeour demanded for the third time.

"Yes," Harry said. "If it makes you feel any better, only one person besides myself knows much more than you."

"It doesn't," the Minister snapped. "These people. . . ."

"The people who helped us aren't interested in helping any more than they did," Harry said firmly. "They were interested in having their shot at the dementors, and couldn't care less about Voldemort, one way or another. If there was any chance you could influence them, I would tell you how."

"And, like Dumbledore, I have to take your word?" Scrimgeour stood up, angry. "That is no way to run a government!"

"You know, Percy said something similar to me," Harry said mildly. "And I understand what you and he mean. It is not a good way to run a government." Harry stood and looked Scrimgeour in the eye. His expression hardened. "And you know what? I'm not the government, but I'm stuck running things because the governments of Europe have screwed up for at least the last hundred years. The governments had over thirty years to deal with Grindelwald and failed, leaving it to Dumbledore. Our Ministry had ten years to fight the first rise of Voldemort, and it totally screwed up every step along the way."

"The Minister at that time could not know. . . ."

"The Ministry failed!" Harry barked. "Dumbledore had to step in again and set up a para-military group with about one percent of the Ministry's resources at the most and fought Voldemort to a stand-still."

"Using Ministry personnel. . . ."

"Who cared more about fighting evil than paperwork," Harry agreed. "Then Voldemort was gone. Every Ministry in Europe knew he wasn't dead. Why wasn't he tracked down and captured or destroyed? When he started making his comeback, what did the Ministry do to stop him? Persecute Dumbledore and try to have me either killed or at least thrown out of the magical world. What the hell kind of government is that? Why should I subordinate myself to that?"

Scrimgeour flushed but said nothing.

"I would rather let you handle everything, but you can't really do it, can you?" Harry demanded.

"No, what you want is for me to do all the dirty work but under your direction. Well screw that! We can either work together like we have been, or you can go to hell and I can do my job!"

"Maybe Weasley is right, and you are a glory hound," Scrimgeour accused.

"Nonsense," Harry said with contempt. "A hundred years from now, or at least two hundred years from now, considering how much longer we live than Muggles, you'll be the one getting most of the credit."

"And how do you figure that?" Scrimgeour demanded, doubtfully.

"There are two reasons," Harry answered, bringing out ideas that Hermione and the Prof had debated with others in the inner group on and off for a while. "First of all, most of what we do is in the shadows and most of what you and the Ministry is being reported. Secondly, while getting rid of Voldemort is the most important short-term goal, destroying the Muggle-hating part of the magical community who keep backing Dark Wizards against Muggles, the Muggle-born, mixed-bloods, and incidentally the power of the Ministries is more your job than mine, and it's the one thing that might prevent some new lunatic from coming along and stirring up this much trouble. If you and the other governments can get that done, as you are by stripping people like the Malfoys of their protection, in the long run the victory will be yours, not mine, and I won't mind that a bit."

Scrimgeour snorted in derision although, truth be told, Harry's arguments had had some impact on

him.

A knock on the door interrupted Harry and the Minister. "What is it?" Harry demanded.

Alastor Moody and John Russell came into the room. "My lord, Minister?" Russell said, "you need to come with us."

"Why?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"Potter here was sent a present," Moody declared.

"What kind of nonsense is this?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"Who sent it?" Harry asked.

"Voldemort sent it," Moody said.

"But it wasn't an 'it'. . . ." Russell broke in.

"Well, it is now," Moody argued.

"I suppose you're right," Russell agreed.

"This 'it' was a . . . 'who'?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"It was," Russell agreed.

"I suppose," Moody nodded.

"Voldemort sent a body?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"Aye, he sent a body, but not a dead one," Moody answered.

"What. . . ?"

"It looks like long-term exposure to Legilimency and Cruciatus," Russell answered.

Moody nodded. "Several hours of both. Right now, at least, there's not much left except a breathing shell."

"Who was it?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"Severus Snape," Moody answered.

Chapter XVII

A knock on the door interrupted the continuing argument between Harry and the Minister over Harry's role in the fight against Darkness. "What is it?" Harry demanded.

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"Who was it?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"Severus Snape," Moody answered.

"I would imagine Voldemort sent a note?" Harry asked.

"A piece of parchment with the Dark Mark on it and addressed to you, my lord," Russell agreed. "It merely said 'He was more on your side than mine. I am finished with him, perhaps you would like a turn'."

"Why would he say that?" Scrimgeour demanded of Russell and the others.

Harry gestured for Russell to answer. "There is no doubt that Snape killed Dumbledore. The question has been, was he playing Dumbledore the whole time, or was he trapped into killing Dumbledore to continue the fight against Voldemort?"

"I do not understand," Scrimgeour admitted. "I thought he was a traitor, pure and simple."

"Snape was never pure, let alone simple, about anything," Harry spat.

"True," Russell agreed. "Dumbledore always knew that young Malfoy was assigned to kill him, and that Snape was to kill him if Malfoy failed. Snape did not try to hide that from the Headmaster. As for his real motives, well, Snape may have been able to fool Dumbledore, or Voldemort, or both. One of those three things must have happened. I asked Harry this and now I'll ask you. Tell me, who do you think he could have more easily fooled? Voldemort, who distrusts everyone but himself, but who believes he cannot make an error, or Dumbledore, who believed in giving

everyone a second chance yet knew he could make a mistake? I would say he could have more easily fooled Voldemort. And tell me, could Snape really have saved Dumbledore that night? Surrounded by Death Eaters who all wanted to kill the Headmaster, could Snape have saved him? I don't see how."

"Probably not," Scrimgeour agreed.

"And now consider this, if Snape decided that he could not save the Headmaster, do you think he would have been cold enough to have killed the Headmaster as he did rather than try to fight his way out and most likely lose Dumbledore, Malfoy, and himself anyway?"

"I don't know him that well, but from what I've heard, if anyone could do that, this Snape could have," Scrimgeour admitted. "So you're saying you believe that Snape was at least anti-Voldemort all along, but killed Dumbledore to further his infiltration into Voldemort's organization in order to disrupt it later?" He frowned. "But why . . . oh, of course. Dumbledore, and the Ministry for that matter, might fight Voldemort, but it's Potter here who has to destroy him. All else can be sacrificed to that end as far as someone like Snape would be concerned with. Snape would become close enough to Voldemort to at some point get information to Potter."

"Yes, exactly," Russell agreed. "From what I heard from Pettigrew and young Malfoy, Snape should have been able to figure out that Pettigrew might have been getting ready to betray the werewolf attack. If so, he did not do anything to stop Pettigrew. In fact, he actually went out of his way to mention some minor plans to Pettigrew that Pettigrew didn't know the details of. It gave us a number of clues on how to track down some of the money trails."

"What did Pettigrew think about Snape?" Scrimgeour asked.

"He thought that Snape was a follower of Voldemort who was still keeping some options open," Russell said.

"Whatever," Harry said with a wave of his hand. "It doesn't matter now why Snape did what he did. He's a vegetable. Why should I go see what's left of the . . . whatever is left of him?"

"He taught you Legilimency, and you were in his mind," Moody pointed out. "You might be able to see past his insanity and learn something."

Harry blanched. Scrimgeour thought this was solely because he was being asked to invade an insane mind. This was partly true, but Russell and Moody knew an additional reason -- they were also asking indirectly Harry to see if he could at least partially cure Snape, so that his mind at least would be more easily accessible.

Finally, after wrestling with his conscience, Harry said in a resigned tone. "Fine. I'll do it."

Thursday, September 11, 1997

"No, there is no news, Minister," Madam Pomfrey stated wearily. The man firecalled six times a day.

"How can there be NO news?" Scrimgeour demanded. "Is Potter finished? What is Snape's condition? What do I have to do, send in aurors to drag them to St. Mungo's?"

Madam Pomfrey arched an eyebrow. "Do you really think that would work, Minister?"

"I suppose not," he admitted, "at least the part about dragging Potter in. Still, I need to know what is going on!"

"As I have repeatedly told you, Mister Potter enters Professor . . . I mean Mister Snape's mind for about twenty minutes every four hours and attempts to heal it. Mister Snape has shown some REM. . . ."

"What?"

"Rapid Eye Movement, showing there is some higher brain activity. Miss Granger, that's right, this is news since the last time you called. You call so often I sometimes forget what I haven't told you." Scrimgeour scowled, but said nothing. "Anyway, Miss Granger is going to arrange some Muggle tests for Mister Snape. Some of their newest tests are more sophisticated than ours in detecting higher brain activity and locating physical damage. Mister Moody should actually be on the way to your office to make the arrangements. And yes, Miss Granger sent along some detailed information on what we hope to understand and discover. There is a healer from Toronto who specializes in melding Muggle and magical techniques for healing brain injuries, with some remarkable successes. She'll consult with her after the tests are completed."

"So," the Minister asked in a disappointed voice, "if there is going to be any progress, it's most likely going to be long term?"

"Exactly. Now, if you'll excuse me, there were a few students injured in a potions accident who I need to get back to."

Saturday, September 20, 1997

Harry sat down with his Council, plus of course McGonagall, Moody, and Arthur Weasley.

"First of all," Harry said, "I have to say I don't have anything to report my self. I've been working with Snape, and it's rough going, with less and less return as far as I can see." He shrugged.

"Hermione's still in contact with that healer in Toronto, and we might see if we can get her to treat Snape and look at Neville's parents, too."

Neville smiled hopefully.

"So, anyone NOT have anything to report?" Harry asked. Ginny and Ron raised their hands.

"Anyone want to go first? Headmistress?"

McGonagall nodded regally. "I have been discussing next year with the Board of Governors. They are amenable to considering allowing the Sixth and Seventh years to come back. It will take some time to work on details."

"The Minister is hoping for another progress report," Arthur said next.

"But there is nothing new to report," Harry pointed out.

"I know, but he still wants one."

Harry frowned. "The Minister can go and f. . . ."

Remus jumped in. "The dueling clubs are going well, considering we're just getting started." He shrugged. "That's really about it."

"Tonks and I have been testing the wards," Moody barked. "Everything SEEMS acceptable, but we'll keep at it." Tonks rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

"Remus, Miss Lovegood, Miss Granger, and I have worked through the remaining materials from the entrance to Slytherin's tunnel," Russell told the group. "The remaining material wasn't as interesting and even less relevant than the first batch we told you about."

"We will release some of the translations soon," Hermione said with a smile, "just to let the world know that Voldemort missed the material."

"What's the point of that?" Neville asked.

"It will make him wonder what else he missed that we haven't released," Russell said with a nasty smile.

"What will that accomplish?" Ginny asked.

"Voldemort has an outsized ego that makes any Malfoy look modest," Harry answered. "The longer he plots an offensive, the greater his advantage over us, unless we get very lucky and get some clue as to where he might be hiding. Add to that, he doesn't respect us, but would Slytherin, and any information we gain from Slytherin. If we can get him to doubt himself, he's more likely to make some error we can take advantage of."

"Perhaps," McGonagall agreed. "However, Tom Riddle was never one to question himself, even when he was a youngster."

"That's why questioning himself at this point might lead to a mistake," Russell pointed out.

"The psychological edge has always laid with Voldemort," Remus said quietly. It was only a few days after a full moon, and he was still tired. "We need to continue to chip away at that. Harry's becoming the White Warlock helped with the general wizarding population, but we need to undermine Voldemort and his followers."

The teens looked satisfied. Harry turned to Arthur. "Anything else from the Ministry?"

"The European Ministers will be meeting in secret next month," Arthur reminded them. "The Minister would prefer that the new elf regulations would come from more than just our Ministry, but he assured me that they will be announced by end of the year, and will be in effect by the spring equinox."

"It's still not enough," Hermione grumbled.

"Excuse me, miss," Dobby said tentatively, "but new rules are as far as most elves can accept."

Hermione looked mulish, but backed down at Harry's scowl. "Anything else?" Arthur shook his head. "Hagrid?"

"Tha forest seems quiet," Hagrid said. "I'd almost say, too quiet, if ya know wha' I mean."

"And your brother?"

"He's visitin' Olympe's sister in France," Hagrid said. "If they get along fine, he won' be back." Everyone seemed relieved at that news.

"Fred and George?"

"We're done," Fred said quietly.

"All of it?"

"For you and for the DA," Fred said.

"Does this mean we get to learn what these two have been up to?" Hermione asked.

"Some of it," Harry said. "Neville, how goes the DA?"

"Well," Neville answered. "I really think that between the DA and the dueling clubs, the students will be ready for anything by spring."

"We have some new tools for them," Harry said. "Ginny, I think you should recruit some of the DA and Third years into a separate group."

"Doing what?" Ginny asked eagerly.

"I was thinking of having a broom squadron, some acting as scouts in case of attacks and some attacking as an actual attack group."

"Is that wise?" McGonagall asked. After all, the students were her responsibility.

"If we can keep Voldemort out of the castle, they wouldn't be useful. However, we can't overlook the possibility that Slytherin left some other way into the castle other than the Chamber and the

secret tunnels we've located. Similarly, we can't discount the idea that he could get on the grounds. He can certainly get as close as the Forest. In case of any kind of attack, the older students have to be ready to defend themselves."

"I must reluctantly agree," McGonagall said with a sigh.

"I wish all the Sixth and Seventh years were here," Luna said.

"I would imagine that was why the Governors leaning towards Riddle were happy to agree to open up without them," McGonagall said drily.

Saturday, September 27, 1997

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the elusive Mister Potter," Scrimgeour nearly snarled.

Harry glared at the Minister. "I've been inside a lunatic's mind most of the month, and it wasn't a very nice place even before he was crazy."

"I can believe that. Have you learned anything?" the Minister demanded.

Harry pulled a sealed envelope from his robe and tossed it onto the Minister's desk. "A few more names, and some solid leads for the European Ministries. Nothing spectacular. Most of his memories aren't really accessible."

"Too bad." Scrimgeour picked up the envelope. "You and I know that Voldemort's still out there, up to something. Most people are hoping he's disappeared for good." He grimaced. "It's a good thing that we stripped Malfoy and the others of their estates. There'd be even more yelling, calling for an end to 'over-spending' if we weren't using the confiscated money."

"Are those people Dark or just stupid?" Harry asked.

"Short-sighted, for the most part," Scrimgeour said with a shrug. "It was a bother at the time, but now I'm glad you had me get rid of Umbridge. We uncovered a lot of shady deals that let us get rid of some of her and Fudge's less savory supporters, and that gives me a hold on the ones still at the Ministry. If they push too hard, they know they'll go down before I do." Harry winced. "Yes, I know, this is not a good way to run a government, but we also need people in their jobs, and we really don't have all that many people to replace them with -- we used them to fill in the slots of the people we already arrested or let go. I know something about Muggle governments, too, you know. We're no worse than about two-thirds of them, and no worse than any of them were a hundred years ago."

Harry said nothing but didn't look impressed. "Go ask your friend Granger," Scrimgeour said.

"Then ask Russell or your werewolf about wizarding society and people in general. Tell me, you know Muggles. If every Muggle had the power the average wizard had, would it be easier or harder to govern them? Especially if the members of their police and military had no more power than the average citizen?"

"Probably much more difficult," Harry admitted. "I might have to accept it, at least for now, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"True," Scrimgeour said. "I don't claim to like it either, but that's what I have to work with." He waved the envelope. "You didn't really come here yourself just to give me this, did you? Russell or Tonks or even young Weasley could have done that, or given it to Arthur for that matter."

"Hermione had an idea."

Scrimgeour didn't need any further clue. "To actually send Snape to that healer in North America instead of just consult?"

"Exactly."

"We don't have an extradition treaty with the North American Confederation," Scrimgeour pointed out.

"I wouldn't like that it, either," Harry agreed. "I want to see him punished for killing Dumbledore."

"And what does Granger have to say?" Percy Weasley had shared his opinions of the interactions of the group around Potter.

"That he's been punished -- he's still being punished for that matter -- which is true," Harry answered.

"And?"

"And I while I am not willing to condemn him to insanity if he can be helped, that doesn't mean I don't want him punished."

"What if he can still make a real contribution to the fight?"

"Then as far as I'm concerned, he can share a cell with Pettigrew for years instead of decades," Harry answered.

Scrimgeour laughed, not a pretty sound. "I'm glad to know you're human after all, Potter. What do you, or your friends, want from me?"

"They want permission to send Snape to Toronto," Harry said.

The Minister thought about that, and asked, "And what do you want?"

Harry shrugged. "How about a grant to a certain healer and her team to come and study the effects of the Cruciatus on the nervous system?"

"Snape and the Longbottoms?"

Harry nodded. "It will cost sixty to seventy-five thousand Galleons. I've arranged for thirty thousand, and St. Mungo's will match that through their foundation and some medical donations from other medical facilities around the world who want the same answers."

"Which means you might need up to fifteen thousand more?"

"Not in cash," Harry said. "Moody estimated that would be the cost of around-the-clock security for four months. He said that there was a French firm that might be trustworthy and that it has British operatives. A few of their ops, some of your regular security people, and an auror to supervise them, along with Moody. How does that sound?"

Scrimgeour gave a short, silent laugh. "Only Moody would say they only 'might be trustworthy', and you're right. These people would need protection. Besides the obvious, are there any other reasons why we should?"

Harry nodded. "Think of it as an investment into security, or at least for the security forces. If there is a cure for long-term Cruciatus torture, you need to know it."

"That's very true," Scrimgeour agreed. "I tell you what. I'll give you a tentative yes, and I'll let you know if we decide otherwise by next Friday. If you don't hear differently from Arthur, he and I will start the ball rolling."

"Thank you, Minister."

Scrimgeour stopped Harry with an upraised finger. "If it works, we all share the credit."

"Of course."

"Was there something else?"

Harry smiled, "I just wanted to remind you that you certainly have my support for the last version of the elf regulations that I saw. It's a good starting place."

Scrimgeour winced. The regulations were about as far as he wanted to go. "I'll get them promulgated, Potter, don't worry."

"I'm not, since I have a lot of confidence in you," Harry retorted. "I know these are as far as you want to go. Believe it or not, they go almost as far as I would want to go, for now. We need to let these work for at least ten years or more before we even think about any serious improvements."

Scrimgeour sighed.

Chapter XVIII

Sunday, October 12, 1997

"Well, Potter, what do you think?"

"Not bad," Harry said.

"Not bad?" Madam Hooch was surprised. "I think they're doing very well!"

"They're flying brilliantly," Harry agreed, as he watched the twelve members of the 'Flying Squad', led by Ginny, fly through an obstacle course at quite acceptable speeds. "They've made great progress in just three weeks of actual flying."

"Then why 'not bad'?" Hermione, who was in the group watching, asked.

"Because the goal isn't just to fly hard, fast, and maneuverable," Hooch said with a slight sigh. "As far as I know, there have never been any real air battles in the whole history of flying, or even major attacks from the air for that matter."

Hermione frowned. "None at all?"

"Oh, there have been fights on broomsticks," Hooch said, "but never more than two or three on either side. There have also been many cases of wizards on brooms or carpets or such flying to attack stationary targets, but never a real battle."

Ron poked Harry. "He's ready."

"Who is?" Hermione asked.

"Signal the flyers to come over," Harry said.

"Harry, what are you up to?" Hermione demanded.

"A practical test," Harry said. "Remus?"

Remus flicked his wand, and a bundle of brooms suddenly appeared in front of him just as Ginny and the flyers came over. "You all flew great," Harry told them. "Now we'll have two practical tests. In the first case, at least, you are defending."

"What are we defending?" Ginny asked.

"Not a 'what'," Harry answered. "'Who'." He pointed over towards the distant Quidditch stands, where a figure waved from the ground entrance. "That's Neville. The other Proctors -- Mark Stover, Carla Brown, Anthony Goldstein, Ernie Macmillan, and Susan Bones plus Hermione and Remus will be defending Neville from the ground. The flying squad will be defending from the air. Now, we all know the coloring spells, right?" Everyone remembered the simple spells which turned things, or people, different colors. They had all learned them in their first weeks at Hogwarts, where it had been common to prank each other by turning each other various colors. "The ground team will use blue. The flying squad will use orange. The attack squad will use red. Color spells and shields are all that are allowed."

"Who are the flyers?" Hermione and Ginny demanded together.

"Ron, Tonks, Fred, George, Luna, and myself." Harry turned to Hooch and McGonagall, who, along with Russell, formed the rest of the observers. "Would you three care to join in the attack?"

Hooch and McGonagall smiled grimly and nodded. Russell requested and was given permission to join in with the ground defenders instead. "Our goal is to 'kill' Neville," Harry reminded everyone. He turned to the ground defenders. "We can launch anytime after thirty minutes," he warned them. "You'd better get going."

"Where do you attack from?" Ginny asked.

"That's something you'll have to wait to find out," Harry answered.

Fifty minutes later, the three groups limped together to examine the damage inflicted on each other. Luna had been knocked out of the attack group fairly early on, for while she was a very good flyer she was not a great one. The rest of the attackers had repeatedly scored hits on both the ground group and the flying defenders, mostly due to the fact that the attackers (not counting Luna) outclassed all the flying squad other than Ginny.

When the group had healed each other others' minor injuries (caused mostly by mid-air collisions and stumbles on the ground) and everyone had been restored to their normal colors, the twins reluctantly brought out some of the weapons Harry had ordered. "I think we'll sit this next round out," Fred said.

"Yes, err, we need to study the effects from a distance," George added.

"Nonsense," Harry said, "you need to see things up close and personal, like the rest of us. You DID remember to bring blanks, didn't you?"

"A few," George agreed.

"Some of the regular ones might have gotten mixed up with the blanks and duds," Fred acknowledged.

"Well, you two have ten minutes to sort things out," Harry snapped, "because you two lead the next round of attacks."

Fred and George sighed, and went to work.

"What do we have?" Hermione asked. "I want to know before we see them in action."

"I certainly agree," McGonagall stated. She folded her arms. "Unless there is an actual attack, these students are my responsibility."

"For the flying squad, the primary air weapons are four take-offs on a Muggle smart guided missile, although a small one," Harry answered. He pointed at two piles of narrow metal tubes, 42 inches long, some green, some purple, some striped, and some orange. "Before they can be used, each flyer has to touch each tube with their wand while saying an incantation. For the green ones, they also have be spelled while touching the tube with the end of their broom. The orange missiles will head for any wand more than twelve feet in the air that it wasn't set to ignore. The green ones will head towards any brooms. The purple are air-to-ground missiles, in case the flyers get a shot at massed targets. The striped ones are for Inferi, if any ever show up."

"But Madam Hooch said that there have never been any air battles," Neville pointed out. "Why prepare for one?"

"Because it's still possible that Voldemort might send an assault force at the castle that way," Harry answered. "If he does, well, then we will have the first air battle." He turned to Hooch. "We'll have to set these to our wands and brooms as well."

"How many can they be set for?" Hooch asked Fred.

"It should be limitless," Fred answered. "We didn't test for more than twenty, but there weren't any problems."

"After each set of students leave every year, you should remove their settings," George added. "We built that in as well. These are for long-term defense, not just for this year."

"We didn't learn much in History of Magic. . . ." Fred started.

". . . but we did learn that there's always another Dark Lord wannabe, sooner or later," George concluded.

"Now, as for these six sets of spheres," Harry went on. "Notice they are coded not just by color but by shape. That way, the flying squad can learn to distinguish them even if there is a night attack."

"And what do they do?" Ernie asked. "Come to think of it, what happens if you get hit by a missile?"

"The anti-broom missiles should hit the bristle end," Harry replied, "setting them on fire. The anti-wand missiles should produce a small explosion of a freezing potion. Your wand hand should be numb for at least an hour. As for the spheres, these four are pretty simple. The orange ones also have the freezing charm. It dangerous only if you inhale a large amount of it. The small pile of sliver ones, well. . . ." Harry looked at Remus.

"Just in case Voldemort does have some more werewolves?" Remus asked.

Harry nodded. "It releases a cloud of silver dust, which will stick to the skin. It is potentially fatal if it's inhaled, but. . . ."

"But it would be very painful on the skin of a werewolf," Remus agreed.

Harry moved on quickly, "The yellow ones have a version of a Muggle concept called 'tear gas'. It will cause your eyes to burn, cause coughing and possibly vomiting. Again, it shouldn't be too harmful unless you inhale a strong concentration. The final one is a knockout potion."

"Why bother with the other ones?" Ron asked.

"Dispersal," Fred answered.

"The knockout potion doesn't spread very well," George added. "You can just trot right through it without inhaling enough to really affect you. The freezing and tear potions will spread over a ten yard area in less than a second and it will spread slowly unless there is a wind stronger than about eight miles per hour."

"The red ones produce a loud bang, but they are primarily useful for night fights," Harry went on, "as they produce a bright magical fire that lasts for three minutes. That means there will be a lot of light, but it won't start any fires. The small black ones, well, if you get hit by one of those, you could lose body parts."

"These are the duds," George said.

"We promise," Fred agreed.

"They had better be," Harry growled.

Monday, October 13, 1997

"Rough weekend, Potter?" Scrimgeour asked as Harry, limping and obviously hurting, came into the Minister's office led by Percy Weasley.

"We had a very tough training session yesterday," Harry said as Percy shut the door behind him. Harry jabbed his thumb in Percy's direction. "It was made worse by his twin brothers." The twins had misidentified one weapon as a blank.

"From what Weasley has said, I'm not surprised," Scrimgeour pointed out. "Anyway, thank you for coming."

"You're welcome," Harry answered. "Is this about the meeting you were supposed to have with the other European Ministers this month?"

"You mean you didn't know the date?" Scrimgeour asked, surprised.

"I'm sure some of my people know, but the main point, to me, is that you're meeting with them if you haven't already."

"I suppose so," Scrimgeour admitted. "Anyway, we met this past weekend."

"Good," Harry said simply. "How did the elf rights do?"

"As far as I'm concerned, it was a minor point," Scrimgeour answered with a scowl. "Still, let's start there. The rights bill will be announced by all the European Ministries on New Year's Day. They will be phased in over the next year."

"Good," Harry said simply. "What else did you discuss?"

Scrimgeour smiled with triumph. "We didn't just discuss, Potter. We're setting up a special task force for the various aurors around the world. The European Ministries are the last signing on."

"Let me guess, the North American Confederation is pushing this."

Scrimgeour shrugged. "Who else? They finally came up with both some seed money and some safeguards for national security."

"How long until they become effective?" Harry asked.

Scrimgeour sighed. "Probably more than a year. Yes, it's late. We just have to hope that it's not too late."

"You'll have someone brief Mister Weasley?"

"He should have the reports already," Scrimgeour assured Harry.

"Good." Harry pulled a set of parchment out of his robes. "Healer Johnson's report," Harry said simply.

"Snape?"

"Mostly recovered and as obnoxious as ever, from what I hear," Harry said.

"Any new information?"

"Not yet. Professor Russell should be seeing him today."

"How about the Longbottoms?"

"She says they might actually come around over the next few months," Harry said. "They'll never be fully recovered, but they might actually be functional."

"Great," Scrimgeour said. "They were both wonderful people."

John Russell entered the private, secure room at St. Mungo's. Severus Snape sat motionless in a chair looking out a window.

"Hello, Severus," Russell said.

Snape said nothing.

"Whatever complaints I might have, or have had, towards you, your being silent is not one of them."

"Do you know how I was found out?" Snape asked, giving in.

"How?"

"He could not believe you, let alone Potter, found out a way to destroy his dementors."

"Who did he think. . . ?"

"Dumbledore, of course. So, the greatest sin I ever committed came back to destroy what little chance I had to redeem myself."

"True," Russell agreed. "You don't have anything else to tell me?"

Snape made a slight gesture towards a pile of parchment. "I think it's all there. If not, I'll send it along, assuming I'm in any condition to remember anything."

"Why wouldn't you be? It's not like we can feed you to a dementor."

"Very funny, John," Snape retorted, although still without any venom. "Tell me, how did you figure out the dementors' locations, and how to destroy them?"

"There are other powerful, knowledgeable wizards in the world who helped us find them," Russell answered simply. "The thing you should remember is, the reason why we could destroy them is because of Harry."

"He really is this White Warlock?"

"He is."

Snape sighed, and simply said, "Shit."

After a long pause, Russell asked, "Nothing else to say or ask?"

"I take I am not to be executed?"

"No." Russell couldn't resist saying, "It looks like your destination will be where Harry suggested, although the term is yet to be determined."

"Look at those notes carefully, John," Snape said.

"I will."

After a few moments, Snape sighed and gave in. "Where is Potter having me sent."

"South America."

"Not that prison in Venezuela, or the one in Brazil I hope."

"Bolivia, actually."

Snape frowned. "That's not supposed to be too bad. Why there?"

"You get to have the cell next to Pettigrew."

Snape winced, but said nothing.

Friday, October 31, 1997

12:47 am

Hagrid moved quietly through the Forbidden Forest. Something -- someone? -- had screamed, and then the Forest had gone far too silent. That had brought Hagrid rushing out of his hut and into the Forest some twenty minutes before. He was tracing moist splotches which had to be blood of some sort.

He was alone. Fang had refused to come out from under the bed. This didn't bother Hagrid. Fang had grown more cowardly over the years and Hagrid had been going into the Forest for nearly fifty years, sneaking in the first time during the early spring of his Second year. Hagrid had spent decades as the assistant gamekeeper, and had taken over the groundskeeper job in addition. He had succeeded into the job of 'Keeper of the Keys' as well. He was a professor, and over the previous months he had filled in some of the gaps in his magical education that his expulsion had created, although he had picked up a great deal of magical knowledge over the decades.

"Stop right there, Rubeus Hagrid," a soft voice hissed from Hagrid's close right.

Hagrid spun around, the lantern in his left hand, his new wand in his right. Hagrid frowned. "Hello, Tom."

"I dislike that name," Voldemort said, taking a few paces closer to the half giant. "Still, from an old school acquaintance, I suppose I can tolerate it . . . for the moment."

"Goin' ta try an' kill me, are yeh?" Hagrid asked.

"Try?" Voldemort asked in return, amused. "I see you have a wand again. Do you really think you can defeat me?"

"Probably not," Hagrid agreed, moving slightly closer. "Yeh really wouldn' expect me to give up easily though, would yeh?"

Voldemort considered this. "To be frank," he finally said, "up until five or six years ago, I believe you would have just stood there in terror and let me kill you. You are more a wizard these days than you were for decades. It may give me more satisfaction to kill you if you fight."

"Yeh stole my education from me, Tom," Hagrid pointed out. "When I saw dementors, it was you I heard an' saw. I've grown pas' that. You can bet I'm gonna fight yeh."

"Oh, bravo," Voldemort sneered.

"Why did yeh frame me all those years ago, Tom?" Hagrid asked.

"Only because you were so easily framable," Voldemort answered. "It was nothing personal."

"Then why did yeh still try ta get me trouble the rest of the time yeh was still a student here?" Hagrid demanded. "I couldn' 'ave meant anythin' ta yeh."

"I believe it was because while you were still here, it meant that Dumbledore still suspected me, and might prove something," Voldemort admitted.

"That's kinda childish, ain't it?"

Voldemort scowled. "Enough of this." He started to raise his wand.

Hagrid quickly responded by throwing his lantern at Voldemort's chest as hard and fast as he could. Voldemort instinctively tried to move out of the way, but the lantern exploded against his back, setting his robe on fire. Hagrid strode forward, and his huge fist clubbed Voldemort to the Forest floor, breaking the Dark Lord's left shoulder.

Voldemort rolled away, screaming in pain. Hagrid tried to stomp on Voldemort's head. Had he connected, Voldemort's body might have been killed.

Voldemort just managed to twist out of the way, screaming, "Stupify!" as he did so. The twisting had also stopped the fire.

Stunning spells generally had little effect on Hagrid. Even Voldemort's, powerful as it was, would have had little effect had it landed in most places on Hagrid's body. This one, shot from the ground up, hit Hagrid in the testicles. That slowed even Hagrid down.

Voldemort knew he could not afford to toy with Hagrid like he had hoped. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" Hagrid collapsed on top of Voldemort, breaking the sternum and nine ribs of the self-proclaimed Lord. One of the ribs punctured Voldemort's left lung, another his spleen. His liver was also lacerated. Had he been fully human, he would have died within hours without medical attention. Voldemort's body, however, would repair itself, although it would take some three weeks to fully recover. It took him nearly an hour to crawl out from under Hagrid, and another ten minutes to make a portkey. Voldemort shot off the Dark mark, and activated the portkey.

The Forbidden Forest was completely silent for several more minutes.

Chapter XIX

Monday, November 3, 1997

Ron Weasley backed into a corner, a look of terror on his face and his hands upraised to ward off any punches or slaps which might come his way.

"How could you, Ronald Weasley!" Hermione screamed at him.

"You stupid, big-mouthed, unthinking git!" Ginny joined in, taking a slap at him, which Ron fended off.

"Admit it!" Ron protested, "you both thought just about the same things!" Ginny, having missed with a slap, aimed a kick at Ron's knee. "OW!"

Catching Ron bending down to grab his knee, Hermione connected with an open-handed slap that not only knocked him back into the corner but nearly knocked him senseless when his head connected with both sides of the corner. "Yes," Hermione quietly hissed, "the thought passed through my mind that as sad, as tragic, as horrible as Hagrid's murder was, it probably affected the power of Harry's Council less than anyone else's would have. And yes, as much as I cared for Hagrid, it would have been harder for me to have lost Ginny or Luna, or even the Prof. I was NOT so insensitive as to say anything like any of those to HARRY on the way BACK from the funeral!"

"Let alone say in it those the blunt terms you used!" Ginny raged at her brother. He had managed to stand back up, but was still cowering a bit under the verbal assault.

"Do you know why YOU are on the Council of the White Warlock, Ronald Weasley?" Hermione snarled. "Because you are important to Harry, which is the same reason why Hagrid was. Do you think that any of us couldn't have been skipped over? that Harry couldn't have found someone with more knowledge, more power, more experience? Of course not; we were chosen because Harry cares for us and trusts us. Because, as I said, we are important to him." She glared at Ron, and he shrank a bit further away from his lover. "I had thought you might be even more than merely important to me, but until you grow up, you can forget it. If you so much as touch that knob on the door connecting our suites, I swear it will be hexed so that your little willie shrinks so small that it will NEVER be seen again!"

Ron gulped in terror -- if anyone could do that, it was likely to be Hermione. Suddenly, Ginny and Hermione were moved aside by Luna Lovegood. Ron barely had enough time to register that it was Luna -- he could barely recognize her, as for the first time in his knowledge of her, she had a look of fury on her face. He stood straighter in surprise.

Luna merely took another step forward and flattened Ron with a right cross to the jaw, and the back of his head again hit the wall behind him, after which he collapsed on the floor. When Ron's ears stopped ringing, Luna spat at him, saying, "Harry is moving out of the castle to Hagrid's Hut, thanks to your inability to hold your tongue! That also puts him away from some of the castle's wards, which means he's in greater danger than he has been. Think about that, Ronald." Luna spun and stormed away. Ginny and Hermione followed.

Ron winced as he noticed that two of his teeth were loose.

"Little brother," Fred said sadly as he came up to Ron, "you need to learn to keep your mouth shut."

"I know," Ron admitted. "It was the wrong thing to say, and the wrong person to say it to, and certainly the wrong time. I knew it as soon as I said it, but I couldn't take it back."

"Come on," George said. "I think you'd better spend the next few weeks commuting between here and our store."

Hermione hesitated, but knocked on the door of Hagrid's, now Harry's hut. Fang barked an alarm from the inside. Hermione raised her hand to knock again, and the door opened by itself. She poked her head inside. "Harry?"

"Come on in," Harry called.

Hagrid's hut had a simple layout. It consisted to one very large room and two backrooms, one a bath and the other a storage room. Hermione looked around the large room. Nearly all of Hagrid's things were gone, except the hams and sausages he had made and, Hermione correctly guessed, the other ingredients and food stuffs were likely stored in the cupboards.

On one side of the fireplace was what looked like a small bed, although Hermione quickly realized that it looked that way only in comparison to the huge one that fit Hagrid which had been there. The larger kettles Hagrid had cooked in were gone from the other side of the fireplace, replaced by newer, smaller versions. Hermione noticed for the first time the oven built into the kitchen side of the fireplace, then she smiled at the small library ladder, which Harry would need to look into the upper shelves of the pantry.

Fang finally got off the old 'small' sofa Hagrid had kept for his normal-sized visitors, although it had mostly served as Fang's bed. All the other furniture was new, as were three of the six rugs on the floor.

Harry came out of the storage room. "Hi," he said simply.

Hermione gestured. "This is a bit of a surprise," she said. "You did a lot already."

Harry gave her a half-smile. "You should know better than that."

Hermione frowned, then said, "Dobby."

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "He did about half the work, and some of the other elves helped out with a lot of the rest. I made some executive decisions and they did almost everything else." He gestured at the store room. "I had to do most of the work in there, though."

"Why is that?" Hermione asked.

"Because that's partially Dobby's space, and he wouldn't make it nice for himself."

"What else is it?"

Harry shrugged. "Storage, of course. Actually, except for food stuffs, most of the shelves are empty. After all, I don't own much of my own, personal stuff, I mean. We built a back shed for the garden tools, although we had to shrink them down to a more usable size."

"Who is going to do Hagrid's work?" Hermione asked, "and where will they stay?"

"Remus is taking over the Third years, and Professor Grubbly-Plank agreed to come in from Hogsmeade to take the Fourth and Fifth years," Harry answered. "A friend of Charlie's is coming in to take over the gamekeeping job, and he'll do most of the groundskeeping, too. Neville asked to take over the gardens. Dobby is being invested right now as keeper of the keys."

Hermione smiled. "That's wonderful!" Then she frowned. "Why are you here, Harry? It's not just because Ron's a prat, is it?"

"I've already forgiven him," Harry said, "but he is a prat. Don't tell him he's forgiven yet. Let him come and apologize."

"Fine, but then why are you here?"

Harry shrugged. "I need some space, I think. I need to grow up a bit more, and I think I can do it best here, where everyone can't just drop in, like you all have been to the suite the last few weeks." He gestured to the fireplace. "Although no one can see in until I answer a firecall, it is fire-connected to all the Council's fireplaces, plus Mister Weasley, Moody and McGonagall's. I can floo

through to anyone of them, although only two people besides me can floo in here."

"Luna and who else?" Hermione teased.

"You."

Hermione blinked. "Really?"

"Really," Harry assured her. He gestured for her to sit in one of the two new stuffed chairs. Harry sat across from her.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Snape left some information with the Prof," Harry said. "He hasn't mentioned it, has he?"

"That he had some new information, yes," Hermione said. "He hasn't said what it is or that it was from Snape."

Harry sighed. "Good. I hope only he and I, besides Snape, knows anything. Assuming Voldemort doesn't escalate things over the next few weeks, I need you and Luna to research something potentially big."

"Alright," Hermione said cautiously.

"Set Luna to researching the magical side of this, while you handle the Muggle side." Hermione's eyebrows went up. "The Prof has some material to start things up. I don't want ANYONE to know what the two of you are researching, except for me and the Prof."

"Go on," Hermione said uncertainly.

"Since you'll be doing research around Europe, including Germany . . . you do read German, right?"

"I do," Hermione agreed.

"Good. Who should go with you for protection?" Harry asked.

"Who would you want to protect you?" Hermione asked.

Harry took the question seriously, and finally said, "I guess it will have to be Tonks, unless you know a member of the Order you'd prefer."

"Not Remus?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry answered so quickly that it surprised Hermione. Harry decided he had to explain.

"Leaving aside the fact that the full moon is the fourteenth, he could easily figure out what you're up to. I trust Remus, but better safe than sorry. Plus, of course, he has to teach."

"What in Merlin's name are we researching?" Hermione demanded.

"Eugenics, especially links between wizarding and Muggle ideas on Eugenics."

"But . . . but eugenics are nonsense! However it started, it took most of the racist nonsense of the nineteenth century and brought it into the twentieth, until it mostly died with the Nazis."

"From what little I understand, I partially agree with you. However, I need to mention one thing about eugenics you might not know, since the Prof didn't until Snape told him."

"And what is that?" Hermione demanded.

"Eugenics wasn't invented by Muggles in the mid-to-late nineteenth century," Harry answered. "It was invented by wizards over two hundred years ago. And yes, Muggle eugenics hit their peak so to speak, with the Nazis, but don't forget the Nazis were partially influenced by Grindelwald, who apparently came out of a secret cabal of wizarding eugenicists."

"And?"

Harry suddenly thought about a Muggle film he had once watched from the vantage point of under the stairs. "You told me that your father was a sci-fi fan, right?"

"Right. . . ."

"Think Star Trek."

Hermione looked confused.

"The Wrath of Khan, not to mention the episode it was based on."

"Oh. . . ." Hermione said, thinking about that. She thought about it some more, and said, ". . . shit."

Two hours later, there was another knock on Harry's door. Harry and Luna sighed. "Watch the stew, would you?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Luna said.

Harry opened the door, already knowing who was standing there. "Yes?"

Ron stood shivering in the windy cold evening. "Could I come in for a minute or two?" Ron asked.

"Sure. Come in."

Ron looked around the hut, a bit surprised at how quickly Harry had made it his own. He thought of all the times he had visited Hagrid here, and what that had meant to him, and even more what Hagrid had meant to Harry. He looked at Harry. "I'm sorry I spoke without thinking this morning."

"I know," Harry said. "It's easy to say stupid things under stress, things which might have some truth in them, but which are better left unsaid."

Ron sighed. "I wish. . . ."

Harry shrugged. "I forgive you, Ron. We're still friends, you know."

"I know," Ron said. "I know it's still unclear what will be happening, if the attack on Hagrid was an isolated incident or the signal for something to start, but do you think I could spend some time at the twins' shop?"

"I don't see why not, but why?" Harry asked. "I'm not upset with you."

"Hermione is still really ticked," Ron admitted.

"Hermione and Tonks will be off on a research mission in a few days," Harry said. "I was wondering if you could do the late shift patrols around the castle and give the Order guards some time off." A number of members of the Order were living at Hogwarts, for extra protection.

"Sure, I can do that," Ron said.

"Then take the patrols from midnight to Six until something happens or the Christmas break," Harry suggested. "You can spend the rest of your time at the twins', until Hermione finishes her assignment. By then, she might have calmed down."

"I hope so," Ron said, seeing Luna giving him a dirty look, although Harry couldn't see it.

"There's a direct floo connection with the twins' to Hogwarts, so if there's an emergency, the three of you can come through," Harry went on.

"True."

"Shouldn't you be helping Ginny with the flying squad, though?"

"She's mad at me, too, and said she didn't need any more help," Ron admitted.

Harry winced. "Well, you know how to handle your sister better than I do."

"Sometimes," Ron said. And with that, he took off.

Harry turned to Luna, who did not look happy. "Are you angry at Ron, too?"

"I was," Luna admitted. "I don't like that you're outside some of the wards. And I think I saw a swarm of Diligent Spangles. If they get into the thatched part of the roof. . . ."

Harry walked over and kissed Luna firmly. "If anyone could be safe here, it's me."

Friday, November 14, 1997

A mostly recovered Voldemort looked up from his throne at the six faces surrounding him. None were originally his people. His Death Eaters were nearly all gone. Now, he was leading a remnant of Grindelwald's true believers -- secret followers at that. "I have an assignment for you," he said, managing to appear recovered, although he was not. These six were nearly identical wizards, the current cream of a two centuries breeding experiment in eugenics. Where the center of this experiment was, even Voldemort did not know (at least not yet), but he was willing to put these experiments to the test.

All six were tall, athletic, and blond. All six were moderately powerful wizards. None was much above average in intelligence, but none were really dim in any way, except for a lack of initiative. "Potter still has eleven of his closest followers. The elf we can ignore. Three of the youngest do not leave Hogwarts. That leaves seven. Of those seven, two are the most vulnerable. Attack and destroy the twin Weasleys. Plan the attack well, but remember, offensive magic, especially large scale magic and dark magic, cannot be used in Diagon Alley."

"Has that been tested, Master, or could it be a tale?" Hermann, the leader of the six, asked. He had been the first of the attack wizards to join Voldemort, and had proven his skill in the attack on Hogwarts the previous June.

"Unfortunately, it has been tested. I have special portkeys for you, each keyed only to each of you. Even if someone has a firm hold on the portkey, once you activate it only you will be transported. Use them after the attack. You get one shot at the Weasleys twins. After that, use your location as a base to track down and attack any of the others on the Council. You might consider the animagus and the werewolf, but let circumstances determine that." Voldemort then asked, "Can I get any more of you?"

"For a specific plan, perhaps, my lord," Hermann answered. Their first loyalty was to the eugenics group, after all.

"I was thinking of an attack on the Weasley home on Christmas or New Years," Voldemort replied, suppressing his anger at having to deal with these people instead of just ordering them. "There is also the possibility of attacking the wizarding prison where some of my other followers are located."

"If you have any information or plans, I can pass them along," Hermann answered. "If they are approved, you may be given more of us."

Voldemort tossed the wizard a few rolls of parchment. "Then go." The six bowed and left. Voldemort turned to his snake. "If they totally fail, perhaps you and I shall go into hibernation for a few centuries. At least Potter will be gone then."

Nagini hissed in dissatisfaction.

"I know. I would dislike that option as well. Still, I must admit, I am running out of options for this timeframe." At that moment, an owl flew into the room.

Voldemort scowled, but took the message. He read it at a glance. "Well, perhaps I can arrange yet another option after all."

Sunday, November 16, 1997

"So, you're my new neighbor."

"Rot in hell, Wormtail," Snape snarled.

"This isn't hell, and I am not rotting," Pettigrew smirked. "Compared to the last eighteen years of my life, this is actually quite nice."

Snape looked around the cell he was in. They were deep in an old nickle mine, which prevented apparation. He had spent the days between his recovery in Britain and his arrival here being sprayed and dosed with potions to inhibit his magic. There was little light, other than the bright light coming in through the bars set in the upper half of his cell door. There was a bed, a chair, a table, a sink, an unlit candle, and a toilet. "If that is true, then you brought it on yourself," Snape retorted.

"And yet you, the would-be hero, are here with me," Pettigrew crowed.

"True," Snape admitted. "Tell me, do you still have that hand?"

If Pettigrew said anything, Snape could not hear it.

"I thought not," Snape retorted. "They have allowed me access to the interest on my money. Hogwarts paid fairly well, and I had few expenses. I also made a small fortune with patents on potions, and they did not take those away, either. So, you cannot bribe me to be nice to you, and you could never lord it over me, either as a follower of Potter and Black, or a follower of the Dark Lord."

Pettigrew still said nothing.

"What? Nothing to say, o mighty Marauder? Do you still think of yourself as one? Or does the thought of what you did to Potter and Lily make you cringe?"

"Fuck you!" Pettigrew screamed.

"Keep it down!" someone yelled in Spanish.

"Do you know why I'm here?" Snape demanded. "It was young Potter's idea! To torture the two of us!" Snape paused. "You know, that's about the most human, calculating action I've ever seen the little shite take."

"Harry sent you here?"

"Yes," Snape hissed. "To remind us what he thinks of us both. As long as we're both here, we're to have adjacent cells."

Pettigrew was again silent.

"So," Snape asked in the soft voice most of his students had feared more than any other, "how long are you in for again? That's right. Life. How long do you think you'll be here, Pettigrew? A hundred years?"

Pettigrew made a soft sound of frustration, but then demanded, "And how long are you here for, Snape? You murdered one of the most respected wizards of our time!"

"I killed him," Snape agreed heavily. "I did something terribly wrong for very good reasons. I gambled that I could control a situation, and lost that gamble three times." He had lost Draco; he had had to kill Dumbledore, he had failed stay close to Voldemort long enough to help bring him down. "How long am I here for? Ten years, maximum, and if some of my information helps destroy our dear Master, maybe less. So, while you stay in your cell for a further ninety years, I can devote myself to potions research."

Wormtail still said nothing.

"Since we're going to be neighbors for ten years, we should learn about each other. What should we talk about this week?" Snape inquired with a twisted evil smile. "Tell me, Peter, do you still have phantom pains from your missing hand?"

Chapter XX

Tuesday, November 18, 1997

"Would you take down the shutters before you go to bed?" George asked Ron, as the twins sat down to breakfast and Ron sat down to a late snack, "and help Fred watch the store for about an hour?"

Ron shrugged. "Sure, no problem." He yawned, having been up patrolling Hogwarts the previous night. "What are you up to?"

"He has to meet with the pin-head," Fred snapped.

"Why would you have to meet with Percy?" Ron demanded.

"Because part of his duties are to be one of the liaisons between the Ministry and Diagon Alley," George answered. "Unfortunately, our shop lies within his beat."

"Beat him," Fred muttered, dishing out the eggs and toast.

"And, as you might tell, I have a slightly less destructive attitude towards our beloved brother," George pointed out.

"Is there a problem?" Ron asked.

"When isn't there a problem where Percy is concerned?" Fred demanded.

George shrugged. "I don't know if the problem is Percy or those people in that new bakery next door, or both."

"Twits," Fred growled.

George shrugged. "Apparently, they claim some of the, well, the explosions that sometimes. . . ."

"On very rare occasions!" Fred added.

". . . sometimes occur here may have caused some of their rising doughs to fall flat," George admitted.

"They knew what kind of business we were when they moved in!" Fred protested. "One reason they moved there from up the street is because we get so many customers throughout the day! They can't have it both ways!"

"I know," George agreed. "Still, they complained to the Minister, and Percy has to look into things first. Come on, it's not like he can make any decision."

"Why not?" Ron asked.

"Because while WE know Percy would decide against us, unless we were totally in the right. . . ." Fred started.

". . . The bakery would assume the opposite, since he is our brother," George concluded.

"By birth only," Ron and Fred said together.

George shrugged. "He's always been this way, so far as any of us remember."

"We should ask Bill if he remembers Percy ever being just a normal boy," Ron commented.

"Or at least a normal Weasley," Fred agreed.

"I asked him that once," George said with a smile. "The answer was 'no'."

Promptly at 8:59, George opened the front door and walked out. Ron followed, and let in three early

customers, and then finished opening up the store by taking down the front shutters. It was a chill and misty morning in London, and both George and Ron missed that all three men looked quite a bit alike under their heavy hooded cloaks, since the cloaks themselves did not match.

Had they seen under the cloaks, they would have seen that the three wizards were actually remarkably alike.

"I do not think it appropriate that you adjudicate this dispute," Marcus the Baker stated to Percy Weasley.

"I of course cannot decide this matter," Percy agreed. "However, my transfer to another part of Diagon Alley is not finalized until the start of next month. Therefore, I must at least make the initial report. I know these two can be noisy and bothersome -- I had a bedroom next to them for sixteen long years -- but as George pointed out, you did know what kind of place you were moving next to. Isn't there some temporary accommodation we can come to? Some scheduling, perhaps?"

Marcus and George looked at each other.

"Maybe," Marcus agreed.

"Possibly," George said.

Percy sighed in relief, glad that only one of the twins had come. Together, they tended to bring out the worst in each other.

Suddenly, there was a wailing in the air. "What is that?" Percy demanded from George, since the sound came from the direction of the Wheezes.

Marcus had been born and raised in Diagon Alley. He already had his wand out and was heading for the door. "Someone used a major hex next door! That's the Alley ward alarm!"

Percy was startled, and so was a full step behind George. Marcus was rushing into the Wheezes, followed by George (who had his wand out) and Percy (who did not). George ran into Marcus, who had come to a full stop just inside the shop. George therefore did not see what had caused Marcus to pull up short.

Percy, however, did see why. Floating along the ceiling was a very small, but very clear, Dark Mark.

George untangled himself. He got over the shock of seeing the Mark first. "Fred! Ron!"

"Ron?" Percy demanded.

"Ron and Hermione had a fight," George said, standing and looking around in a panic. "He's been sleeping here since Hagrid's funeral."

"Oh, Merlin," Percy said pointing, just as the first aurors entered the shop.

"Wot's all this th . . . shite!" the young auror exclaimed when he saw the Dark Mark.

Percy pointed wordlessly again and swallowed his horror. "Someone call St. Mungo's!" he finally exclaimed.

The auror shook George slightly. "Where's your floo? I need backup and a trauma team!"

"This way," Marcus called. "It will be easier to get to mine!"

"What's happened here?" Ollivander demanded from the doorway. The rest of the Diagon Alley crowd melted away from him as Marcus and the auror ran out. The elderly wandmaker entered the shop, and quickly pulled his wand and hurried to George's side. Ron and Fred Weasley had been stabbed multiple times. "They're still bleeding, so they're still alive," Ollivander stated, pushing George out of the way. "Secure that one! Alive!" Next to Fred was another body, holding a knife. It

was clear that Ron or Fred had hexed this attacker, which had set off the alarms.

"Look, Moody, you are retired. You have no standing here," Scrimgeour stated firmly.

"And you know the two Weasleys are part of the White Warlock's Council," Moody pointed out. The two were arguing in a corridor at St. Mungo's

"And you aren't. So, bugger off!" Scrimgeour had once been Moody's subordinate, and the two had never gotten along well on a personal level, although they had often worked together professionally. "Or do I have to have you escorted out?"

"You wouldn't dare, boy."

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

At that point, there was a commotion behind them. The two old men turned to look down the corridor, and saw the crowd of on-lookers, reporters, Ministry yes-men, and the like scatter. In a few seconds, it was clear why.

The White Warlock was coming.

Harry Potter was still a slim, short, 17 year old wizard, but magical power was literally radiating from him. He was clearly not to be stopped. Hermione Granger and John Russell, each a few steps behind him, looked equally determined, if not as dangerous. Ginny Weasley, a few steps further behind, was clearly crying, and was escorted by Neville Longbottom.

"Where are they, and where is their attacker?" Harry demanded.

"The Weasleys are still being treated," Scrimgeour said. "They were each stabbed at least six times, and the knives were poisoned. The person that one of the Weasleys hexed is recovering, but cannot yet be questioned."

Harry turned to Russell. "Prof? Take care of that."

"No," Scrimgeour said firmly. "Engaging in a firefight is one thing. I will not, I cannot, allow you to interfere once a suspect is in custody." He stepped back when Harry rounded on him.

"I did not say the Prof was to torture him," Harry snarled. "I said he as going to get the information we all need out of him. He's done the same thing for the Ministry in the past, so don't give me any backtalk. I will NOT allow another attack on my people to go unanswered. YOU cannot allow ANY of the business people in Diagon Alley to be attacked. So, BACK OFF!" Some the hangers-on who had recovered enough to come a bit closer to the Minister again scattered in a panic.

The Minister, however, stood fairly firm. "Don't you threaten me, Potter!" Scrimgeour snapped. "You can probably take over the Ministry with little more than a snap of your fingers, but remember, that means you have to assume ALL the responsibilities."

"I am not trying to take over, you st. . . ."

Hermione stopped Harry by putting a hand on his wrist. Russell looked Scrimgeour in the eye. "You know perfectly well that I am qualified and allowed to participate in the questioning," he stated firmly. "I will share all information equally."

Scrimgeour scowled, but a flick of his hand satisfied Russell, Moody, and one of the Ministry hangers-on who had again sidled back. The three left in a hurry. Hermione nudged Harry. He scowled and put his hand out. Scrimgeour reluctantly took it, and managed not to express any surprise when Harry passed him a note. "Percy and the other Weasleys are down the hall, fifth room on the left."

Harry nodded, and Harry and his friends moved off. Scrimgeour glanced at the note, which merely said, 'TONIGHT, YOUR OFFICE, 9:00'

Meanwhile, Harry had barely had time to enter the waiting room and see the grief-stricken Weasleys before Percy was in his face. "Fred is dead," Percy spat. "Ron probably won't survive. Are you happy, Potter?" Harry said nothing, but Ginny quickly slapped Percy's left cheek, snapping his head to the right, where Hermione instantly connected with a left-handed slap nearly as stinging.

"Neville!" Harry commanded. Neville took the two women by the arm and lead them over to the grieving Mrs. Weasley, who was crying so hard that she hadn't heard what had happened. Harry took Percy by the chin and engaged his eyes. "Be at the Minister's office tonight at Nine," Harry barely whispered.

Percy blinked, never expecting that response. By then, Harry was already gone, over to comfort Mrs. Weasley. Percy felt a stab of jealousy, as he admitted to himself that Harry was better at comforting his mother than he was. Worse, Percy had to admit, was that his mother obviously was comforted by Harry more than she had been by him.

Percy turned and stared blankly into a corner, ashamed.

"What are you doing here, Weasley?" Scrimgeour asked after he returned to his office from dinner.

"Potter asked that I come," Percy answered simply.

Scrimgeour looked at Percy, and shrugged. Potter might not be shy about opening up if he had invited young Weasley. The two men walked towards the Minister's Office together. When they approached the main entrance, they stopped. Potter was waiting for them with Luna Lovegood.

The pair were dressed in what would soon be recognized as their uniform -- black dragon-hide combat boots, jeans, denim shirts and jackets, and, since they were in the magical world, denim cloaks.

"Minister, Percy," Harry greeted. "Hermione and the Prof are running a little late, but they are on their way."

"I'll see they get here," Percy said, turning back.

"That's not necessary," Harry said. Hermione and John Russell silently appeared right behind Harry. They were dressed much like Harry and Luna, although Hermione was wearing a long denim skirt.

"How. . . ?" Scrimgeour started, but he quickly regained his poise. Percy just stood there with his mouth open.

"It's just a matter of power," Harry said. He took off his cloak, and the other three followed suit. "We have a lot to tell you."

"And Percy?"

"You may need someone to run errands and messages connected to this information," Harry said. Percy winced. Harry glanced at Percy, saying, "The messenger has to be completely trustworthy, and able to travel all around the world." Percy looked a bit mollified.

"Well, come in," Scrimgeour said, opening his office door.

When they were all seated, Scrimgeour said, "Well?"

"What do you know about eugenics?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Scrimgeour admitted. "Percy?"

Percy scowled. "I never heard of it, either."

"Hermione?" Harry requested.

"Until last month, I thought it was a Muggle movement which started in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," Hermione said. "In some respects it was science, but in the end it was much

more of a pseudo-science. The more scientific aspects moved to genetics, biology, and anthropology, the rest is still espoused mostly by racists and similar types."

The last statement caught the Minister's and Percy's attention, as they could see some possible connections.

"Essentially, eugenics believed humanity could be improved by government and scientific policies, designed to discourage and later eliminate undesirable elements from humanity. They didn't have very good models for disease, let alone heredity, and even at their best most practitioners had many fundamental errors underlying their ideas. At their worst, they faked their data to prove racial, sexual, and other differences which do not exist."

Scrimgeour snapped his fingers. "You mean like the Nazis, those Muggles influenced by Grindelwald's people."

"Exactly. The Nazis wanted to eliminate birth defects, mental and emotional diseases and handicaps, and what they considered inferior races. It turns out that many of these ideas had filtered through to the Muggle world in the Nineteenth century from a group of wizards operating in central and southern Europe."

"Binns never teaches anything about Grindelwald," Russell said to Percy. "While he preached the superiority of wizards over Muggles, he was not totally hostile to the Muggle-born wizard. Like Voldemort, he did preach that the Muggle world must be enslaved by the magical. He helped trigger two Muggle world wars in the hopes that the Muggles would weaken themselves to the point where he and his followers could take over."

Luna took up the story. "In the early 1700s, a wizard who went by the name of Martin of Pecs wrote a monograph in Latin which pointed out that wizarding families had tended to become small over the previous two centuries. In fact, for the last four hundred years, the average European fully magical family has had only 2.9 children, which, for various interesting actuarial reasons I should go into. . . ."

"No," Harry and Hermione said.

Luna pouted for a moment, but went on. "Anyway, that is too low a number of children to fully replace the magical population. As we all know, if there weren't magical people interbreeding with Muggles and the Muggle-borns, we would die out. His book was the first in the field, and it still forms the basis of the debate."

"And?" Scrimgeour asked.

"It is far less known that he had a group of followers operating by the 1750s. Martin died in 1758, age one hundred and twenty. This inner group, which seems to have no known name, is primarily dedicated to finding out how to determine if a child of a wizard and Muggle woman would likely be magical or not. There have been several articles in wizarding journals whose members can be traced back to Martin's group, and a rather infamous nineteenth century group, who took direct action in forcibly joining the Muggle-born to the magical community, and in the forcible creation of mixed-bloods."

"What?" Percy demanded.

"The Knights of Walpurgis kidnaped the Muggle-born when they were under five, so that they could be raised in magical families," Russell said. "They also raped Muggles related to the Muggle-born, trying to create magical children to be kidnaped."

"The article writers are all associated with the Knights, although some rather loosely," Luna admitted. "Grindelwald wrote three of these articles before he turned to preaching the undermining of Muggle cultures, and of course later admitted to being a member of the Knights. In addition, of course, the Knights believed that European wizards, especially northern and western Europeans -- those that can trace their magic and their racial background to the Celtic and Germanic worlds --

were the apex of humanity."

"And?" Scrimgeour asked.

"According to Snape, the Knights had a third group, other than the kidnaping rapists and the writers," Russell said. "Supposedly, Martin himself set up a breeding area in Transylvania, and perhaps elsewhere."

"Breeding?"

"They are attempting to breed the ideal wizard, ideal in term of magic, and in racial composition as well," Russell said. "That Germanic wizard who was in on the Hogwarts attack was one of what Snape claims are called the Companions of Walpurgis -- the first generation they've let out, but still far from what they hope are the ultimate wizards. From what little I have been able to gather from the assassin, Voldemort has made an alliance with the Knights."

"Is that it?" Percy demanded, to Scrimgeour's surprise.

"That's as far as I can go, without authorization from the Minister to question our attacker with stronger methods," Russell pointed out.

Scrimgeour thought about that briefly. "Make out the documents in detail, and then we'll discuss it." Russell nodded his understanding.

"Fine, enough about that. What about Ron? How is he?" Percy demanded dismissing what to him was the lesser concern, looking at Harry. Ron had barely been hanging on when Percy had torn himself away.

"The knives were poisoned," Harry admitted. "His wounds are healed, but magic doesn't affect the poisons."

"Poisons?" Percy asked.

"Multiple poisons, reenforcing each other, although that also means that they act slowly."

"And what's being done about it?" Percy demanded.

Harry's face twisted in disgust. "Everything we can."

"I was woken up in the middle of the night to meet you?"

"What else do you have to do?"

Severus Snape grimaced. He turned to the sullen guard and said, "He's a werewolf, you know."

The guard said nothing. Snape shrugged. "I need to pick up more Spanish."

Remus smiled nastily. "The interior guards don't usually speak much Spanish. You're in Incan territory."

Snape processed that, and then shook his head. "Why am I not surprised? Very well. What do you want from me, Lupin? Russell can't run his own errands?"

"He can, but we're not after that sort of information."

"Well, what sort are you looking for? I have had very little sleep, and I am NOT in a good mood."

"I have never seen you in a good mood, and I've known you for over twenty-five years," Remus retorted. He pulled out a stack of parchment. "Three Companions of Walpurgis staged an attack. One was captured. They used poisoned knives; knives poisoned with multiple poisons at that. The combination resists all attempts at treatment, although we have a list of what the poisons contain." He shrugged. "I won't swear that the actual poisons are correctly separated."

"Who was stabbed?" Snape leered, and asked. "Potter? the oh-so-smart Miss Granger? the

delectable Miss Weasley? Longbottom the buffoon? the bumptious Ronald? the . . ."

"Oh, shut up, Severus," Remus snapped, shoving the parchment at Snape and pushing him into a chair.

Snape sighed and looked at the parchment. Remus sat and prepared to wait. "Who was stabbed?" Snape asked in a serious, normal tone of voice.

"The three companions hit the Weasleys' joke shop in Diagon Alley. The wards there protecting against major hexes are no doubt why they used the knives. Fred Weasley died more from the wounds than from the poisons, although those most likely finished him off. Ron Weasley is still hanging on. They give him a week to ten days more."

Snape merely nodded and kept reading, nodding as he went.

In less than five minutes, Snape tossed the parchments on the low rough table. "I know of this combination. The Dark Lord was in an expansive mood a few times, and shared some interesting potion lore. I think he was grateful to speak to someone he considered to be near his own level in one small area." Snape gave Lupin a twisted smile. "He knew I could never have ambitions, like Lucius."

"Is there an antidote? Do you know it?" Remus demanded.

"No, there is no antidote," Snape said, seemingly with regret.

"No cure?" Remus asked in horror.

"There is no antidote," Snape agreed, "but there is a cure."

"There is?"

Snape smiled grimly. "It is a six part process. The fifth and sixth steps are incredibly Dark ceremonies, especially the fifth."

"How Dark?"

"Well, the fifth part starts with the victim being bathed with the entire life's blood of a young girl who has not started menstruation. . . ."

"Stop!"

Snape nodded. "I would hope so. I still think you are something of a monster, but I know you and YOUR Master well enough to know that he, and you, would not trade one innocent life for another."

"So, there's no hope?"

"There is some," Snape said. "You can do the first three steps. That will awaken Weasley, and for about a week he will not be in unbearable pain, although he will be weak."

"And then?"

"And then, if he does not carry on to the fourth step, he will become more and more sleepy, until he falls asleep, and never awakens in this life." Snape shrugged. "I saw MY former Master employ this poison once, after we talked. He brought the man around at the last moment, just to watch him die again."

"And the fourth step?"

"It's not Dark, per se," Snape said. "However, once Weasley takes the first sip, he must keep up a fairly rigid dosing with the potion. If he falls too far behind, he will sink into that final coma in about two hours on the outside. If he takes the potion, he will not be able to function very well, and he will be in some pain and discomfort for a few weeks, and then more pain after some time. No potion will alleviate that."

"You're implying the Ron will, at some point, either die by being forgetful, or perhaps even decide to let himself go," Remus said.

"That is what happens, sooner or later," Snape agreed. "So, do you bring him back, with a suspended death sentence hanging over him, and a fair amount of bearable pain, leaving the decision to him, or just let him go?"

"Will you come back to supervise all this?" Remus asked, "assuming that the Weasleys agree?"

"As a free man?" Snape asked.

"No," Remus replied. "You can move up to a house arrest, with facilities for your own potion research."

"Potter never came up with that!" Snape exclaimed.

"Hermione did," Remus agreed.

Snape sighed. "Almost anything is better than having a cell next to Pettigrew. As much as I despised James Potter, as much as I hated Black, as disgusted as I am by even seeing you, Pettigrew is worse than all of you rolled together."

"So you agree?"

"I agree."

Neither man was interested in shaking hands on the deal.

Chapter XXI

Saturday, November 22, 1997

Harry took a deep sigh, and went inside one of the places he hated most in the world.

"Good morning, Mister Potter."

"Good morning, Madam Pomfrey," Harry replied in a cheery voice. "May I see him?"

"For fifteen minutes. Follow me, but wait outside the room until I call you in."

"Right." Harry followed Madam Pomfrey to a private room off the main Infirmary. She went in, and Harry waited. A few moments later, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny came out. "I'm sorry," Harry said, surprised. "I didn't realize. . . ."

"It's alright, Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley said kindly. "Thank you."

"For what?" Harry asked her, puzzled.

"For getting Ron what help there was possible for him," she answered simply. "If it hadn't been for you, that horrid man might still be imprisoned under some South American mountain like he deserves, but Ron would be . . . gone." She sniffled. "Only you could have gotten him here in time."

"It was the least I could do," Harry answered, with complete truth.

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley said with great sincerity, "I doubt if you have ever done the least you could do, at least about anything of importance." She glanced at Ginny.

Ginny nodded and grabbed Harry into a hug. "Thank you, Harry," she said, nearly crying.

Mrs. Weasley knelt and took Harry's hands. "Mrs. Weasley!" Harry protested, shocked.

"No, my lord," she retorted. "I know what is right. Thank you, my lord, for the life of my son. You have now saved two of my children and healed a third."

"And I lost you one of them," Harry said bitterly. "Ow!" Ginny had slugged his upper arm.

"Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley scolded. She looked back at Harry. "Every one of my children fights for what's right, even if one has chosen a poor path to do it. Fred knew what he was doing. I never said a word about any of my children fighting for what's right, once they turned seventeen." She gave Ginny a dirty look over that before turning back to Harry. "Arthur and I are fighting this war, too, after all. I have known from the last night of that awful Tournament that events like these could happen. You saw that terrible boggart at Headquarters. I've known this was more than possible, and none of it is your fault." She finally allowed Harry to help her to her feet. "I know you will end this fight as soon as you can. We're still with you, Harry. We will always be with you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley." Mrs. Weasley kissed Harry on the cheek, and stepped aside.

"Fifteen minutes at most, Mister Potter," Madam Pomfrey reminded Harry. Harry nodded and slipped into the room. He crossed over to the bed, where a pale lanky figure laid very still.

Ron managed to turn his face to Harry. "Hey."

"Hi, Ron," Harry said softly.

"Now don't you cry over me," Ron said. "I sort of expected it from Mum and Ginny, but not only have Hermione, Fleur and even Luna already cried on me this morning, so have Dad, Bill, Charlie, and even Neville."

"Sorry I wasn't here earlier, but apparently there was a line," Harry retorted. Ron managed a slight smile, but Harry couldn't. "I'm so sorry, Ron."

"About Fred?" Harry nodded. Ron echoed his friend's movement and then said, "Yeah, I think I'll

probably cry some more about that later. Try and keep an eye on George, okay?"

"I will. Charlie and Bill are with him."

"Better than Percy," Ron said softly, obviously with mixed feelings.

"Didn't someone tell you what happened?"

"What?"

"Percy resigned from the Minister's Office," Harry said with a shrug.

Ron was as surprised as everyone had been when they heard the news. "What's he doing, then?"

"He's transferred to Magical Law Enforcement. He plans on prosecuting any more Death Eaters or other followers who are caught. He's gone from being a hindrance to being if anything too hard on the bastards."

Ron managed a shrug as well. It had taken too high a price for Percy to act as he should. "I guess that's one way to deal with this." He looked at Harry. "Go ahead and ask."

Harry did as ordered. "How do you feel?"

"Very achy, and very very tired." He sighed. "I'm never going to be out in the field again, let alone go through auror training or anything similar, am I?"

"Probably not," Harry agreed. "Certainly you're not going out on the front line."

"I'm probably not even going to be flying again, am I?"

"You'll fly again," Harry said firmly. Ron gave him a dirty look. "Okay, you'll probably never race a broom again."

"You will find something for me to do, right? I mean, other than research." Ron scowled. "I know Hermione meant well, but I don't think I could work for her and Luna." He sighed. "Not that I would be all that good at it, anyway."

Harry put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "I need you, Ron."

"To do what?" Ron asked bitterly.

"Ron . . . I need you."

Ron's pale face flushed slightly as he remembered that Harry was no fair-weather friend. "Thanks, Harry." Harry squeezed his friend's shoulder. Ron gave Harry a twisted smile. "Do you think I should write the greasy git a thank you note? Mum sort of suggested it."

Harry grimaced. "Not unless you want to. The greasy bastard has been rewarded enough."

"Thank you," Ron said again. "I know that it wasn't easy asking for the snake's help."

Harry snorted. "I didn't like having to do it, but it was a very easy decision, Ron. I would have done just about anything that wasn't dark to help you." Ron regained a bit of his color at that. "Can I get you anything?"

"If Madam Pomfrey won't confiscate them, some sugar quills would be nice," Ron said thoughtfully. "Some chocolate frogs would be even nicer, for that matter."

"Shall I ask Dobby to have your card collection sent up?" Harry asked.

"Well, I do have a bunch I haven't put in the folders," Ron admitted. "It looks like I'll have some free time."

"Would you like some real paper work to do?"

Ron narrowed his eyes. "What kind?"

"You could take over as Treasurer from Tonks," Harry suggested. Ron looked torn. "Shall I have

Tonks stop by and tell you what it all entails?" Harry asked.

"Sure," Ron said quickly, but then sighed.

"What else is wrong?" Harry asked.

"Hermione and I. . . ."

"What?"

"I guess we won't ever be getting back together."

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

"There are a whole lot of side effects to this . . . this, well Snape called it a 'poison cocktail'. I think he enjoyed listing them all to me."

"I didn't know the git was here," Harry growled.

"He wasn't. He was the last person to see me at St. Mungo's before they brought me here," Ron said.

"What does that have to do with Hermione?"

Ron looked embarrassed. "You can tell me, Ron. We aren't thirteen anymore," Harry urged.

"No, we're not," Ron admitted. "I'm sterile and, well, it won't work for fun, either. No little Weasleys from me, and no Happy Hermione, either."

"Maybe Hermione wouldn't care about children," Harry suggested.

Ron looked away but pointed out, mumbling, "I could never satisfy her before, remember? Now it's even more impossible."

"There are other ways to satisfy her," Harry told his friend. Ron wrinkled his nose. "Don't look that far ahead, okay?"

"I'll try," Ron said.

"Rest and get your strength back."

"It will never all come back," Ron said. He quickly held up his hand, saying, "I know, I know, I need to work on it and recover as much as I can."

"I think there might still be a line of more people to cry on you," Harry teased. "I'll ask Madam Pomfrey about the sweets."

"Thanks, Harry."

Mrs. Weasley and Fleur quickly took Harry's place. Harry consulted with Madam Pomfrey. "He can certainly have some sweets, especially chocolate," she finally said. "However, his metabolism will always be lower than it was. He'll put on weight easily, and he'll also lose muscle tone and mass."

"I'll send up a sugar quill," Harry said. "He really just likes chewing on them when he's trying to avoid writing. I'll send a case of frogs. Maybe you can put one just outside his range, whatever that is. That will encourage him to move around more."

Madam Pomfrey smiled. "You're going to be a fine father some day, Potter."

Harry blushed.

Severus Snape glanced around the large front room of the small cottage. He sneered. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"How about making yourself useful without abusing or lying to anyone?" Remus suggested. Snape

turned his back on Lupin.

"Your personal effects will be along shortly," John Russell said in a more moderate tone.

"And I suppose I am now supposed to become Potter's tame Potion Master?" Snape spat.

"Of course not," Remus said. "For that to happen, you would have to have feelings. You know, not just bile but feelings like shame, gratitude, and decency."

"If it wouldn't violate my parole, I'd dearly love putting you down," Snape retorted.

"If I hadn't grown out of my adolescence, I would say something like 'the day after your parole ends, we can finally decide this', but there is nothing left to decide," Remus replied. "You can make yourself useful by your brewing and by anything else you remember, or you can spend your time working for yourself, or you can sit here and sulk until your term is up. You decide."

"If there's one thing both sides of this war possess, it's self-righteousness," Snape declared.

Remus smiled nastily. "It must have been awfully difficult for you to be caught between such factions, when you're convinced everything should revolve around you instead."

When Snape opened his mouth to retort, Russell stepped in. "Enough, the pair of you. Anyone would think you were a pair of ex-lovers instead of childhood enemies." Snape and Remus both recoiled at the image. Russell looked at Snape. "You're clear on the rules?"

"I am," Snape agreed. "I have no desire to be returned to the cell next to Pettigrew."

Sunday, November 23, 1997

"You're here early. What do you want, Mister Weasley?"

Percy looked very different to John Russell. He had always been a very serious boy, far too serious for his own good, and had turned into a serious young man. Percy was now far beyond 'serious'.

"Can you really get information from this 'Companion'?"

"Almost certainly. It's a particular magical knack I have."

"And if he resists giving up his secrets?"

"It could easily destroy his mind," Russell said seriously.

"And that would be wrong," Percy said to himself. "It would be torture."

"Torture? No, in that it would not cause physical pain," Russell answered. "That doesn't make it right. It could be necessary."

"I don't like the idea, but I want you to do it," Percy said. "That's wrong, isn't it?"

"On some level, yes," Russell agreed. "It may or may not be more wrong not to gather that information. It would be wrong to do this for revenge. You are rightly angry, about Fred's death and what happened to Ron. How all this has hurt you and your family." Russell took a stab. "Not to mention what nearly happened to you."

Percy winced. After a moment of silence, Percy whispered hoarsely, "How do we live with doing it? With wanted to do it?"

"With stripping away a person's mind? His personality?" Percy nodded. "Percy, there are times when you have choices between evils. If we don't do this, more evil may come. More could die."

"Is that enough?"

"No," Russell, "it's not. It eats away at you." He looked off into the distance. "I rather think that when the war is over, I shall have to retire. Being around so much innocence is starting to be painful. You look at an eager thirteen year old, and know how wonderful that life could be, and you

also know how many horrendous things could happen to that student. Anger, hatred, bigotry, rape, murder . . . and so much else." He shrugged. "There are steps I can take which might just frighten this wizard into giving us some of his secrets, but in the end, we may either have to leave him his secrets, or strip them away from him, one way or the other. One life against dozens. If it turns out he has little information, then we've damned ourselves for nothing. We can't do this on the off-chance. We have to probe, and then, maybe, we can justify destroying a mind."

"I researched the laws," Percy said. "Archaic rules apply when there is a White Warlock. Potter and the Minister can authorize you to do what you need to do. There have to be three observers, who could order you to stop by a majority vote."

"And why did you research that, when you were so against special rules for the White Warlock?"

Percy hung his head in shame. "Revenge," he said softly. "A Dark act."

"In its way, a very Dark act," Russell agreed. "You need to be tested."

"How? for what?" Percy asked, startled.

"You need to be an observer if we go through with this," Russell said. "And, as you see a man's mind and personality being destroyed, you will have to decide if we go on or not."

Percy swallowed nervously.

Russell gave Percy a twisted smile. "Don't worry. Maybe we won't get permission."

Ron Weasley tiredly opened his eyes. Everything made him feel tired, and every muscle in his body hurt, although he thought he perhaps ached a bit less today than the day before. The effects of the complex set of poisons on the knives that had wounded him would last his entire life, and while over the next few weeks or months the pain he felt should diminish, over the years it would again grow worse.

Ron looked off to the side and saw Hermione. "Oh . . . hi. . . ."

"Good morning," Hermione said quietly.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked. "I'm worried about you."

"Oh . . . thanks, I guess," Ron said awkwardly. "I guess this is all kind of, well, depressing."

"True," Hermione said. "I hope you don't mind, but I've been trying to find out what all these affects are supposed to be. . . ."

"Snape gave me a long list," Ron said. "Actually, he made me listen while he dictated them to Madam Pomfrey. You can ask her."

"You wouldn't mind?" Hermione asked.

"Snape said that there's nothing that can be done," Ron said, "but I suppose if anyone can find something the git doesn't know, it would be you."

"Does she have a record of everything Snape said the poisons are doing to you?" Hermione asked.

"Did Harry tell you something?" Ron demanded.

"No, he avoided my questions, which made me think there might be something else going on," Hermione retorted.

Ron turned his face away. "I'm sterile, and not only that, well, it won't work anymore."

"What won't work?"

Ron colored. "I know I never lasted long, but now I won't even get the chance to do that."

"Oh . . . you know, there are some Muggle treatments that might work for that aspect of things."

Ron shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"Do you think that a woman would only be with you to have children, Ron?"

Ron shrugged.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "Besides, who can say if Snape told the truth? He hates us, too, not just Harry."

"He wouldn't risk being caught in a lie," Ron said.

"This combination of poisons is pretty obscure, so far as I have been able to discover," Hermione retorted. "He could be counting on the fact that no one, except maybe Voldemort, could gainsay him."

Ron shrugged again. Hermione scowled, which Ron did not see. She leaned over the narrow bed and kissed the side of his head, and left, passing Percy in the outer part of the Infirmary.

"Are you busy, Professor?"

Russell gave Hermione a twisted smile. "I've been very busy today, but I certainly have time for you. Let me guess, you have questions about Ron's condition."

Hermione nodded. "Assuming Snape was telling Remus and Ron the truth about the long-term effects. . . ." she paused.

"He likely was. Go on."

"Would he really know these things for certain? And would he have told everything?"

Russell considered for a few moments before answering, "He would not know the effects for certain, or at least not all of them. And it is possible he might be holding back something."

"Would it possible for me to see him?"

Russell took a bit longer to consider that. Finally, he said with a small sigh, "As a member of Harry's Council, you can certainly get access to Snape almost anytime you need to. Despite a fair amount of caustic comments, he did agree to help our cause. However, may I make a suggestion?"

"Of course!"

"Don't approach Snape unless you have some facts to argue with him," Russell warned. "If you can't disprove or at least challenge some aspect of his statements, don't think you can force any admissions out of him."

Hermione thought about what she knew of Snape, and of Russell. She had to agree that Russell certainly knew Snape better than she did, and she had no reason to disagree with the Prof's assessment. "You're right."

"Spend some time researching the problems," Russell said. He walked over to his desk and pulled out a sheet of parchment. He picked up a clean sheet, and waved his wand over the two, copying the information. He handed the copy to Hermione. "These are the potions and some of the speculations on how they might interact. If any more information comes my way, I'll send it on to you."

"Thank you," Hermione said simply, grateful she would not also have to go through Pomfrey.

Chapter XXII

Tuesday, November 25, 1997

"Come in!" Harry called nervously. John Russell entered Harry's office at Hogwarts. Harry was seated, with Hermione and Luna on either side of him. Russell took another seat.

"So?" Harry asked simply. Russell sighed.

"No success?" Hermione asked.

"None at all," Russell answered. "He won't even give us his name. I've never seen anything like it."

"Is it possible that he doesn't know any important information?" Harry asked.

"Possible? Unfortunately, yes. I don't think it's probable. As I said, I could get no definite information from him. However, he could not prevent some involuntary reactions. At the very least, he knows where Voldemort was holding up when he last met him, and he knows some of the locations of the Companions."

"Is that information worth enough to destroy his mind?" Hermione asked.

Russell shrugged. "It's a very tough judgement call," he said. "It is, after all, possible that Voldemort learned his lesson from the quarry attack and won't be caught out that easily again. It is also possible that the locations this man knows for the Companions and the groups associated with them are just port-key drops."

"Which are?" Harry asked.

"You show up and there are port-keys available to use," Russell answered. "You may have to use a special password to activate them, or some may be trick port-keys to some volcano or deep under the ocean. Imagine a safe guard, and someone has probably used them, and I would think that the Companions would know a fair number."

"We could still set watch on the locations," Hermione pointed out. "And he could also know the identities of people involved who are out in the general magical communities."

"I'd say it's very possible," Russell agreed.

"But is it probable? is it certain?" Luna asked. "Can we destroy a person for the chance at possibly useful information?"

"I'd say it is probable he could provide us information about the Companions we could really use," Russell said. "Beyond that, well, there I'm less certain. However," he added, "remember, if we go all the way with this, I am stripping away every memory he had. It takes weeks of association spells to clear the dross and we may learn a great deal from chance remarks."

"You've done this before," Hermione stated.

"I have had to do this three times before, including two summers ago."

"I don't think I can authorize it, or ask Scrimgeour to authorize it, either," Harry said. "At least not yet."

Hermione and Luna nodded their agreement. "Are there any ways of softening up his resistance?" Luna asked, "ways which might take some time but which cause no damage?"

"There are," Russell agreed, "however, it means feeding him a rather nasty-tasting potion every day and then keeping him partially sensory-deprived for at least six weeks."

"Meaning?" Hermione asked.

"It means keeping him in a simple cell. The temperature can be comfortable, but shouldn't vary. The

same is true of the lighting. The food should be just enough to keep him healthy, and should be bland. There should be as little interaction with him as possible. No reading. No. . . ."

"I think we get the idea," Harry said. The three friends looked at each other, and they shook their heads.

"I agree," Russell said. "If those conditions don't constitute torture, they come close. We might have to resort to such methods, but I don't believe that now is the time."

"Will close confinement at the Ministry be all that much better?" Luna wondered.

"Perhaps not much better, but still better," Russell said. "I doubt if it will soften him, but we can try."

"Should I try Legilimency?" Harry asked. "I don't have any real experience, but. . . ." He trailed off.

"But you have a lot more power than I do," Russell agreed. "In most circumstances, I would agree you should try. However, I think trying to force your way in might cause his mind to actually shut down. There has certainly been extensive tampering done to his mind. We might not only lose him, but you, too."

"Then no," Luna and Hermione chorused.

"You'll talk to the Minister about his confinement?" Harry asked.

"I'll take care of it," Russell agreed. "I'll also mention he might commit suicide if he decides he won't be rescued. He was raised to be a fanatic."

Ron was sitting up in bed, looking longingly out the window when Hermione showed up in the early afternoon. "How are you feeling today?"

Ron shrugged. "A little better. What have you been up to today?"

"I was meeting with Harry, the Prof, and Luna about that lunatic that stabbed you."

"Any progress at getting information out of him?"

"Not really. We'll have to try some slower methods."

Ron looked closely at Hermione. "Why are you nervous?"

"I'm going to make some tests to see if I can help you." Ron gulped nervously.

Hermione pulled her wand and hit the door with a trio of spells. "We don't want to be disturbed." Turning back to Ron, she smiled and walked over to his bed saying, "You don't have to be so worried. This will be a very pleasant set of tests, although I suppose they could be frustrating."

"How so?" Ron asked. "What are you doi . . . eep!"

"Well?" Voldemort demanded, "will you honor our alliance and strike, or not?"

"We will," the burley blond wizard stated, "under two conditions."

Flashes of inspired torture flashed through Voldemort's mind, but he suppressed the impulse. "And what might those 'conditions' be?" he snarled.

"First, you will of course be leading the assault."

Voldemort did not react, although he longed to teach this hybrid exquisite lessons in pain. Instead, he merely nodded and said, "Of course."

"Second, our overseers would like you to strike at Potter again, either directly or indirectly."

Voldemort smiled evilly. He had had a contingency strike plan, which he had hoped he would not

have to use. Now, however, it would dovetail nicely into these two demands. "How does this plan sound?"

Sunday, November 30, 1997

"First of all, the good news," Harry said to his Council and his usual outside advisors (Headmistress McGonagall, Arthur Weasley, and Mad-eye Moody). "Madam Pomfrey reports that Ron is progressing nicely. If Snape's information was correct, he could continue to get better for another three weeks or so, and then he'll stabilize as long as he's on the potions." Everyone nodded their understanding.

"Headmistress?"

"There's really nothing to report," she answered. "The academic programs are progressing nicely, and there are no disciplinary problems worth reporting."

"Prof?"

"No leads, no progress," Russell admitted bitterly.

"He cannae hae gone to ground," Moody stated. "He must be planning something!"

"He must be," Harry agreed.

"I hate to bring this up," Remus said.

"Go on," Harry said.

Remus kept his eyes averted. "Has your link to Voldemort given you any twitches since the battle at the Ministry?"

"Not a twitch," Harry admitted. "Is that worth exploring?"

"I don't think so," Hermione said.

"Why not?" Russell asked.

Hermione and Luna exchanged looks. Hermione turned to the group and said, "We think you're all laboring under a misapprehension."

"In what way?" Arthur asked.

Luna turned to Harry. "Did your scar ever really bother you before you came to Hogwarts?"

"Not really," Harry admitted.

"In fact, it wasn't until you were near Voldemort, planted into Professor Quirrell, right?" Hermione prompted.

"Right. Oh, I see where you're going with this." Harry addressed the group. "Voldemort told Snape that he had not been aware of our connection until after the attack on Mister Weasley here. In fact, he was aware of it that first night. I didn't remember this for a long while, but he entered my dreams, encouraging me to switch to Slytherin."

"Would that even be possible?" Tonks asked.

"If a student or their parents ask within the first week, the Sorting Hat will reevaluate them," McGonagall admitted.

"And the Sorting Hat was uncertain if I should go into Slytherin or Gryffindor," Harry said.

"The point is," Hermione went on, "that most, and perhaps even all, of the contacts were either caused by Voldemort or caused by close proximity."

"So," Luna picked up, "how would Harry push the contact over distance?"

"You might be able to do it," Hermione told Harry, "but we think you'd have to practice Legilimency a great deal to have any real chance."

"Good point," Russell mused. "But who do we get for you to practice on?"

"Oh," Ginny said smugly, "leave that to us."

"No," Harry complained, "not Colin?"

"I think that's who we should ask first," Hermione affirmed.

Harry sighed and turned to Arthur Weasley. "Any news from the Ministry?"

"Only that there is a faction pushing hard to extract information from that Companion by any means necessary," Arthur answered. "I would say we can keep up the slow approach if Riddle doesn't attack before the New Year. If he does. . . ." Arthur shrugged. "Beyond that, there's not a rumble. Even the Press seems to understand that we're all looking for him. Since the dementors were dealt with, though, they aren't nearly as frightened."

"At least we've kept a lid on who the Companions really are," Moody said.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Tonks asked.

"Keeping the information that we've captured a Companion quite is good," Russell said firmly.

"But is the fact that we now know the Companions exist a good thing to keep secret?" Tonks asked. "If they stay involved, the news will come out sooner or later. The public will be outraged that this was kept from them."

"And if they drop out, that just means they'll be a danger later, maybe a century from now," Hermione pointed out. "Shouldn't they be rooted out now, before they grow even more in power?"

"If we do out them," Harry mused, "that might force them to stay allied with Voldemort."

"Maybe Daddy should start printing some stories," Luna suggested. "That will get people used to the idea. Since some people don't believe parts of The Quibbler anyway, it might not force these people into a stronger alliance, assuming they aren't already in one."

"Good idea," Hermione said, which made Harry and Ginny smile, remembering how Hermione had reacted to Luna in the first months they had known each other. The rest of the group approved Luna's idea as well.

"Does anyone have any other ideas?" Harry asked.

"I did have a request," Arthur said. When he had everyone's attention, he asked Harry, "Molly was wondering where you, where all of you for that matter, might be spending the Yule holidays, should we be so fortunate to still have things quiet?"

Harry shrugged. "Mister Lovegood is making a trip to North America. Hermione is spending Christmas Eve at her parents, and Luna and I, and Dobby, will be at Godric's Hollow."

"Perhaps we should have a big Christmas dinner at Headquarters," Luna suggested.

Harry made a face; Kreacher was still there, after all. Still. . . . "Alright." He looked at Mister Weasley. "You and Mrs. Weasley will just have to get used to being guests instead of hosts."

Arthur smiled at that.

After a number of minor matters were discussed, the Council broke up, leaving Harry alone with Hermione, Luna, and Dobby. "Mister Harry?" Dobby asked.

"Yes, Dobby?"

"May Dobby and Winky plan a nice Yule for everyone?"

Harry gave Dobby a small, sad smile. "Yes, Dobby. Go ahead."

"Is Mister Harry feeling well?"

"I am, Dobby. You and Winky start putting your heads together. Don't forget to consider Sandy in your plans."

"Of course not, Mister Harry!" Dobby disappeared.

"What is wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked. "I can see it's something."

Harry just gave a little half-shrug and stood. He kissed Hermione's forehead, kissed Luna with a bit more passion and said his goodnights.

"What was all that about?" Hermione demanded.

"Do you mean it is not clear to you?" Luna asked, surprised.

"No," Hermione admitted, "I don't understand."

"Harry cannot believe he will ever have a normal life," Luna said. "You know his greatest fantasy as well as I do -- to marry, to sire a family, to play with his children."

"That should be more than a fantasy," Hermione protested.

"I agree of course," Luna said, "but he does not believe he will ever have normal happiness. It's not that he believes he doesn't deserve it, of course, just that he's afraid something will always happen to prevent his happiness."

"He believes he has a wierd, then," Hermione mused.

"Exactly: wierd, fate, kismet, call it what you will," Luna stated. "It's not that he even thinks he's cursed. Still, we can hardly argue that most of the time, Harry is robbed of anything like a normal life."

Hermione nodded and said, "I'm surprised he hasn't tried to distance himself from you after Fred and Ron were attacked."

"He has tried to hint at that, but I assure you, I have ways of proving to Harry that I am not going anywhere," Luna said with a satisfied look.

"Yes, I understand you spend a few nights a week out of the castle," Hermione said drily.

"How did you know?" Luna asked. She knew that Hermione was well-aware that she and Harry were lovers, of course, but not that she knew their schedule.

"The elves know, and they weren't certain if they should report your absences to Professor McGonagall. Since you are on Harry's Council and aren't a regular student anymore, they decided to ask me."

"Ah."

Hermione smiled. "Nothing else to say?"

"No," Luna said. "Have you got the test results back from Ron's specimens?"

"No, I'm waiting until there's a larger database. I don't want to know the results yet."

Luna put a friendly hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Just in case all the results are bad?"

Hermione shrugged. "I know, I should be braver. Ron needs some hope. I'm so afraid that after a few months or a few years of this, he might just . . . give up."

"I cannot imagine Ronald taking that road to the next plain," Luna said doubtfully.

"Long term pain and depression can drive people to do desperate things," Hermione said softly.

"I hope you're wrong," Luna said.

"So do I."

Luna leaned over and kissed Hermione gently. "Be of good hope, my companion."

Hermione gave her friend a wan smile. "Thank you. Now go cheer up Harry."

"I plan to." Luna smiled. "Care to come along?" she teased.

Percy Weasley hesitated outside of his flat. He had not intended to work so late, especially not on a Sunday. Percy's hand hesitated to open the door, and then his hand dropped. Even Percy knew he was working too hard. Percy acknowledged to himself, for once, that his temper was frayed and that he was very tired. He decided then and there that, barring some emergency, he would take a long weekend the next weekend. Maybe he and Penny could make a trip to some Muggle place that she liked. Although he did not care much for the Muggle world, Penny came from there and missed it.

"I'd better tell her that first, right after I apologize," Percy muttered. He took a deep breath and unlocked the door.

Percy looked around, and frowned. The flat was dark. 'Penny must really be angry,' Percy thought. Usually, no matter how late he was, she would be up sitting in the small parlor. Penny had a minor position at Gringotts, and she always had plenty of paperwork to scrutinize.

Percy sighed and went into the bathroom. After changing into his pajamas, he tiptoed into the bedroom. Percy slipped into the bed and froze.

Penny wasn't there.

All sorts of horrible thoughts ran through Percy's mind. Exactly how angry was Penny? Surely, not angry enough to. . . Percy sprang out of bed and went into the parlor, waving a candle on.

Nothing. Nothing was out of place, no note. Percy picked up the candle and walked into the kitchen. He glanced once around the room, but then froze. He turned back towards the stove.

"Penny!" Percy knelt on the floor and touched his wife. Her body was warm, but not warm enough. Percy touched her neck, and pulled back his hand quickly, having found no pulse. "No!"

"Oh, that is the least of your problems, Percy Weasley."

Percy spun around, pulling his wand. His eyes went wide. "Voldemort!"

"Indeed," Voldemort replied. "And just when did you first dare to say my name, Weasley?"

"Potter might not be right about much, but he is right about you," Percy spat.

"Is he? And what are you going to do to avenge your wife, to save your self?"

Percy looked confused. He backed up a step as Voldemort took on forward. Percy next bumped against the wall. There was no place else for him to go.

Percy raised his wand, his hand shaking. He tried to think of some hex, some defense, anything to stave off whatever was about to happen.

Nothing popped into his mind.

"Nothing to say? Well, I do." Voldemort smiled. "Imperio!"

Chapter XXIII

Tuesday, December 2, 1997

The funerals for Penny Weasley were small and quiet. Percy said little at the wizarding funeral in the late morning and less at the Muggle funeral in the early afternoon. He was silent at the cremation. The grieving widower insisted that what he needed most was quiet, and to get back to work that Thursday, when he was scheduled to interrogate some of the high ranking Death Eaters who were imprisoned.

Late that evening, Voldemort forced Percy to come to a safe house. Percy had struggled hard against the Imperius all day, but was no match for the Dark Lord. For what Voldemort was going to use him for, however, stronger controls were needed, and this was the first chance Voldemort had had to implement them.

As Voldemort tattooed the glyphs onto Percy which would make him an unwilling slave, he reflected that had he had a good shot at Potter that morning, a great deal of difficulty would have been taken care of. Still, Voldemort was still certain of his long-term triumph.

Thursday, December 4, 1997

"Weasley," Lucius Malfoy snarled. "I am not likely to break any trusts, and certainly not to you."

Percy Weasley merely looked at Malfoy. They were in an 'interview room' (a euphemism for interrogation cell). As usual, there were two guards in a gallery above them. "This is the only interview room without Muggle eavesdropping devices. And I have something I will say to you. I suggest you listen and think about it."

"And what is that?" Malfoy sneered.

Percy leaned forward, his left hand on the table. "Evening forest."

Malfoy looked confused for a moment, and then frightened as he remembered what that password meant. He looked carefully into Percy Weasley's eyes, and realized that things were even worse. "Master?" he whispered.

Percy nodded. "I am speaking through him. You are the last I am speaking to, Lucius." He removed his hand from the table. "I placed an object on the table. If you touch it, it will stay invisible for another three or four hours. If you do not, it will dissolve in thirty minutes. Are you prepared to become active, or do you wish to spend the rest of the war here? Oh, by the way, Percy here is a very bright boy. He tracked down the bribes you paid out for an early release should I lose."

"I am ever in your service," Lucius replied.

"Yes, I thought so. Be touching your son and any of those here not in previous service to me with their last name falling between the letters G through J this Sunday morning who are willing to come, just before the end of your breakfast. Understand?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. Now, we shall sit here for fifteen minutes for show. I suggest you use the time by telling me everything you know of the prisoners you might recruit."

"Yes, Master."

Sunday, December 7, 1997

"Why, Miss Granger, how nice of you to visit," Snape said in sarcastic tones. "To what do I owe

this honor?"

"I'm looking for information," Hermione snapped, "as you could certainly guess. I need to know if you were misled by Voldemort, or if you deliberately tried to torture Ron."

Snape frowned. "I have no interest in Mister Weasley. What makes you think I tortured him in some way?"

"Did you or did you not tell him that he would be sterile and, well, non-functioning?"

"That was the information I had," Snape stated. "Interesting, that you know about the state of Mister Weasley's genitalia. . . ."

"I know a great deal about things you would find even more interesting than that," Hermione snapped again. "I have no idea what Ron's sperm count was before the poisoning, but it is currently nearly at low-average levels. . . ."

"Miss Granger!" Snape interrupted, "I assure you, I have NO interest in Mister Weasley's reproductive capacity. I have no idea if the sterility is progressive, or if the Dark Lord was incorrect about that effect, or if the rapid treatment Weasley received helped him, and again, I have no interest in the answer."

Hermione frowned. "I wouldn't put it past you to know a cure and withhold it, just to hurt Harry."

"I would not, because I did not," Snape retorted. "There is a cure, it was merely too Dark for Lupin to even want to hear it."

"I do," Hermione said.

"You do what?" Snape asked, puzzled.

"I want you to describe what else needs to be done to cure Ron."

Snape smirked. "Are you certain?"

"I am."

Snape's smirk grew, and he obliged her.

As Snape spoke, he admitted to himself that he was surprised that the fastidious Mudblood did no more than wrinkle her nose as she took notes. "So," he said after he concluded, "when do you sacrifice the virgin child?"

Hermione looked at him with contempt. "You know better than that," she retorted. "These final two steps are totally out of line with the first four, especially the fifth. The sacrifices could be nothing more than a ruse to prevent people from talking the final step."

"It is possible, although unlikely," Snape replied. "Life's blood, especially of the young and innocent, is a well-documented if short-lived magical stimulant. It is much more likely that the blood is required to regenerate the powers of the victim to the point where it can withstand the rest of the cure. These are powerful ingredients used in the final potions, and I doubt anyone not in perfect health could survive the cure."

"There must be some other way," Hermione stated. "If I've learned anything about magic, it's that there is always some way around any problem."

"That is not entirely true, but it is partially true, if you finish the truism," Snape said simply.

"What truism?"

"'There is always some way around any problem, if you are willing to pay the price'. There is at least one answer to Mister Weasley's predicament -- the rituals and potions I have described. The price would be the damnation of those who made the cure and the victim who took the cure. The Dark Lord wishes to live forever. The solutions include finding, stealing, or making a Philosopher's

Stone or the solution he took, the making of Horcruxes. Potter misses his godfather. Tell me, could he have found three willing people to sacrifice themselves to bring Black back?"

"What do you mean?"

"To draw someone back from the Veil takes three willing replacements, who, at the conclusion of a ritual, pass through the Veil within twelve hours of the person they wish to save. A problem, a solution -- just not an easy one. As for Mister Weasley's problem, look at the one known solution. Tell me, Miss Granger, even if there is a second solution, do you think you have the time to find one before the poison so fills your friend that no solution will work? I know you believe that you have the knowledge. After all, you took six years of potions," he mocked. "The fact that you have missed your final year and any apprenticeship training such as Professor Dumbledore, Slughorn, and myself undertook means nothing to a witch of your talents."

"You just want me to beg you to do the research," Hermione said coldly. "Then you can turn me down and feel superior."

Snape smiled evilly. "Nonsense, I would be honored to devote all my time to the problem."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "And your price?"

"Ah. It occurred to me the other day that I have been remiss in fulfilling my heritage. You do have brains and talent, and I care nothing for looks, so perhaps you could bear an heir for me."

"You are disgusting pervert," Hermione snapped. She turned and started to walk out.

"We could always use Muggle artificial insemination to breed you," Snape called to her. Hermione slammed the door behind her. Snape shrugged. An heir could wait until his sentence was up.

He hesitated, and then walked over to a chalk board he had set up. "It can't hurt to take a look at the problem," he muttered. "I can always trade it for my freedom if I solve the puzzle."

It was over an hour later, when Snape had just finished writing the steps for the final two rituals when the chimes announced another approved visitor had moved through his wards.

Snape turned to see who was bothering him now. He hoped it wasn't Potter, come to be tiresome about his proposition to Granger.

It wasn't.

"What do you want, Weasley?" Snape asked dismissively.

"I just wanted to see you for myself," Percy answered.

"You've seen me before," Snape retorted.

"So I have," Percy replied, coming closer.

Snape scowled and stepped back. "What do you want, Weasley?"

Snape had been watching Percy's right hand, his wand hand. Like a snake, Percy's left hand shot out and a knife ripped Snape from just below his navel to just below his diaphragm and then back down through to his pelvis. Snape looked down at his intestines, which were uncoiling onto the floor. He looked at Percy.

"Good bye, Severus," Percy said, looking Snape in the Potion Master's rapidly clouding eyes.

Snape saw who was controlling the body. "You. . . ." Snape fell to his knees. "The Boy will destroy you," he said, more to annoy the Dark Lord than because he believed it.

Percy spat on the dying body, cleaned the blood off himself and knife, which also removed Percy's fingerprints. The odds were already very much against Percy's not being suspected in the prison break, which should soon be reported back in Britain. Still, there was no reason to leave excess evidence. That would be sloppy, and Voldemort had resolved not to make such basic errors again.

Percy Weasley walked out of the safe house.

A knock sounded on the door to Harry's, once Hagrid's, hut. Hermione stopped crying in Luna's lap and sat up, drying her tears and Harry moved to the door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Russell."

A wave of Harry's hand opened the door, and Russell came in. "What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"There has been a major breakout from the prison on Baffin Island," Russell said. "Seven Death Eaters, including the Malfoys, escaped along with fourteen other prisoners."

"How?" Hermione demanded before Harry or Luna could.

"We don't know yet," Russell said. "It appeared to be a portkey, which should not have worked. It's possible that Voldemort or the Knights have a more advanced form of a portkey, or it may be something else."

"How could they have gotten one?" Luna asked.

"Ah," Russell said. "That's why you need to bring me through the floo with you, Harry. It was either a prison worker, or Percy Weasley."

"Percy is an ass, but. . . ." Harry started.

"Percy's wife was murdered by a Death Eater or Voldemort, who had left before Percy had arrived. What if they hadn't left?" Russell said bitterly, for he knew he or someone should have checked more carefully.

"Percy could be under the Imperius," Luna said.

"Exactly. And he's visiting Ron in the Infirmary right now."

Only Harry, Luna, and Hermione could use Harry's internal Hogwarts' floo connection in the hut. Therefore Harry grabbed the Prof by the hand and went to the fireplace, calling, "The Infirmary!"

The quartet, followed by a protesting Madam Pomfrey, burst into Ron's private room less than thirty seconds later.

Percy instantly pulled a knife and flung himself at Ron. Ron managed to weakly block the knife, causing a long rip down his left arm.

Harry didn't bother doing magic, he just flung himself at Percy, tackling him and pulling him off Ron with one move. All three rolled off Ron's bed onto the floor.

The Prof came around the bed and kicked the knife away from the struggling trio. He quickly stunned Percy.

"What the bloody hell was that all about!" Ron cried from the floor. Hermione and Madam Pomfrey pulled Ron off the floor, while Luna helped Harry to stand.

"Look," Russell said simply. He had opened Percy's robe and pulled up his shirt. There were ritual tattoos all over Percy's torso, concentrating around his heart. "Weasley here is enslaved to Voldemort's will. This is a stronger, permanent version of the Imperius."

"Percy's been under Riddle's control?" Ron asked, horrified.

"Not for long," Russell said. "These aren't even healed. Most likely, Voldemort killed Penny Weasley and put Percy under the Imperius. After the funeral, he would have done these."

"Why?" Ron asked. "Not just to, well, to kill me!"

Russell shook his head. "No, of course not. Percy had access to the prison where Malfoy and some of the other Death Eaters were located. They escaped a few hours ago."

"But why bring Percy here?" Hermione asked from Ron's side.

"If we hadn't suspected Percy, he might have used this as a chance to attack Harry," Russell answered. "Since we did, he probably wanted to hurt us by killing Ron at the least."

"But if he hadn't shown up here, we might not have suspected him as strongly as we did," Luna pointed out.

"True," Russell said.

"But typical of Voldemort's thinking," Harry said. "Can you break the rituals?" Harry asked Russell.

Russell shrugged. "Maybe. I've never done any ritual tattooing, although I know the principles. A rune of severing right over these three should do the trick, if I can get some help."

"What kind of help?" Luna asked.

Russell thought for a moment. "I would need seven women. You two, Ginny Weasley, and four others. One needs to be a virgin. The sooner we do this, the easier it will be to break the ritual submission."

"We'll get on it," Hermione said, and she and Luna quickly left the room.

"I'll notify the Ministry," Harry said. "We need to have them track every place Percy's been since the murder." He and Russell also left.

"I'll just lie here, then," Ron complained.

"That is correct," Madam Pomfrey told him. "If this works, your brother will need you. If you don't rest, you won't be able to help him."

Just over an hour later, Harry looked in on the ritual being performed on Percy Weasley. Percy was laid naked on a stone slab, tied down, and he was struggling and screaming as Russell tried to inflict the new tattoo atop the others. Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Susan Bones, Carla Brown, and two Fifth year Ravenclaws Harry didn't know, naked and with painted runes over their bodies, were dancing and chanting.

Russell stood up, his back obviously stiff from the effort, pointed his wand at the now-completed tattoo, and declaimed an incantation in a language that Harry couldn't even guess at.

Percy stopped screaming and seemed to fall asleep. The seven girls suddenly became very shy, especially when five of them saw Harry. Harry averted his eyes and they quickly threw their robes and shoes on. Four of the girls fled, embarrassed and giggling. Russell and Ginny would take Percy back to the Infirmary, and then Russell would notify the Ministry of what had happened. Luna and Hermione followed Harry back to the 'cabin', as he preferred calling Hagrid's hut.

Monday, December 8, 1997

Percy Weasley found himself awake. Every muscle in his body ached, but those pains were overshadowed by a burning on his chest, over his heart. That, in turn, was overwhelmed by a splitting headache.

Percy moaned softly.

"So, you're awake."

Percy opened his eyes, and saw that he was in a bed across from his brother Ron's. Ron was also in bed, and was looking back. It took Percy several moments to figure out where Ron's bed was and why he looked so weak.

It took several more to work out why Percy was in the Hogwarts' Infirmary. "Oh . . . Merlin!" Percy

exclaimed softly. "It . . . it hasn't been a nightmare!"

"If you mean your possession, then no, it was real," Ron said bluntly.

"Then Penny. . . ."

Ron looked a bit abashed at that. "I'm sorry, but yes." Ron hesitated, and then asked, "He didn't make you. . . ."

Percy shook his head, the tears running down his cheeks. "No . . . no, as horrible as I acted, at least I didn't do that."

"I see that you're awake, and that Ron is as tactful as ever," Ginny said from the door. She walked in and sat on Percy's bed, holding him tightly and glaring at Ron.

"What?" Ron asked.

"Do they know all the things he made me do?" Percy managed to sob out.

"They know you helped, I mean, were forced to help create a prison break," Ron said. "And of course you tried to kill me."

"That wasn't Percy," Ginny snapped.

Ron said nothing, even though he wondered why Percy hadn't been able to gather enough will power to at least hesitate in his attack. Despite all the things he could say to belittle Percy, lack of will was certainly not one of them.

"Do you still blame me for being possessed?" Ginny snapped.

"No," Ron retorted. "Percy isn't eleven, and you never tried to knife one of your brothers."

"The tattooing brought him even more firmly under Riddle's control than the Imperius or my possession would have," Ginny said firmly.

"Oh," Ron said. "I am sorry about Penny," Ron added. "And if you need to hear it, I do forgive you for not stopping the attack on me."

"I did kill, though," Percy said between sobs.

"Who?" Ginny demanded.

"Snape."

Ginny and Ron exchanged looks. Ron saw that Ginny still literally had her hands filled with Percy, so Ron slowly got out of bed. He grabbed a cane and even more slowly hobbled out of the room. He would tell Madam Pomfrey, and she would in turn tell someone in the Order.

To Ron's surprise, however, Tonks was waiting outside. "He's awake?"

Ron nodded, and said, "He claims to have been forced to kill Snape."

Tonks frowned. "I'll contact your father, and the Ministry will send someone. I'll be coming back to debrief him."

Ron nodded. "I'll let them know."

Chapter XXIV

Tuesday, December 9, 1997

Tonks and Russell walked through the corridors of the Ministry. They had copies of the reports from Percy Weasley's debriefing. The prison break, and Snape's murder, had caused an upswing in nervousness, both for the public and within the Ministry. Percy Weasley had never been very well-liked, but most of his co-workers had seen him as a strong-willed stubborn wizard. Voldemort's easy takeover of him had reminded them all that they could suffer a similar fate.

"Professor Russell?"

Russell and Tonks turned and saw a young witch. "Yes, Miss Williams?" Russell responded, recognizing her as a student who had left Hogwarts some six years before.

"Here," she said, tossing him a small coin very hard.

Russell did not try to grab the coin. Instead, he tried to knock it away. However, the knut was a very sensitive portkey and Russell instantly disappeared.

Tonks swiftly stunned the witch.

Had this kidnaping occurred over a year before, Russell would have been less prepared to deal with it. He had been in hard training, especially over the previous summer. By the time the portkey had landed him, Russell had his wand out and was ready. He stunned the two wizards waiting for him before they could respond.

"Oh, very well done," hissed a voice from behind him. Russell ducked, rolled, and shot off a hex, which was brushed aside.

"You are a powerful wizard," Voldemort said, stepping out of the shadows, "but you are nothing compared to me."

"From the scene, it looked like Hagrid beat you pretty badly before you managed to kill him," Russell retorted. "I figure I can do at least as well."

"You are not a half-giant," Voldemort stated.

"True," Russell agreed. "What do you want?"

"I mostly just want you dead," Voldemort said. "If you hadn't been there to coach him, Potter would have been close to helpless once the Old Man was gone."

"I wouldn't say that," Russell disagreed. "It would have taken Harry longer to get up to speed without me, but he would still be ahead of you, even if there were no such thing as a White Warlock."

"There is not such thing! There is no 'Higher Magic' or 'Higher Power' or any of that nonsense!"

"You say that just because you're terrified of death," Russell sneered back. "You can't admit there is anything higher than you, and so cannot believe."

"And you aren't afraid of death?"

"I am," Russell admitted as he looked for an opening to attack. "However, I at least believe in the possibilities."

"That is a weakness."

"Is it? You're the one who thinks he can become immortal in this life. That's just plain ignorance."

"Ignorance? Did you know there is a wizard who over five thousand years old!"

"Having met one who is a few thousand, I am not surprised to learn there is one that old," Russell acknowledged. "However, I am not stupid enough not to realize that five thousand years is nothing like being immortal."

Voldemort appeared puzzled.

"What is five thousand years to the two hundred thousand or so the human species has been around? Or the six million or so there have been up-right apes roaming the earth? Or the five hundred million there have been backbone creatures on this planet? Can you really imagine living in that body of yours for a million years?" Russell smirked at Voldemort's confused expression. "No, I thought not. You have a brilliant mind, probably even more so than I do, but you have a very limited imagination."

Voldemort flicked a curse, which Russell easily deflected.

"You have a nasty temper, too," Russell mocked. "It's faster than mine; I wonder if it's any match for mine."

"I saw your rage in Snape's memories," Voldemort declared. "You know mind magic I have not had the time to explore. You would be useful to me."

"Yes, but you are of no use to me. Another defect -- you only care about how things affect you, you have no concern for others."

"My. . . ." Voldemort started, but stopped.

"Yes, yes, you're a poor little bastard whose mother died and left you in an orphanage, boo hoo hoo," Russell spat with scorn. "Poor little Tommy Riddle. I can name two dozen wizards who had at least equally hard childhoods, starting with Harry, and the only other one who turned out miserable was Snape."

Voldemort dismissed that with a gesture.

"Yes, I know, no one could have suffered as much as you; no one could have your problems; no one else could overcome them like you did," Russell mocked. "You might be as book-smart as Hermione Granger, you might have nearly the natural affinity for magic as Harry, but you are just a deformed, depraved, selfish little bastard."

"CRUCIO!"

Russell ducked the spell and sent the same right back at Voldemort. It struck, but Russell was unable to hold it long. Still, Voldemort screamed for some six seconds under it.

Russell tried to apparate, but there were wards up against that. "Tsk tsk tsk, a so-called 'good wizard' who uses an Unforgivable?" Voldemort asked, now on his guard.

"You didn't even begin to taste my fury," Russell declared. "Tell me, o powerful Dark Lord, when was the last time you actually fought a wizard? Other than Harry, who was underage and beat you twice, and Hagrid who never quite got through his Third year?"

This time, Voldemort and Russell managed to curse each other with the Cruciatus, and so it only held for a brief second. Voldemort recovered first, however, and yelled, "Legilimens!"

His mind was instantly filled the Homer's 'Catalog of Ships', in the original Greek.

"First of all," Tonks said, "Gayle Williams was certainly under the Imperius, personally done by Voldemort himself. He came into her flat early this morning, killed her lover -- she was a shop assistant at Eelops named Christie -- and put the curse on Williams. Williams is therefore a washout so far as information is concerned."

"And the portkey?" Hermione asked.

"We've never seen one that powerful," Scrimgeour admitted. "While a portkey will take off with anything touching it, unless it was pure dumb luck, the forward momentum it had should have prevented it from dragging Russell with it. That's one reason why it's difficult to kidnap anyone with training by using a portkey."

"Because we're trained to bat it away instead of catching an object like that," Harry agreed. "So, it could have been dumb luck?"

"Put simply, no," Tonks answered. "Remember the prison break."

"The area where the kidnaping occurred at is under the usual anti-portkey wards," Scrimgeour explained. "Now granted, it's more difficult to hold someone portkeying out than it is preventing them from portkeying in. Still, Voldemort, or more likely these Knights, must have come up with a new, more powerful variation."

"Are we in danger of people portkeying in anywhere?" Hermione asked.

"We don't think so," Scrimgeour answered. "Both at the prison and here, the wards nearly held. We don't think anyone could use these new portkeys to get in anywhere, but they can obviously get people out."

"Let me guess," Harry said bitterly, "there's no way to trace these new portkeys."

"No good ways," Scrimgeour answered. "However, we do have a general direction the portkeys traveled in from the prison. Our boffins are trying to see if this one left enough of a trace to get any sort of direction from. If the lines intersect anywhere close, then we might have an outside chance of launching a rescue. However, if it's more than fifty miles away from here, well, the margin of error, which is already pretty high due to the distance from Baffin Island, simply grows too large for any immediate searches."

"A very crude defense, but a seemingly effective one," Voldemort admitted as the Catalog restarted.

"I'm a good boy, who does his Occlumency exercises every night before bed," Russell retorted through gritted teeth.

"Yes. I studied this memory. Snape was most impressed. However, I believe I found a little flaw . . . right about . . . here!" Voldemort forced his way deeper into Russell's mind.

"Here is the direction, sir!" an Unspeakable said, hurrying into the Minister's office. Scrimgeour took the direction and pulled down a map Britain and Ireland hanging on the side of his wall. The others noticed that there was a green line slashing across the map, obviously the direction the portkeys from Baffin Island had taken. He cued the new direction in. It disappeared to the east without touching the other line.

"Damn," Scrimgeour, Tonks, and Harry all exclaimed.

"We need a larger map," Hermione declared.

Scrimgeour tapped the map twice and it slowly enlarged into a map showing all of Europe and North Africa. It was clear where the lines intersected.

Transylvania.

With a sigh, Scrimgeour tapped the map where the lines intersected three times, which enlarged that section of the map.

"There's Charlie's dragon reserve," Harry said, pointing to an area about twenty-five miles from the actual intersection.

"It likely doesn't matter," Scrimgeour said. He pointed to an area just a bit west of the actual

intersection. Two taps slowly made it an extreme close up. "They are all likely there."

Voldemort was wary. He had lost all his senses -- he was inside of John Russell's mind, and that was all he was aware of. This was dangerous.

"I've had over two years to prepare this trap," Russell's thoughts said. "Even if I somehow managed to beat you, I couldn't escape from here, could I?"

"No, you couldn't," Voldemort said. "We are in the heart of one of the Knights' territory."

"And which area is that?" Russell asked, mostly just out of curiosity. "It has to be one of the six large unplottable areas in Eastern Europe we aren't certain about. I'm guessing the one in Transylvania or the one in southern Bulgaria."

"The first, actually. Now, what do you intend to do with that information?"

"Nothing," Russell answered. "I've been a searcher of information my entire life. I just wanted one last fact. Now, let me ask you something. You have split your soul, and so even if I killed your current body, you wouldn't be dead as long as the last two Horcruxes exist."

Voldemort hissed. He had been fairly certain his enemies knew all this, but now it was confirmed. He was also shocked to learn he might be down to two Horcruxes

"I'll take that as a yes, then. But your mind is now mostly inside of me. What happens to you if you're inside someone else's body when they die?"

"It likely doesn't matter," Scrimgeour said. He pointed to an area just a bit west of the actual intersection. Two taps made it an extreme close up. "They are all likely there."

"And what is 'there'?" Harry demanded.

Scrimgeour turned to Hermione and asked, "Do you know the Muggle story of Dracula?"

"I've seen some of the films, but I haven't read the original novel," Hermione admitted.

"Bram Stoker invented most of the story out of whole cloth, but he did get some of his ideas from some old stories, and some facts a Muggle-born cousin of his let slip while Stoker was doing his research. Part of the myth and story of Dracula came about because a Romanian Prince named Vlad Dracul, Vlad the Dragon, also known as Vlad the Impaler, made a deal with a Transylvanian vampire, who had once been a wizard. He also went by the name of the Dragon, Dracul. The vampire Dracula was killed in the 1700s by a wizarding vampire hunter who, according to Russell's research, later joined the group which became the Knights of Walpurgis. Dracula's valley had been unplottable since the early eleventh century, and still is."

"So, you're saying it's impossible to rescue the Prof?" Harry demanded.

"If we made an all-out effort, we might, might mind you, be able to organize an assault by the end of the year. After all, unplottable means we cannot easily observe what is going on inside that valley or assault it easily."

"And if I and my people are there?" Harry demanded.

"It would still take until the end of the year. That would just mean any assault would be more likely to succeed."

"We go on the Twenty-seventh," Harry said. "There should be two separate Ministry groups working on this. . . ."

Scrimgeour nodded. "The people going in will be very separate from the people organizing the logistics. We'll all aim for a rendez-vous the evening of the Twenty-sixth, and then an assault the

next day at whatever we decide it the optimal time."

Harry nodded and turned to Tonks. "You coordinate."

"Right."

Harry stood, his jaw set. "Let's go." The attack would almost certainly be too late to save John Russell, but it was time to strike against Voldemort and his allies.

"What happens to you if you're inside someone else's body when they die?" Russell asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean try and leave."

Voldemort tried to withdraw, and failed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm dying," Russell said simply. "You will get no satisfaction from my death other than the fact of the death itself. You will get no information from me. Maybe I'll take what little is left of your soul with me, leaving what's left in your two Horcruxes dormant, unless someone frees them rather than destroys them."

"NO!" Voldemort screamed, mentally thrashing and trying to escape.

"You know, when I was a First year, I was really impressed by you," Russell said. "You could have been great, and you tossed that away on trying to conquer the world."

"NO!"

Russell gathered all his anger and turned it on himself, dissolving his connections to his body, welcoming the darkness, while Voldemort fought against the tug trying to pull his soul from his body. It was a battle of will, not of magical power, and it was an even fight.

That evening, Harry met with McGonagall, Remus, Tonks, George, Neville, Luna, Hermione, and Ginny. Tonks had just finished explaining what had happened and now Harry picked up the story.

"So, now we have to hope that the Ministry can convince the Romanians to join in an attack without it leaking," Harry said. "From what little we were able to determine, however, the Romanians have been itching for an excuse to get into this area, and we'll go through that multi-ministry security taskforce that Scrimgeour is helping to set up. They aren't active yet, but we might be able to scare up some aurors from elsewhere. The North Americans have indicated that they would be interesting helping out in any real assault, just not in the more boring policing aspects or providing security."

Harry looked at his friends and took a deep breath.

"Don't be stupid," Ginny said. "We're coming."

"Or you're not going," Neville agreed.

"Fine," Harry said. "George, can you find some Quidditch players we can trust to provide some air support?"

"I can, and I can arm them," George said.

"Ginny, can you train them in two weeks?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Train them until the morning of Christmas Eve, then have them meet the afternoon on Boxing Day. That's when we'll ask them to join the attack."

"Right," the two Weasleys said.

"Professor, Remus? Could you canvass the Order for Volunteers?" The two agreed.

"Finally, Hermione and I will be gone this weekend, and no, we're not going to talk about it." Hermione was obviously as surprised as the others at what Harry had just announced. "Since the next full moon isn't until just after midnight Monday morning, Remus will be in charge while I'm gone. Tonks, each evening starting tomorrow report whatever you learned from the Ministry to Remus and Luna. Any questions that I'm likely to answer?"

Since there were no questions, Harry dismissed everyone except for Luna and Hermione.

"Where are we going, Harry?" Hermione asked mildly.

"The Prof was arranging a meeting with Theseus. His contact will be here soon. I sent Hedwig with a message for him to meet me at the hut."

"And you're presuming permission was granted," Hermione stated.

"We're going no matter what," Harry growled.

"would that be wise?" Luna asked.

Harry sighed. "I don't know. We'll wait and see what the vampire has to say." He stood. "Shall we go wait for him?"

The knock came a few minutes before midnight. The door swung open and to Harry's surprise a very beautiful vampire came into the room. She was certainly shorter than average height, but she was stunning, with auburn hair and a body any veela would envy, although her skin was like the purest marble (and not much more animated). "I am Marcia," she said simply. "Where is John, Lord Harry?"

"Professor Russell was captured by Voldemort this morning," Harry said bluntly.

Marcia's mask-like face showed a slight expression of pain, but she only said, "That is sad to hear. Do you intend to still take up the invitation?"

"I do," Harry said. "Myself and Miss Granger."

A slight look that might have been hunger passed over Marcia, but she merely nodded. "If there is nothing else?"

"Actually," Harry said, "there is."

"And that is?"

"It appears that Voldemort has allied himself with some groups calling themselves the Knights and the Companions of Walpurgis," Harry stated. Marcia gave him a distasteful look, but said nothing. "It appears as if they are using Dracul's Valley in Transylvania as their base."

"That was lost to us a few centuries ago," Marcia said. "We magical vampires have mostly divorced ourselves from the magical communities in Europe because of this."

"Do you think any vampires might be interested in helping us assault it?" Harry asked.

"I shall pass your idea on to some elders," Marcia replied. "If there is any interest, they shall send a representative to Theseus' Saturday evening, or at least send word to basileus Theseus."

"Thank you," Harry said.

Marcia bowed. "I at least hope I may fight on your side, Harry Potter."

Chapter XXV

Friday, December 12, 1997

Harry sat up in his bed quickly, his wand at the ready. "Who's there!" he called. Luna rolled off the other side of the bed and appeared, wand at the ready, a second later.

"Sorry about that," a voice said.

"Prof?" Harry asked, doubtingly. "Prof!"

"You're a ghost!" Luna supplied.

"Yes," Russell agreed, coming a bit closer, "I had noticed."

"Tell me something only you should know," Harry challenged.

"Be more specific, Harry," the ghost urged. "Voldemort didn't manage to ransack my mind, but you don't know that."

"What was in the drawer you showed me in your private study?"

"That was a drawer of rather obscure Muggle hand weapons. You took a shine to a pair of brass knuckles, although they were actually nickle-plated, and my ninja stars. I hope you've been practicing."

"I have," Harry said, lowering his wand slightly. Luna dropped hers for a moment and wriggled into her dressing gown. "I was afraid you'd been, well. . . ."

"Killed," Russell agreed. "I managed to lure Voldemort into my mind, and I tried to destroy him by killing myself while we were struggling."

"Prof!"

"It almost worked," Russell said wistfully.

"What happened?" Luna asked.

"I was trying to drag him into the afterlife, and he was struggling to hold on to his body. I ended up a ghost; he snapped back into his body." The ghost shrugged. "If he were fully human, it would take him at least two months to become fully functional, more likely three. As it is, he should be pretty disoriented for at least two weeks."

"Good," Harry said. "We hope to attack Valley Dracul on the Twenty-seventh. That is where you ended up, right?"

"It was," Russell agreed, a bit impressed. "Are you still going to Theseus' tonight?"

"Hermione and I are," Harry answered. He glanced at his clock. "She should be back in half an hour. We have a portkey to Marseilles at Eight this morning, and we're meeting our contact at One-thirty."

"What are you doing between Eight and One-thirty?" Russell asked, confused.

"There's a used magical book store Hermione wants to visit, and then we're going for bouillabaisse," Harry admitted.

"Well, you know the best place for it."

"I . . . I'm not certain what to say to a new ghost," Harry admitted. "I am sorry. . . ."

Russell held up his hand. "We'll talk when you come back, Harry. Luna and Remus can debrief me while you're gone." He turned to Luna. "Has the Headmistress filled my job yet?"

"Hermione and I have been filling in. The Headmistress is, or was, looking for a replacement."

"I'll stick around to the end of the year," Russell said. "Then, unless you really need me, I think I'll duck through the Veil at the Ministry. I do not find this sort of existence pleasant."

"Thanks, Prof," Harry said.

"I am your loyal friend," Russell said. He bowed and drifted off through the wall.

Harry turned to Luna. "You and Remus make certain he's not only who he says he is, but that Voldemort doesn't control him in any way."

"We will, although I do not believe he is under any control, other than his own," Luna said.

"This is very good," Hermione said.

"It is," Harry agreed, "I have to admit that fish soup didn't sound very good when I first heard of it."

"I admit, while I could just see you eating bouillabaisse I didn't see you liking snails."

"I like garlic, and they're really good with the pink wine. Those charbroiled oysters were even better."

They ate for a few moments, and then Hermione said, "You aren't going to talk about the Prof with me, are you?"

"Not until we get back, and I hear from Luna and Remus," Harry said simply. "I have to admit, I'm not sure how I feel about his being a ghost. I mean, I'm sorry his body is gone, but. . . ."

"It is a bit confusing," Hermione admitted. "How do you feel about his plan to go through the Veil?"

Harry shrugged and tore off some bread. "I don't know how I feel about that, either. Still, he might change his mind by July."

"True," Hermione agreed.

At that moment, a tall chestnut-haired woman came up to them and leaned over Harry's shoulder, whispering a password. Harry nodded and said, "I remember you from last August." He lowered his voice. "You're the witch from Theseus' villa."

"Very good," she said with a strong German accent. "You may call me Elsa. I hope you won't mind my having some wine and cheese with you?"

"Not at all," Hermione said.

Elsa smiled at Harry. "You're a brave wizard, to bring an attractive witch to Theseus'. He can be a very seductive host."

"Hermione has a mind of her own, and is the most talented witch I know. On the off-chance she can't handle something, well, I wouldn't want Theseus as my enemy, but he doesn't want me as his, either."

After a waitress had given Elsa a wine glass and took their order for a large cheese plate to be delivered while Harry and Hermione finished their meal, Elsa said, "Last August, you were a raw, somewhat callow student. I won't flatter you by saying how much you've grown."

"Harry can easily be underestimated," Hermione remarked.

"Not by me," Elsa said, "and not by Theseus, either. However, some of the girls will be disappointed that your handsome older friend isn't with you."

"Voldemort killed him Tuesday," Harry said. "Well, actually, he's a ghost now."

"I am sorry to hear that," Elsa said with sincerity. "Geena and Noelle will especially be saddened."

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

"Ah . . . a faux pas," Elsa admitted. "I misunderstood what you knew. As you can probably understand, Theseus does little of his own direct recruiting these days. Even the Muggle girls know something of our world. Most of them are happy to come because of Theseus' charisma. However, what leads to their recruitment tends to be one of two things. One group, especially the Squibs, consists of those who hope to meet an interesting wizard who will help them bear a magical child."

"Such as Geena and Noelle?" Hermione suggested.

"Noelle, the child of Squibs, is expecting the Professor's child in the late spring. Geena is a Muggle who had similar plans, but no," Elsa agreed, "as she originally fell into the second, larger group."

"Let me guess," Hermione said drily. "This Theseus has strong contacts with vampires. These other women have vampire fetishes."

"Precisely," Elsa agreed.

"And what would attract a witch?" Hermione asked archly.

"If you mean me, his charisma, and the chance to learn from a powerful master warlock," Elsa replied without embarrassment. "I suggest you withhold judgement until you have met the basileus."

"Is he really?"

"What's a basileus?" Harry asked.

"That's Greek for 'king'," Hermione stated.

"That is Classical Greek for king," Elsa agreed. "However, Theseus' native Greek is centuries earlier, and a different dialect." Hermione flushed slightly. "Shall we have coffee and a sweet, or shall we leave presently?"

"How are we going?" Harry asked, signaling for the bill.

"Theseus keeps a small hostel a few miles from his estate. I have a portkey which will take us there. From there, a carriage will take us the rest of the way."

"Sounds reasonable," Harry said.

"I just hope it has springs, or the magical equivalent," Hermione said. Pre-mid19th century carriages had uncomfortable suspensions.

"The basileus has kept up with technology," Elsa retorted. "He just prefers not to have a motorcar on the estate."

Four hours later, the carriage had deposited the trio at Theseus' estate, and Harry and Hermione were waiting inside Theseus' library.

"Why have you been smirking all afternoon?" Hermione asked as she glanced around the library.

"You and Elsa didn't hit things off very well," Harry merely remarked.

"And why did you find that amusing?"

"Only because I so rarely see you acting like that," Harry assured her.

"Like what?" Harry was saved answering, as Theseus entered at that moment.

Hermione saw a burly man of average height coming to greet Harry, obviously from the Eastern Mediterranean. His eyes, however, were no longer fully human, and the area around the bridge of his nose seemed to Hermione like a character from The Next Generation. There was also something different about his body language, but Hermione wasn't certain if that was an effect of his antiquity

or his use of Horcruxes.

Harry introduced the ancient warlock to Hermione, and she felt a frisson of power as he smiled at her. It wasn't Legilimency, she knew. She had learned enough to be sensitive to that touch. No, now she understood what Elsa had meant by Theseus' charisma.

Hermione, however, was with Harry. Her friend, her leader, her lord, and so much more. On top of that, there were her confused feelings for Ron, not to mention a few other people. Between the two, Hermione might feel a thrill, but she would not fall under Theseus' spell.

A slight smile showed her that Theseus understood at least parts of this, and the warlock gestured for them to sit. "I am sorry to hear about John," he said. "However, the fact that you have kept your appointment must mean you have something serious to discuss. I hope it is something I can actually help you with?"

"Meaning?" Harry asked.

"I believe I made things clear, that we were not interested in picking any further fights with Voldemort," Theseus pointed out.

"Did you know that he was allied with the two groups of Walpurgis? the Knights and the Companions, I mean?"

Theseus' eyes went slightly wide for a split second. "Can you prove a true alliance between him and the Companions, which means the group behind the Companions?"

Hermione and Harry had kept their Muggle dress. Hermione therefore pulled a small stack of parchment from a Muggle briefcase. "Absolute proof?" she asked. "Not at this time. We do have strong evidence."

Theseus took the papers and asked, "And what else?"

"You did know that these groups control a place called Valley Dracul?" Harry asked.

"I know it well."

"That's where Voldemort and his Death Eaters are. That's where the Prof fought Voldemort and lost." Harry looked deeply into Theseus' eyes and continued, "We intend to launch an assault on the Twenty-seventh."

"We meaning?"

"Myself and my people, the Order, and the British Ministry. The Ministry is inviting other Ministries, especially from Romania and North America. I invited the vampires through Marcia, and I'm inviting you. I would have thought she might have mentioned it to you."

Theseus sat back. "No, she did not. She did, however, make a hurried trip to the Elders, and said I should expect a visit tonight."

"I don't expect an immediate answer," Harry said, "although I would need one soon."

"And any information you have which would be helpful to us would be very welcome," Hermione added.

Theseus' jaw was set and he was looking deeply into some inner space. Finally, he said, "There are others I need to consult with. I shall send dinner to you. I shall speak with you around dawn." He glanced at the two teens. "Will you have any problems sharing the same suite as before?"

"No," Harry said firmly.

Theseus stood. "I shall send one of the women to take you there."

"Is there any chance I could look around this library?" Hermione asked. Seeing the look on Harry's face, she added, "If Harry doesn't mind staying, that is?" Having met Theseus, and seeing the glint

in his eye, she had decided she had best stick close to Harry.

"I don't mind," Harry said.

"I have a more interesting library I could share with you, if you would prefer to spend some time there," Theseus said. Hermione was happy to agree.

Twenty minutes later, Harry asked, "Does this library really look any more interesting than the other?"

"Oh, yes!" Hermione chirped happily. "I mean, I don't have time to read any of these, but it's so wonderful to know that these exist!"

"Give me a hint, bearing in mind I probably will have no idea what you're talking about," Harry said with a small smile.

"Well, this whole wall is made up of Muggle histories, memoirs, and such from Greece and Rome. Only a tenth of this, at most, survived in the Muggle or magical world. Oh! The History of the Etruscans by the Emperor Claudius!" Harry turned back to the paperwork he had brought with him, catching up on reports, while Hermione had her fun.

"Very good, Weasley," Madam Pomfrey said, "I release you from the Infirmary. Now, you have the vials of potion in the unbreakable tubes?"

Ron merely opened his robes to show the belt he now wore. Luna had given it to him a few days before, and it held twelve small vials of the potion he would have to take for the rest of his life. Still, those represented six days of potion. Ron reflected that he was lucky in a few minor things, at least. The potion had a long shelf life, years in fact. It was also easy enough even for him to make, although somewhat expensive. The dose was also small. The three gallons of the stuff he had on the shelves of his suite would last him a very long time. On top of that, Harry had bought him a special custom made watch, which would silently alert him whenever he needed to take his next dose, and which wouldn't stop the alarm until he had taken it.

Although his muscles would ache every day for the remainder of his life, it was now no worse than how he had felt many mornings after a tough dueling practice -- just permanent. It also did not interfere with his magic.

"Now, take your time getting back to your suite, and mind you stick to your diet! You can't eat like you used to, your metabolism is much lower than it used to be."

"I know," Ron said. Hermione and his mother had lectured him several times about this.

Madam Pomfrey's professional manner suddenly dropped. "I'm so sorry I couldn't do more, Mister Weasley."

Ron smiled gamely. "How long have you been here, Madam Pomfrey? As a student or healer?"

"You know perfectly well I was in your mother's class," she told Ron.

"And how many Weasleys, and Prewitts for that matter, have you known?" Ron asked.

"I'd say too many, except there really haven't been any I would have wanted not to have known," she retorted.

"Have you ever known one to give up when something important is at stake?"

"No," Madam Pomfrey admitted, "I can't say that I have. Remind your brother to come in for his check-up."

Ron frowned. "He should be well enough to go home by now," Ron grumbled.

"But where is home?" Madam Pomfrey asked softly. "He can't face going back to his flat. I doubt he ever goes back there again. And would you want Molly fussing over you?"

"No," Ron admitted. It had been nice, for a day or so. Still, "I wonder whose bright idea it was to put his room next to mine." At least it didn't have a connecting door.

"That would have been your sister, I believe," Madam Pomfrey said. "And remember, no major magic until tomorrow." She handed Ron his wand. "Nothing above Third year for a day or two, in fact."

Ron took his wand and smiled. "No problem."

That evening, Harry and Hermione sat in the small sitting room between the two smaller sleeping chambers. The remains of a much heartier meal than the ones Harry had had the previous summer lay between them. Although the weather was mild compared to the Highlands of Scotland, there was still a distinct chill in the air. Neither of the teens could identify the names for the dishes they had eaten, although between the two of them they could figure out most of the ingredients -- charbroiled seafood, mutton and pasta, and other heavy foods, along with a bottle of red wine and several types of breads and cheeses.

"I never figured you for a gourmet," Hermione teased.

"I know," Harry said sadly. "Another of the Prof's legacies. I ate with him about once a week, and he always took the time to serve me something interesting and good, and to teach me about the dishes and the wine." Harry's look went from sad to tragic.

"He's still around," Hermione pointed out.

"Yes, but I was thinking about Nick's Death Day Party back in Second year."

"All that rotting food, you mean?"

Harry nodded. "Now that vital, interesting, vibrant wizard is partially gone. Did you ever see him smoke a cigar?"

"And his pipes," Hermione agreed.

"He took such pleasure in life. Knowledge of every kind, magical and Muggle. Food, drink. . . ."

"Sex," Hermione added, making a face.

"I guess so," Harry agreed.

"It's not your fault," Hermione reminded Harry.

"It's a little my fault," Harry argued. "I don't feel all that guilty, but I do hope we can mostly end this on the Twenty-seventh."

"Meaning?"

"Trapping Voldemort in some sort of prison-Horcrux and destroying the one inside his snake. Dealing with these Walpurgis people, so they don't throw up some other bloody mess in a generation or something. Recapturing the Death Eaters, especially the Malfoys."

"Life will never be perfect," Hermione pointed out.

"I know." Harry smiled. "Aren't I the one who usually points that out to you?"

"Only about the elves," Hermione said tartly. She frowned. "Why did you ask me about the library earlier?"

"I just wondered if he sent us to another library in order to monitor us, that's all."

Hermione shrugged. "It's possible. And even though the two of us checked this suite out, that

doesn't mean he doesn't have us bugged in some way."

The two friends sighed.

After a few moments of silence, Hermione asked, "Are you worried about the discussions that must be going on now?"

Harry shrugged. "We'll know early in the morning."

"Perhaps we should go to bed early, then," Hermione suggested.

Harry smiled. "Good idea."

Chapter XXVI

Saturday, December 13, 1997

"Well my slippery friend, what do you think of my allies and their locale?"

Lucius Malfoy shrugged. He had been awake all night and was tired. "They seem . . . odd and dedicated to their own goals, my lord."

"So they are," Voldemort agreed. "Did you and your spawn accede to their requests?"

Malfoy flushed and said, "As you requested, my lord." Malfoy had no great desire to 'donate' to the blood lines of these fanatics, but it was only a few minutes' exercise, after all.

"Good. Now, I have a job for you and your boy, if you think you can carry it out."

"As you will, my lord."

"Do you think you can go back to your position of power without my success, Lucius?"

"No, my lord," Malfoy had to agree.

"Good. You are the only one I see available who could control more than a few score of my Inferi."

Lucius' eyebrows went up.

"Ah, I see you, like so many others, have forgotten them. I have at least nine hundred available. With the help of your son and one of these Companions, I believe you could direct at least several hundred of them in an attack on Hogwarts, possibly more."

"I . . . I thank you, my lord. When would the attack be?"

"I still have some indirect sources at the school. Most of the Fifth years have arranged to come back the afternoon of the Twenty-seventh and have a 'study party' -- a large O.W.L. study session the from the morning of the Twenty-eighth through the afternoon of the Thirty-first, and then a party New Year's Eve. I admit, I am torn between an attack on the late afternoon of the Twenty-seventh soon after they arrive, and one just after dawn on the First. Have you a preference?"

"No, my lord," Lucius said quickly, but then a thought occurred to him. He looked at Voldemort, who nodded permission to continue. "However, it is possible that some of the students, especially the Ravenclaws, might not stay up late partying on New Year's Eve. Also, the Order might be back on higher alert on the First, while they might relax a bit once their charges have arrived safely on the Twenty-seventh."

"That is why I was hesitating," Voldemort agreed, "Otherwise the symbolic value of an attack on the First would incline me to choose it. You will be happy to know that your wife's Scottish cottage has been overlooked by the Ministry, and was not even reported to the Order -- at the cost of some five hundred Galleons. Therefore, you and your son will be transported there just after sunset tonight. The Inferi shall arrive after dark on the Twenty-fifth." He handed Lucius a stack of sealed parchment. "The directions for controlling them are the first three pages. Read them and learn them well. Move all which you can control to the spot mentioned on the final page after dark on the Twenty-sixth. That final page is a portkey for the three of you. The pages in between are the options you have for the attack. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Attack on the Twenty-seventh, unless you have good reasons for delaying it until the First."

"Yes, my lord."

"The Companions will send along a pair of serving girls to cook for the two of you through the evening of the Twenty-sixth. Do not misuse them, the Companions will take it amiss and the girls

are capable of fighting back. However, you and your son should feel free to impregnate them. They and Companions would look favorably upon that."

"Yes, my lord. Thank you for your trust."

Voldemort sneered and dismissed Lucius.

Harry and Hermione were awake well before dawn, by 5:20 in fact. They were not surprised, therefore, to hear a knock on the door to their suite at 5:45.

It was still dark, and the vampire Marcia was standing at the threshold with Theseus. "Please, come in," Harry said.

"I am pleased you have awoken early," Marcia said. "I would wish to speak with you, as well as allowing the basileus speak for us."

"Does that mean the vampires are willing to help?" Harry asked.

"It does," Marcia answered. "There will be thirty magical vampires and forty-two non-magical ones available. There is one thing we ask you to consider. You would not have to answer until the Twenty-sixth."

"And that is?" Harry asked.

"If you would allow one of us to bite you and draw off a little blood, say half a cup, and then let the same vampire feed that blood back to you, that would establish a psychic connection through the night."

Harry looked at Hermione. "Just the one night?" Hermione asked.

"With those amounts, yes, although there would be some emotional bleed-over for a few days."

"The vampire blood would also give some slight protection against minor curses, and more importantly from any narrow misses from major curses," Theseus added. Harry and Hermione nodded. They knew that some major curses could be reflected off of walls and such, hitting anyone near by with lessened results.

"Two questions," Harry said. "First, would this offer just be open to me, and second, are you one of the vampires making the offer?"

"I am," Marcia answered. "There are nine of us making the offer. Any of us offering may make the exchange up to three times and have it work. The offer is open to any of your followers except for the werewolf."

Harry knew that vampires and werewolves rarely got on, and so said nothing. "Then I shall seriously consider your offer," Harry replied. He turned to Theseus, but said nothing.

Theseus turned to Hermione. "Have you read The Iliad, Miss Granger?"

"I have, many times," Hermione replied in Classical Greek. She switched back to English. "Is there much truth in it?"

"A fair amount, although it conflates many different stories. Achilles, for example, was born a wizard. His mother, however, transformed his magical powers into that long-famed near-invulnerability, quickened reflexes, and above-average strength. I am a product of the society many of those stories came from. What were our favorite pastimes?"

"Drinking, pillaging, and raping," Hermione retorted.

"Well, I never cared for the rape part, and I certainly still drink a great deal." The ancient Greek smiled nastily. "It's been over two thousand years since I've done any real pillaging and looting. I think it's time to see if I can still do it."

He turned back to Harry. "I have some friends I can bring with me, too. I shall gather up all the information I can about Valley Dracul and the Companions. Since Marcia seems an acceptable envoy, she will do the same with the vampire covens. We shall be at your place at Hogwarts two hours after sunset. Have your planners there as well. Time is short."

"That will be to our advantage," Harry said. "The quicker we pull this off, the less likely it will be to leak."

"True," Marcia said. "However, remember, every group involved will have different demands to be satisfied."

"Mine is that Voldemort is at least weakened, his snake and the sixth. . . ."

Theseus interrupted, "Harry!"

"What?"

"Just so you know, only two vampires know of how Voldemort obtained his condition. Marcia is not one of them. She can be trusted with the knowledge, but be more careful to whom you speak of this!"

Harry nodded and looked at Marcia, who gave him a minor shrug. "It is up to you. I swear to keep your secrets, Harry Potter."

"Thank you. Voldemort knows he created five Horcruxes, and he accidentally created a sixth. Four have been destroyed. One is still hidden, while we are fairly certain he fed the final one, a magical quizzing glass, to his snake Nagini. If nothing else, I need to destroy the sixth Horcrux and look for any leads on the seventh, a magical cup. I wouldn't mind disembodimenting him, come to that."

"Ah," Theseus said, pulling an empty box for Swan vestas and a sheet of parchment out of his robe. "I have made this into the shell for a Horcrux. Here are the instructions for absorbing Voldemort's remaining soul into it."

"A cardboard matchbox?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Theseus answered. "Once the final Horcrux is destroyed, all anyone has to do is toss this one any fire, and it will destroy what is left of Voldemort. Destroy it before then, of course, and that fragment becomes free, as it was for some thirteen years."

"Thank you," Harry said, taking both. "Now, what do you and the vampires want?"

"I want for people to forget about Horcruxes," Theseus answered.

"We want Valley Dracul back," Marcia stated.

"And we should all want these Companions taken down a few notches," Hermione added. "They could turn into a big problem down the line otherwise."

"I don't know what the Romanian Ministry will want," Harry warned. "I will support the vampires' claim as strongly as I can, however."

"We all have much work to do, and Marcia must take refuge from the daylight," Theseus stated.

"Elsa will be here to escort you back to Marseilles in two hours." He extended his hand. Harry shook it and, to Marcia's surprise, offered his hand to her as well.

When the pair had left, Hermione turned to Harry with a question. She never got to ask it, as Harry swept her up into a hug.

"It might be over in a few weeks," Harry said in her ear, his voice ragged from hope and amazement.

"It might," she agreed. The two close friends hugged again, and kissed from joy and hope.

Ron Weasley walked slowly down a Hogwarts corridor. Suddenly, a blur emerged from the wall and went right in front of the startled convalescent. Ron didn't really feel Peeves, for he had just enough of a view to identify what had gone through him, but he was so startled he lost his balance. Before Ron hit the floor, another blur came out of the wall and rushed through him. Ron hit the floor hard.

"Are you alright, Ron?" Ron looked up and saw it was Professor Russell.

"I'm not sure," Ron admitted.

"I'm sorry I can't help you up," Russell said. "And I'm sorry I rushed through you."

"I thought that was Peeves . . . oh, you were the second blur!"

"Exactly," Russell confessed. "Peeves was rather hoping he could take advantage of my condition. I was proving him wrong."

"That's good to know," Ron said, struggled to get to his feet.

"How are you managing?"

Ron shrugged. "I'd feel better if I could get well enough to get in whatever is going on."

"Would you like an honest answer to that desire?" Russell asked.

"Sure," Ron said, somewhat indifferently.

"Then I think we could get you in shape to go into 'whatever is going on', but I doubt you would survive it well, and I also doubt that what may happen will be the final battle. Would you really like to be in the first big show, knowing you're unlikely to go beyond that and knowing how much distress and worry your being there will bring to your friends and family?"

"Will I be in any better shape in, say, May or June?" Ron asked.

"Probably a bit better," Russell answered. "And, although I hate to say this, after the upcoming battle, if it comes off, there may be fewer alternatives than using you."

Ron grimaced at that, but knew that this was also true. If there was any kind of big battle, there would likely be casualties. "Well," he said, "I won't argue with that."

"Good," Russell said. "Come to my office if you can. You can help plan out possible attack routes. Hopefully Harry and the others will be bringing back more information."

"Thank you," Ron said.

"Good evening," Harry told his Council and his advisors, plus Percy Weasley, the Minister, and two wizards Scrimgeour had brought with him. "Although we're sorry for his current form, I'm sure we're all glad to see Professor Russell is with us again."

There was an embarrassed murmur at that.

"Now the immediate cause for our assault on the Valley of Dracula is gone, but all our evidence suggests that Voldemort, his Death Eaters, and at least a fair number of these so-called Companions of Walpurgis are located there. I believe that we need to attack and capture or take out as many of them as possible. I therefore made an alliance with a representative of the Elder Council of Vampires in Europe. They are willing to join the assault under my command if the Valley is returned to them. In addition, my people are planning their own assault teams and Professor McGonagall and Remus Lupin have solicited volunteers from the Order of the Phoenix. Minister? Do you or your associates have anything to say at this point?"

"Sooner or later, the public will get restive if we don't show progress in the fight against Voldemort," Scrimgeour said. "This seems like a good time to launch such an attack with some

signs of success. Obviously, we need a set plan of some kind before we all say for certain we're in. Jason?"

"I am Jason Carter," one of the wizards said, clearly with an American accent. "The North American Confederation fully agrees with both of you. I am authorized to say we can have a force of sixty aurors, hit-wizards, and other trained personnel ready for an assault the evening of the Twenty-sixth, with many more ready to help keep the area secure afterwards. Of course," he added over the appreciative whisperings of the others, "having a set plan wouldn't be remiss."

"I am Radu Hanciu, representing the Romanian Ministry." The olive-skinned wizard said nothing, thinking hard for a few moments. Finally, he said, "We cannot agree to the outright and immediate turning over of this valley to the Vampires, and without us, the mission cannot go on."

"Really?" Harry commented. "And how would you stop me? Would you tip off the enemy?"

"Of course not," Hanciu snapped. "We could not stop you or the vampires. However, I would hope these others would not invade another Ministry's territory."

"I'm certain the Romanians are open to compromise, my lord," Hermione said soothingly.

Hanciu glared at this annoying teen. Harry noticed and glared back.

The two stared at each other for quite a few seconds.

Hanciu flushed, embarrassed and also, he had to admit, a little afraid at the power behind this stare. "Yes," Hanciu said, "we can work something out."

"Marcia will be here before midnight," Harry offered. "Hermione or I could mediate, if you'd like."

"We'll work something out," Hanciu hurriedly assured the White Warlock.

"Good," Harry stated. "Minister, who will you be appointing as your representative to the planning group?"

"I know Miss Tonks' worth. I gave her this list of the people we'll be sending in, and she can use Percy Weasley here as well."

Percy and Tonks both nodded their agreement.

"Mister Carter, Mister Hanciu, you're both able to serve?" The two men quickly agreed. "Good. Ron, Professor Russell, George and Ginny Weasley, and Marcia will complete the group," Harry said. "I would like a tentative set of plans for us by dawn Tuesday morning. We'll then meet as this group again Tuesday night at Ten-thirty." The group understood those times were for the vampires' accommodation. Harry looked at Hanciu. "If you and Marcia haven't come to an agreement by then, we'll be happy to arbitrate."

"Yes, sir," Hanciu said with nearly gritted teeth. Considering his positions on house elves and werewolves, Potter was not likely to give the Romanian Ministry an easy time just because their dispute was with vampires.

Monday, December 15, 1997

"Where are we going?" Ron demanded.

"What do you care?" Harry asked. "You've been begging to get out of the castle since I got back."

"You haven't been locked up in a room with Percy," Ron retorted.

"Is he really that bad?" Harry asked.

Ron sighed and considered. "No," he finally said, "I suppose not. Still, it's difficult not to remember all the things he did between the end of the Third Task and Fred's . . . murder."

"I know," Harry agreed. "How's George doing, by the way?"

"Better than I would have thought, but not well," Ron admitted. "I think this attack group work is doing him more good than the rest of us."

"Four Weasleys working together," Harry said. "If it were almost anyone else, I'd feel sorry for Old Red-eyes."

"Seriously, Harry, where are we going? And why am I wearing Muggle clothes under my cloak?"

"Just take a hold of my arm," Harry said, "and take a deep breath."

Ron gave Harry a very dirty look, but did as he was told. He was not overly surprised to feel Harry disapparate, taking him along for the ride.

When they landed, Ron shook his head. "Bloody hell, Harry. That took a while!"

"About a minute," Harry agreed. Ron was still catching his breath. "Here, give me your cloak. We not only don't need them, we'd look odd here with them."

Ron frowned and did as he was told, looking around as he did so. "Where are we?"

They were in a large, bright room, although the Venetian blinds were partially closed. There was a fireplace, and the room looked both plush and impersonal. "Go ahead and look around, Harry said.

Ron frowned and did so. One doorway led to a good-sized kitchen with one door leading to a small toilet and two others leading outside -- Ron's suspicions were confirmed -- everything was Muggle. In front of the kitchen was a dining room, and across the entrance hall, in front of the parlor they had apparated into, was an even more formal, small parlor. Ron went up the stairs, and there were three bedrooms (one empty, one with just a bed and a dresser in it, and one outfitted as an office), two bathrooms, and a master suite. "What is this place?"

"It's just a house in America," Harry said. "This is what is called a 'gated community'. That means the only Muggles who can come in are the owners and those they invite. This is a bit more isolated than most of the others, and has some minor distraction spells on it."

"Why do you own it?" Ron asked. "I least I would guess that you do."

"I do," Harry agreed. "It's some place to escape to."

Ron suddenly frowned. "Did you say North America?"

"I did, and yes, I know Hermione would say that apparating anywhere over two hundred miles away isn't safe. Well, it's safe for me, alright?"

"Alright," Ron said doubtfully. "Why am I here?"

"we're going Christmas shopping," Harry said. "I'll pay in dollars, and you can pay me back."

"I have no idea what to buy!"

"We're going to a Muggle place called a 'shopping mall'. You'll find lots of Muggle stuff. Come on, it'll be interesting. Plus we can have lunch and dinner."

"We already had lunch!"

"There's a five or six hour time difference, I forget which," Harry said. "Come on, what do you say?"

"Let's go!"

Chapter XXVII

Tuesday, December 16, 1997

"Do we have a plan?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Tonks said, taking the lead. "The first thing to remember is that because the Valley is unplotable, we cannot apparate or portkey into it. Well, Harry might be able to, the rest of us certainly can't directly do so."

"But indirectly?" Harry asked.

Tonks unrolled a map and tossed some small pieces of plastic on top of it. "There is a way around the problem. The attack begins at Four-fortyfive in the morning on December Twenty-seventh. The vampires will launch two attacks at these two points. These are the two major entrances into the Valley. This large castle in the south is the headquarters, or at least the headquarters in the Valley, of the Knights and Companions of Walpurgis and that's where the main assault will be. This smaller castle to the northeast protects the other entrance, and that has some of the Companions as well as Voldemort and his people. The vampires must get to these general areas near the castles. If they can get further or take out more of the Companions and other guards, fine. Either way, they'll start withdrawing by Six-fifteen if they haven't before that, which will give them more than enough time to retreat to their camps and then be portkeyed to safety before dawn."

"And then what?" Harry asked.

"That's where these pieces of plastic come in," Tonks said. "These are portkey targets. There are no known wardings against these. Whomever has the mate to one of these can be portkeyed to the other. You hold or stand on one and it takes you to the other. If you stand on it and remember to pick up the other, you can portkey yourself back to the first. After that, they're useless."

"So, the vampires will be dropping these," Harry said.

"Hopefully we will be more careful than that," Marcia responded.

"Exactly," Tonks agreed. "Now, the North American and Romanian forces will attack the main castle. Their goal is to disable the Companions and to seize as much information as possible. There are three villages, two compounds, and a fortified manor in the valley."

"Are we sure of that?" McGonagall asked. "The area is, after all, unplotable."

"There are holes in those wards, unless you know about them and arrange new spells to take care of things," Tonks answered. "In this case, we're talking about photos from orbital satellites. These cannot be directed just on the site of the Valley. However, if a series of images are made all over the area around the Valley, we can piece together the photos." There were confused mutterings and complaints about that. Tonks held up her hand. "Professor Dumbledore took precautions for Hogwarts in the 1970s. The Walpurgis group did not. So, there are three villages, apparently of Muggle peasants. The two compounds are two of the areas for those participating in the Companion programs. We aren't certain what the manor is used for."

"Assuming we're successful," Hermione asked, "what happens to the peasants, and the Walpurgis people for that matter?"

Hanciu caught on immediately. "In the short term, there is little we can do for the peasants, other than take care of their physical needs. They have been separated from the outside world for hundreds of years, after all. We and the vampires have agreed to educate them and hopefully integrate their children over time."

Hermione frowned slightly, but knew that it would be a mistake to just toss the peasants into modern life.

"As for the people the Walpurgis groups are breeding, we shall have to see how conditioned they are. We hope that some at least can be quickly brought into the mainstream magical world, but we will have to screen them carefully."

It was not much of an answer, but Hermione was willing to accept it for the moment.

"Go on, Tonks," Harry said.

"Once we're in the Valley, it should be possible to apparate around, except for inside of the castles, and most likely the two compounds unless the inner wards are also breached. The Romanians are tackling the south castle, and the North Americans will hopefully be able to move on to the two compounds at some point. Those allies of the vampires and Harry here are tackling the manor. That leaves the north castle for the Order and the British Ministry team." She looked around. "Now, George and Ginny are working with a group of twenty-two flyers, mostly professional Quidditch players. George and fifteen others go in with the International and Romanian groups. They'll be launching against the south castle and the more southern compound. Ginny and her seven will be launching from our group towards the northern castle. Those will start about an hour before dawn, under the cover of the middle of the vampire attack."

"Ron," Harry said, "you and Luna are in charge of the DA. You'll be in charge of the flying squad, Luna in charge of the castle's outer defenses, while Professor McGonagall is of course in overall charge and in charge of the inside. Remember, the Walpurgis people certainly have other forces, and Voldemort might as well. We could easily be hit in retaliation here before we can get our forces back from Romania."

"We'll be on alert the whole time," Ron said. "It's a good thing almost all the Fifth years will be here."

"They're supposed to be studying for the O.W.L.s!" Hermione objected.

"Then they'll be glad for the break, and be more mentally alert after some exercise," Ron retorted. Most of the people rolled their eyes.

"Yes, well," Tonks said, taking control back, "I don't think we need to go into detail about the actual assignments of everyone, do we?"

"No," Harry agreed. He looked around. "Does anyone feel they need to ask any questions about anything which does not directly concern them?"

No one did. Harry dismissed the group, although the British group reconvened in the room behind the great hall. There Tonks would lay out in more detail the British objectives.

"So," Harry asked right before Tonks left, "what do I do?"

Tonks shrugged. "I would expect you'll be in the second attack wave. I want to assign five aurors to you, not the people you know. We don't want any distractions."

Harry frowned, but couldn't argue. "Fine," Harry said. "However, as much as I hate to say it, everyone has to be on the lookout for Nagini. She's large and very poisonous. Hopefully she's pretty inactive this time of year, but remind everyone that she has a magical power source inside her. Use a severing charm and move away."

"Right."

"So, now we wait," Ginny said.

"Now we wait," Harry agreed.

The next week passed. In some ways, it passed too fast -- there was a great deal to plan and prepare and only a limited amount of time to get it done. In other ways, time passed slowly, because

everyone was looking past Christmas to the attack. None told themselves that the war could soon be over, because they were afraid of disappointments. They were also afraid of what the cost of the attack might be, and only hoped they would have some sort of victory to justify the costs.

Therefore, most of the people closely in on the attack plans had an anxious time before Christmas. Neville, and to a lesser extent Ginny, did have the distraction of Neville's parents. They were still weak, and their minds often wondered. Still, compared to the condition they had been in, they were fully functional people once again, albeit on a slower scale than they had been before their torture.

The only member of Harry's Council who was really happy seemed to be Dobby, as he and Winky prepared Grimmauld Place to the holidays. No one, not even Hermione, was really sad to hear of the suicide of Kreacher, on the 21st.

The large group that gathered at Grimmauld Place the late afternoon of Christmas Eve was a quiet one. The Black house had a sub-basement, a cellar, a main floor of public rooms, a floor of parlors, and three floors of bedrooms, plus an attic. The elves had the second of the bedroom floors and selected other rooms bright and clean. The rest of the house they had left mostly alone so far.

Everyone took quiet pleasure in their gifts the next morning, and in the joy their friends and family took in the gifts given. Still, it was a somber celebration.

Far up in Scotland, the two Malfoys took a walk in the falling snow. "It's safe to talk here," Lucius said. "Falling rain and snow are very good for disrupting tracking and eavesdropping spells."

"Do we go through with the attack, Father, or do we turn them in?"

"And what would we do, Draco?"

"If you have some money and identities we can slip into, perhaps we could escape instead of turning ourselves in as well."

"And when the Dark Lord triumphs?" Lucius asked drily.

"Even if we agree the Dark Lord will triumph in the end, how long will that take? He's been trying to take over the world for about thirty years, and he holds partial control of one castle somewhere. Who's been fighting him? The British Ministry, which you insured was ineffective, and the Old Man. Even if he and Potter were the second and third most powerful wizards in Britain, or even Europe, there's a whole world out there for the Dark Lord to conquer before he reaches us."

"The Dark Lord's reach might be much longer than you think, even if your suppositions were correct. Think in these terms, Draco. Either Potter will be at Hogwarts, or he won't. If he is, then only the Inferi will make contact and we will not be suspected. If he is not, then we may decide to show ourselves and take out some of his support. Either way, we risk little, and may always consider our options later. If we are successful, we will have more chances to leave."

"And if we are not successful? Especially if Potter is there?" That was a difficult admission for both Malfoys, that Potter might actually be powerful and dangerous, not just lucky. Still, they had to take the possibilities into account.

"The attack is expected to fail," Lucius said. "The Inferi are expendable. The main test is of our will."

"Very well, Father," Draco said.

Saturday, December 27, 1997

12:01, Romania

Harry, Hermione, and Marcia

"Did you know that magical vampires who have tasted each other can communicate with their minds before I told you, Harry Potter?"

"I did," Harry said. Remus Lupin had been a very thorough teacher back in his Third year.

"Then," Marcia said, "with your permission, I shall only trade blood with you. I shall relay any information to you from my brothers and sisters, although I do not expect to have much to say until our attack is over."

"And then?"

"And then my brothers and sisters will be seeing through the eyes of some of your friends and allies, and then telling me if I need to say anything."

"And that will work after sunrise?"

"For some hours, although it will fade throughout the morning. By noon, sun-time, it will be gone," she reminded him.

"Alright," Harry said, unwinding the muffler from his neck.

"No," Marcia said, "that neck is too tempting. Your life force and magic are so powerful, no vampire could stop herself from bonding herself to you. Take off your left glove and roll up your sleeves." She glanced at Hermione. "Take out your wand. He needs to trust me for this to work. You do not."

"Right."

Harry held out his hand, and Marcia took it in her freezingly cold hands. She bent over and Harry hissed in pain, and then moaned in pleasure. Harry didn't notice Marcia's icy, hard tongue lick his wrist, her saliva sealing the wound. Her fang tore a small cut in her own wrist and she let the blood drip into Harry's mouth for several seconds before she sealed that as well.

"You can hear me, Harry Potter?"

"Yes," came the surprised response.

"That is good," Marcia said. "Now I must go to my coven for our part in the attack." She was gone from Harry's small room in the magical tent in a blur.

"We need to get in position, too," Hermione said nervously. She kissed Harry's cheek and turned to go. "You're the most important person in my life, Harry. Be safe."

Harry said nothing. Instead, he grabbed on her hand and pulled Hermione into an embrace. They kissed briefly, if passionately, and then they exited to go to their attack groups. Harry greeted the five middle-aged aurors, picked because of their power and experience, not their speed.

And again, it was time to wait.

Harry Alone

For Harry, it was much like the wait before the First Task. Time had little meaning. He ate mechanically when one of the aurors put a plate in his hand and drank the pumpkin juice without noticing what it was. The only interesting thing which occurred was the appearance of Theseus and five of his 'friends' -- all dressed in Bronze Age armor.

"Do not smile, Harry," Theseus said. "This armor is all magically enhanced, and our jabbing spears can act much as you would use a wand."

"Do you know what is at the manor?" Harry asked.

"Records," Theseus answered. "We shall destroy all who oppose us, capture the manor, and go over the records starting tomorrow. We shall send you a copy."

"Thank you."

Remus did manage to elicit another small smile a short while later, as he went by handing out chocolate bars to everyone. There may be no dementors in the Valley, but they could all use the sugar lift, not to mention the uplifting effects chocolate had on the magical. Harry smiled when Remus gave him a Mars Bar as well as well as the same two large bars of dark chocolate he was giving to everyone else.

"Thanks for everything, Remus," Harry said.

"Not a problem," Remus said. "James and Lily would be proud of you today, and Sirius would wish he were your back-up."

"Thanks."

It was only a few minutes later that Marcia told him through their link that the vampires were off. She was in on the attack on the northern part of the valley. Harry only got brief flashes of what she was doing, general impressions of magical vampires slipping sweeping in as bats and landing at their designated areas while others landed in trees or nooks in the castles near parameter guards. As soon as the first vampire transformed into their human form, the ward alarms would go off.

The vampires allowed forty-five minutes from their initial takeoff before the first made his move.

The first to transform were the vampires near the borders of the Valley, and they took the guards quickly, draining them of blood in less than half a minute. Within seconds, the ones at the castles did the same, and then the non-magical vampires, still moving faster than any normal person, ran across the ward lines to attack other guards.

Only then did the nine vampires with the portkey targets transform and scatter their targets. Less than three minutes after the first transformation, all the vampires were moving, looking for new targets.

It took the Knights and Companions only ten minutes to respond to the threat, but by then it was too late. All of the wards against intrusion and vampires were already screaming out their alerts, and so no new alarms went off to signal that several hundred other attackers had been portkeyed into the Valley.

Meanwhile, the vampires were retreating, sooner than they had hoped. Still, they were not leaving the way they came in. The non-magical vampires were heading for the lower points of the Valley, while the magical vampires were heading inwards -- all drawing some of the Valley's defenders away from the Ministry and Order attack teams. The magical vampires especially were causing additional casualties along the way. One stopped and planted a cylinder on his way past the center of the Valley. They then transformed and flew away.

Each of the attack groups checked their special goggles. Hermione had given a pair of night vision goggles to the twins the previous October, and they had managed to figure out a way to mass produce magical versions of them.

"All vampires are approaching the boundaries," the vampire linked to George sent.

George pressed a button, and a small flare launched into the night sky, bursting into red sparks. That was the signal for the broom squads to mount up. One minute later, a golden flare went off, and the flying squads took off.

Ginny

When the red flare went up, Ginny adjusted her goggles, checked her weapons, and mounted up. Then the next flare went off, and she kicked off, the seven fliers following her as she climbed nearly

vertically into the cloudy dark night.

As she approached the castle, she could see no one outside or on the ramparts. She communicated this to her vampire conduit. Passing over the ramparts, she could see figures milling in the main courtyard. She passed that information on as well as she started to circle. She raised her left hand and gave a series of signals to her squad. Since they were circling, she could tell that the flyers she could see had understood correctly.

There was a circular metal cylinder case under each broom, containing twelve tubes -- twelve of the twins' missiles. They were not anticipating many flyers, so there were only two each of the anti-broom and anti-wand missiles. There were also only two of the anti-Inferi missiles. The other six were the air-to-ground missiles, and Ginny had ordered each flyer to be ready to fire four missiles. The first would be an anti-wand missile. these were designed to seek out any wand it had not been charmed to ignore which was more than twelve feet above the ground. Ginny could see a few wizards moving around the lower balconies of the courtyard. The other three in each salvo would be the air-to-ground missiles.

Ginny keyed in the missiles she wanted to the control pad Fred had invented, feeling a slight twinge in her heart as she did so. "This is for you, Fred," she muttered. She held her hand up in the 'ready' pose, and she could see three of the other flyers do the same. She waited a moment for any unseen stragglers, and then peeled off into a classic 'dive-bomber' strafing-run.

Voldemort

The first clue anyone in the north castle courtyard had that they were under a new attack was when the anti-wand missiles exploded on the upper balconies, killing eight and wounding a number of others. When Voldemort saw the explosions, he was reminded of the larger explosions which had struck the quarry he had had a headquarters in. He turned and ran into the castle, out of range of the twenty-four small explosions which rained down destruction on his allies -- each more than powerful enough to kill up to three or four if they were too close together.

As Voldemort hurried into the main corridor of the castle towards the small courtyard which led to the housing block he controlled, he heard more explosions coming from near the main gate. If it had not been clear before, it was certainly clear to everyone that a major assault was underway.

Voldemort carefully opened a mental pathway he had kept clear for over a year and a half. If Potter was nearby, he should be in a rage, and that would not hurt -- as opposed to those sickening feelings the Boy had directed towards him in the Ministry Atrium.

On the verge of apparating to a spot near the castle, Harry felt pain surge through his scar for the first time in a long while. He winced and stopped before he messed up his apparation. He felt a twinge of triumph as Voldemort fed on his deep-seated anger.

Harry calmed himself and stood up straight. He knew what he had to do, and gathered all his love for Luna and his friends, his followers, his family, and forced it through the bond.

Voldemort shrieked in agony.

Above Harry's head, Fawkes and three other phoenixes appeared in a diamond formation above him. They were holding a chord, as if waiting for Harry to set their song.

Harry smiled as a thought struck him. He was not angry. He was not filled with revenge. He remembered an old American movie about the Civil War, and the song they sang. Harry sang the

song softly, but the phoenixes joined in immediately, adding complex harmonies.

**Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He had loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.**

Harry knew he was certainly by no means the Lord referred to, but he was a lord, and he wore the sword of Gryffindor. He was not here for revenge. He was here to mete out Justice.

It was in that mood that Harry Potter, the White Warlock, apparated to in front of the dark castle, a host of 27 phoenixes now hovering over his head, singing the chorus of the song with Harry. A dozen dark wizards were trying to hold back his friends, who were trying to widen the small breach in one of the panels in the great enchanted gate.

'He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat,' Harry sang to himself while the phoenixes sang along. He gathered forth all the power he could muster, enhanced by the phoenixes, and with a sweep of his wand the dozen castle defenders were blown two hundred feet away by a tornadic wind. Another wandless command sent all of Harry's power against the enchanted gate.

The gate blew apart, and a quarter of the front of the castle collapsed. Harry strode forward, and his very surprised followers did the same. Harry looked up and saw a figure standing in what had been the second floor of the castle before he had brought the front of that part of the castle down. He recognized St. John Montague, a Slytherin a year ahead of him, in a Death Eater costume.

Harry amplified his voice, "**REMEMBER CEDRIC DIGGORY!**" he called, and then he stunned Montague with such force that his left shoulder, which is where he landed, was shattered.

Harry and his friends and allies march on.

Chapter XXVIII

Voldemort

Voldemort shrieked as Harry's positive feeling, carried by his power, surged through his blood, the blood he had stolen from the then-young teen.

These feelings were suddenly replaced by other feelings which Voldemort could not at first identify, for while they were not as painful as the love and affection Harry had assaulted him with, they were still immensely painful.

Then some hidden spark deep inside what was left of his soul identified them as righteousness and the desire for justice. Almost as annoying, there was now some damn tune pounding in his mind.

At that point, the entire castle shook, and it only took the feeling of triumph coming through the link to inform Voldemort that now was not a good time to challenge Harry Potter. Perhaps one-on-one he could destroy this pest, but his own allies had gone from yelling orders and trying to organize a defense to screaming in panic.

Voldemort apparated to his inner chambers. "Nagini!" he called out, "Come! We must leave!"

There was no answer. Voldemort frowned, where could his snake have gone? Then he remembered feeding it a new-born Companion which had not measured up to their standards.

Voldemort knew he needed to leave. He also knew he had to try and take the snake, off asleep and digesting the large meal, with him.

Hermione

Only two of the attack squads kept moving immediately after Harry had blasted down a quarter of the front of the north castle. This was because Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom had been the least surprised people in the assault teams. It wasn't that they hadn't been surprised, just that they were used to Harry doing stupendous things.

Under Hermione's orders, the two squads of six each advanced, casting hexes at the castle's defenders who had not been buried by the rubble. Hermione wanted very much to keep an eye on Harry, who was standing still, with an amazed and, well, amused look on his face, but not all the defenders were retreating in a panic, although most were. She knew that they had to keep the pressure on, or else the defenders might regroup somewhere inside the castle.

Seeing the twelve attackers move forward, the other groups finally jerked into motion as well.

Harry

'Wow,' Harry thought, 'that went a lot better than I thought it could have.' Movement off to his left saw him that Hermione was pushing two of the squads onto the attack. Harry's eyes flicked upwards, and he could just make out Ginny's group tossing the various attack balls down at the interior courtyards of the castle.

Harry searched his mind, but he could not detect Riddle hiding there anywhere. "I guess we do this the hard way," Harry muttered. He looked around, and saw the other groups were moving as well. With that, Harry joined in the attack, sending stunners that cut through most of the shields they encountered. The other shields may have held, but the casters were shaken enough that they usually backed off at least a few steps, and they were certainly distracted enough to slow down their attacks on the squads moving towards them.

Harry risked another glance around. He could just see the earliest glimmers of dawn. Full light was

likely at least twenty more minutes away, and that would put the defenders on an equal basis. With that, Harry shot off six more stunners, taking out three defenders, knocking two back, and just missing a sixth.

Every once in a while, one of the defenders sent off the Killing Curse. Harry had taught a number of people the physical metal shield which Dumbledore had used in the atrium of the Ministry. Anyone who could materialize such a shield was able to defend both themselves and anyone near them, as long as the caster's power was not significantly greater than the shielder's. Since it took a fair amount of power to create such a shield, Harry was hoping that only Voldemort's Killing Curse should have much of a chance of crashing through anyone's shield.

Harry's stunners pushed the defenders back into the castle.

Draco

"Disturbing, aren't they?" Lucius asked, looking out over the hundreds of Inferi he had gathered using Voldemort's words of power. He would be controlling nearly half of the Inferi and launching the main attack. The Companion of Walpurgis would be controlling just over half, and would be launching the actual first attack. That should draw out the teachers and any other defenders and allow for Lucius' attack on the castle itself.

Draco would be controlling all of the remaining dead. His force would be coming out the Forest and driving in between the other two forces after Lucius' attack started. "They are only dead Muggles," Draco managed to say in a firm voice. They are tools, just as they should have been when fully alive."

"Very true," Lucius said. "You are ready? We need to be in position near the wards before light."

"I am, Father," Draco said.

"I am ready, Malfoy," the Companion answered as well.

"Then let's get in position."

Draco moved out, commanding the bodies to follow, trying not to look back. Those blank eyes . . . Draco allowed himself a slight shiver.

Voldemort

Voldemort frowned, having checked yet another possible hiding place and come up empty. He knew a lot about snakes, and also knew that there were dozens of places Nagini might have gone to sleep off her last meal. He was nowhere near being in a panic, but he knew he could not stay much longer -- it had been over an hour since the front of the castle had fallen. Soon, he would have to hope that Nagini would stay hidden should the castle fall. She could, given the Horcrux she had swallowed, survive in a hibernation for many years once she awakened from her meal and realize he was gone.

It was a risk Voldemort would prefer not to take, but he could.

Hearing the sounds of battle, Voldemort looked out into one of the inner courtyards. In the last forty-five minutes, the attackers had made their way well into the castle proper. He was very displeased to see that the attackers were able to conjure metal shields which protected them from the Killing Curse.

'Or do they just protect them from these Knights' Killing Curses?' Voldemort wondered. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" His Killing Curse struck one of the metal shields, which exploded. The Curse went on to kill the witch who had been generating it, and the exploding shield injured five of the attackers around her.

Voldemort took careful aim. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" Careful aim again. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" And again. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" He could not spend the time to take out many of the attackers, but this should delay the takeover of the castle. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" Then he caught a flash of bushy brown hair. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Voldemort turned to sweep into the next possible hiding place, calling for his snake. An angry scream he recognized drew his attention back, and he saw the Boy.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry

Harry was running through the upper rooms in the front of the castle, looking for any clue where Voldemort might be. Suddenly, "*Hermione is down!*" cried Marcia through the link to Harry. "*I do not know if she is dead or unconscious.*"

Harry instantly apparated to where the link directed him, and he appeared astride over Hermione's body. Harry saw she was down, but bleeding badly. She was injured but not yet dead -- her shield had shattered but kept her alive. He screamed in frustration but looked up, knowing he had to raise his shield to protect himself and Hermione and the other injured attackers.

He saw Voldemort on a balcony above them, already with his wand in motion. Harry conjured his metal shield, but imagined it highly polished.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry's shield rang from the impact, but it held. A crushing sound above indicated that his mirrored metal shield had indeed reflected the Killing Curse. "Keep those hexes going and get these wounded out of here!" Harry commanded. He dropped his shield and apparated up on the balcony.

Voldemort was already gone. Harry apparated to the opposite side, so that Voldemort could not easily get the drop on him, and quickly picked off six of the defenders below. The remaining defenders in the courtyard quickly withdrew.

Harry sighed. He apparated back to the courtyard, gathered Hermione and nine others together, and transported them and himself to the aid station. In less than twenty seconds, he was back on the balcony, beginning the hunt again.

Neville

Neville had been working out hard since the previous July. He had trained far past anything he had thought possible for himself. As Harry commanded the attackers to go back on the offensive, though, Neville thought his heart and chest were going to burst from exertion.

The fact that he had no certain idea if Hermione was alive or dead did not help. The fact that a little piece of his brain wanted so much to know how Ginny was did not help.

The fact that he was scared, but still fighting, did not help, either.

Neville decided that none of that mattered at the moment.

Neville stood up wearily and took a deep breath. "We're only a third of the way through this place," he managed to say in a strong voice. "We've had enough of a break. Let's take 'em out!"

"We're right behind you!" a voice called out. And with that, the left flank of the attack carried on.

Harry

Harry and Voldemort suddenly appeared in the same room, some twenty yards apart from each

other. Harry's scar again burst into horrendous pain. Voldemort smiled and raised his wand. His blood was also radiating pain into his body, but he was just managing to work his way through it. Suddenly, 27 phoenixes appeared above Harry, singing. Voldemort collapsed, and an emergency portkey whisked him away.

"Is he gone from the valley?" Harry managed to ask.

Fawkes considered this, and quickly trilled what Harry felt was an affirmative.

"Can you bring me anywhere near him?"

This took longer, as the entire flock seemed to consider the question. This time, however, the answer was a negative. The flock watched Harry consider this.

Harry simply said, "Then ending this will have to wait. I need to help the others still fighting. Thank you all for your help."

This was the correct response, and the flock trilled a question, which Harry interpreted as 'What next?'

"If you could help those you believe deserve help, we would all be grateful," Harry answered.

Again, the correct response, as he had asked, and not ordered, and had not even asked for special treatment for his side, let alone for Hermione, although the flock knew Harry wanted to ask for both. Still, he was deferring to their judgement.

The flock sang a joyful chord, and then 26 of the phoenixes disappeared. Harry knew they were off to help the injured. Fawkes then sang a short snatch of song before disappearing as well, and Harry knew he was off to see to Hermione.

Harry went off to continue the battle.

Voldemort

Voldemort arrived at his most secret lair. It was in the Pyrenees, an area no one associated with him, or with Salazar Slytherin. Voldemort cursed the darkness of his lair, but finally stumbled over a chair. He was too tired to do more. He sat down and tried to think.

It was very probable that he was down to just two Horcruxes. How could that be possible? Could he possibly create four more, so that he would have the magic seven pieces, or could he split his essence into a too small segment? In all his research, most of the references claimed only one Horcrux was possible, while others suggested up to six could be created. He had created five. Two more might be possible for such a wizard as himself. . . .

'Not yet, though,' he thought. The problem needed more study and the Knights and Companions may or may not lose the battle that day, but even if it were lost they should quickly regain their Valley. Hopefully, Nagini would stay safely hidden until he could return and summon her, which should work once her meal was digested and she entered into her magical hibernation.

Was the Hufflepuff Horcrux safe, though? That dratted Boy and his advisors had been through the outside entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, discovering things even he had not found. Could they have discovered the Cup?

Could they have laid a trap for him, over the magic of Salazar Slytherin himself?

"Unlikely," he muttered. He made a decision, knowing that the Hogwarts people be busy soon enough. Until then, he should rest.

Draco

Draco moved behind a tree for the third time since that morning. He was not certain why he was shy around the Inferi. There was really no reason to be modest around dead bodies. Draco finished urinating, buttoned up his trousers and walked around his 'troops' yet again. Some of the Inferi looked human only in that they had a general appearance of the humanoid. Others looked freshly dead.

'No,' he thought, 'there's no reason to be modest with these.' He ordered six of the Inferi, who had once been young women and older children, to strip. Draco undid his buttons again.

Tonks

The battle though the north castle had lasted over five hours. The defenders had, seemingly, been driven out. Only 5% of the attackers had been killed, most of them Voldemort's remaining supporters. Over half of the remaining attackers had been injured, with various degrees of seriousness. Unfortunately, most of those were already recovered at least to the point where they could defend themselves and they were lurking near the castle.

"What do we do now?" Harry asked Tonks.

She looked up, exhausted. "What do you mean?"

"We have to secure this castle, and that could take days," Remus said, limping over. "The battle is still raging in the southern castle, although we seem to be winning, and then there's the rest of the valley to take. Then, of course, we have to hold it."

"You don't think we thought of those things?" Tonks asked. "We'll have five hundred new people in here from the other European, Central Asian, and North African Ministries once the valley is secure, plus the North Americans are sending in fifty people to work with the Muggles, and the Romanians have two dozen to take command of that. Most of the North Americans who were in on the attack will stay for three months as well. I want to leave you and Hermione here in charge of the castle and take twenty-eight of the best-rested fighters and the flyers with me to the south castle."

"Hermione's recovered?"

"She's certainly well enough to cover this," Tonks answered.

Harry thought about the rest of what Tonks had said. "So you and twenty-eight others? That's an odd number," Harry said.

"I was talking to Remus then. I'm hoping you and your ensemble will be coming along," Tonks said drily.

Harry whistled a question, and the flock of phoenixes appeared. "I know that you all know what we're asking," Harry told them. "Will you come with us and help?"

The phoenixes looked at each other, and began a complicated conversation of twitters, coos, and other noises, accompanying various head and neck movements. Finally Fawkes trilled out something to Harry, and pecked at Harry's small supply bag with his beak.

"I think he means we should eat and drink a bit before going, and they'll come with us." Fawkes made an affirmative noise.

"Twenty-five minutes," Tonks said.

"I'll pass the word," Remus told her.

Lucius

Lucius looked at his time piece. It was time, if the Companion followed orders.

A few seconds later, Lucius heard a slight noise coming from the directions of Hogwarts.

Ron

Ron, Luna, and the ghost of John Russell hurried into the Headmistresses office. "What's that alarm?" Ron asked.

"There are Inferi at the ward boundaries," McGonagall answered. "I will order the lockdown starting five minutes. All students not involved will meet in the library. Miss Lovegood, you are in charge of them." Luna nodded.

"Some of the students and staff will be prepared to help you defend the students, should things go badly."

"They shan't, but it is good to be prepared," Luna answered.

"John, you will rally the ghosts to patrol the corridors?"

"I'm ready as soon as you give the word," Russell replied.

"Mister Weasley, put out the call to the flyers."

"Yes, Professor," Ron agreed. He had never thought he would fly in anything like combat again. He hoped his adrenalin would overcome his physical limitations for however long was needed.

"Professors Flitwick, Sinistra, Vector and I will be with the other Proctors in the entrance hall. The security squad will be outside." Her eyes flicked over the group. "Shall we do our duty?"

The group nodded.

"Then let us go."

Ron looked over the eight other flyers on the roof of the great hall. "You each have the rocket cylinder loaded with eleven of the anti-Inferi missiles and one of the anti-personnel ones?" They all nodded.

One Fifth year Hufflepuff asked, "Why the one anti-personnel one?"

"Someone has to be controlling the things," Ron replied, "probably more than one. With that in mind, take two sacks of the black spheres." Each flyer nodded. None of the others would be effective against the Inferi.

"Remember," Ron said, "some of the Inferi will look pretty human. Even if it was just made from some newly killed person, there is no way to put the soul back. It's just a blank, mindless piece of meat, operating on instructions. They can't be reasoned with, they can only be destroyed, burnt, or disenchanting. The anti-Inferi missiles will splash a mist of the disenchanting potion. If you run out of missiles and spheres, you have to hit them with a fire spell. It's a slow, disgusting thing to have to do, but no one under Third year would have any chance of defending themselves, and who knows how well the students who haven't had DA training would do?"

"Hufflepuffs are well-prepared to do the dirty jobs," a Hufflepuff stated.

"And we have the know-how," said a Ravenclaw.

"And we're always ready for a fight," said a Gryffindor.

"And I am not going to be left behind," said the sole Slytherin. He was going to be certain this day figured high on his resume.

"Then let's go," Ron said. He stiffly mounted his broom. "Joe? You, Frank, and I will head towards the known location. You three circle to the left, you three to the right. It's more important to guard those areas than it is to help us. They can't just be attacking on one flank. If there are Death Eaters or large numbers of other wizards, retreat back here and recharge the cylinders. Does everyone

understand?"

The eight students nodded.

"Then let's go."

Chapter XXIX

Ron led his flight on its search mission, and soon spotted a group of several hundred Inferi heading towards Hogwarts, with a wizard in an ill-fitting camouflage cape directing them from the rear. That had been the wizard's mistake -- there was a few inches of snow on the ground, and not only didn't the cape really fit (it was too short), but the wizard was kicking up snow as he walked, leaving a trail behind.

"Attack the Inferi first!" Ron called. Well over 100 feet above the ground, the wizard could not hear him. "Then after firing three missiles each at the Inferi, aim for that wizard kicking up snow at the back!"

"Did we win?" Harry asked Tonks. Harry was sitting on a tree stump, exhausted. Fawkes was still with him, although the other phoenixes had departed.

"For the moment," Tonks said. "The main good news is that we seem to be in control of the Valley. It is possible that there are some of the Walpurgis people in hiding, especially in some of the castles or the woods. All the ones in the compounds have been rounded up and are being moved to various holding facilities around Europe and North Africa."

Harry nodded.

"Obviously, the main thing to do now is to try and secure the place. There will be thirty vampires in here tonight to help out, but it's still a few hours until dusk."

Harry nodded.

"We didn't sustain any more deaths after Riddle disappeared.

Harry nodded.

"Did you know your fly is open?"

Harry nodded.

Harry's head snapped up and his hands went to his crotch. "Hey!"

"I just wondered if you were asleep."

"Not yet."

"Good, because there is one major bit of news for you. One of the Order people, Victor, caught a look at Riddle leaving. He didn't have the snake with him."

Harry managed to think about that for a moment. "So, if Nagini was here at the beginning of the battle, there's a fair chance it's still here?"

"Oh, it's here. We found a kidnaped Muggle-born. The Knights decided her baby wasn't up to their standards and they fed him to the snake last night." Harry looked revolted. "Exactly. Once the vampires show up, we'll launch a major search into the nooks and crannies of the castle."

"Then I'd better take a nap," Harry said.

"You'd better," Tonks agreed. As long and tough as her day had been, Harry had probably done twice as much, even if Tonks had had the extra responsibility of being more in command. "Can you keep an eye on Harry, and wake him in two or three hours?" she asked Fawkes.

Fawkes gave a happy trill, and Tonks moved off. Harry sat on the ground, leaned back against the stump, and fell into a deep sleep, while Fawkes sang him a lullaby.

Although he did not know the wizard directing the Inferi was a member of the Companions of Walpurgis, it made no difference to Ron as he scored the kill. His group had taken out many of the Inferi, and the remaining ones were starting to become directionless by the time the wizard die from the missile attack. Ron therefore left the two Fifth years to begin rounding up the Inferi and push them towards a common area with fire spells. He then took off to check on the other teams.

It was mere chance that took Ron over to the smallest group. While Draco Malfoy had managed to avoid the three missile strikes aimed at him, all of his Inferi had been destroyed or disenchanting. Draco had lost his Invisibility Cloak (the flyers had seen the trail left in the snow by the cloak's dragging) and he was trying to flee from the three pursuing riders, who were instead herding Draco towards the castle. "You two, fly over to the Hogsmeade side and check that out! There must be a group in that direction. Johnson! Fly back towards the first group and help them herd those Inferi!"

As he was giving directions, Ron was landing in front of Draco, who had already been disarmed. "Well, well, look who we have here," Ron sneered. "A disarmed ferret."

Draco had just run over a hundred yards after a short night and a very long, exhausting morning and afternoon. He fell to his knees, panting, but still glaring.

"Nothing to say? How odd," Ron said, coming a few steps closer.

Draco let his spare wand fall into his hand and he tried to shoot a spell off. Ron, however, was much faster.

"BBBLLLLLAAACH!"

"I always wanted to make you eat slugs, Malfoy," Ron gloated as he snapped Malfoy's spare wand. He added another hex, one that Harry had taught him which would keep the spell going until he released it, and then a third that insured that Draco was indeed disarmed.

"BBBLLLEECH!"

"Oh, that was a big one!" Ron said, sending ropes to tie the heaving blond up.

"You bas -- BBBLLLLARRGH!"

"No, I'm as legitimate and as pure-blooded as you, Malfoy, for what little that matters. You're going to keep belching slugs, too -- yes, just like that one! -- until I remove the spell. Now, since you're here, I guess I'd better go check on your father."

"Weasley! -- ErrrARRRGH! -- get back here and untie me, you prick cock -- BLLLEARRGH!"

"Should you be here, Hermione?"

"I should," Hermione told Tonks. "I've had a couple of hours sleep, and I'm completely healed. Let me take a few people and start a systematic search for the snake. We can enlarge the search later."

"How do you plan to find it?"

Hermione transfigured to large rocks into. . . .

"Mongeeese? Or is that mongooses?"

Hermione frowned. "I'm not certain, to tell the truth." She shrugged. "Either way, I can make them search out any snake in the castle."

"Good idea. Get going, and remember not to get into a direct fight if you can help it. That thing is more dangerous than any snakes, except maybe a basilisk."

Hermione shuddered a bit. "Right." She clucked her tongue, and the two animals followed their mistress.

Ron discovered that the main attack was the third one. The attackers had missed hitting Malfoy -- in fact, they had not detected him. They had spent all their missiles, and there were still some 400 Inferi closing in on the castle, for Malfoy had managed to bring over the remaining Inferi from the original attack group. Three of the flyers had gone back to the castle to reload all their cylinder missile clip with the remaining 30 anti-Inferi missiles they had in stock. "Keep the fire spells going!" Ron called, and he pushed his ill body hard to get back to the castle as quickly as he could, taking one of the flyers with him.

"Load your cylinder with tear gas," Ron commanded as soon as they had landed -- it was a quick flight, because the Inferi were closing in on the castle.

"Why?" the young flyer demanded, while doing as she was told.

"Lucius Malfoy or someone is out there, directing those things," Ron pointed out. "Whoever it is must be invisible or disillusioned, and they've remembered to cover their trail - probably by moving within the Inferi instead of behind them. If they don't have a bubble-head spell on as well, this should get them, and we might be able to see their body moving in the colored gas."

"That's certainly worth a try," the Hufflepuff girl agreed. She loaded up with 12 tear gas missiles. Ron loaded 10, with 2 of the killer missiles.

"You take the right wing and center, I'll take the left. Start just behind the middle of the Inferi and work your way back and around, starting in the center. I'll be starting on the left. Let's try and flush him."

"Ready!" The two kicked off.

By the time they returned, the last of the remaining anti-Inferi missiles had been launched. The two riders with the tear gas then made their runs at the target, and soon the area was filled with pink mist from the anti-Inferi missiles and the light yellow tear gas. The nine flyers, now joined by Hooch and Luna, were circling the parameter, looking for any movement which might give Lucius Malfoy away.

"There!" Hooch called out. More than three quarters of the Inferi had fallen as they had been disenchanting. There were eddies in the misty smoke and it was clear someone was trying to make a run from the scene. Six stunners flashed, but a strong shield deflected them. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" Malfoy called out. "AVADA KEDAVRA! AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The first struck Hooch, while Luna managed to move her broom far enough away from the second that it did not affect her. The Fifth years all shouted out 'Stupify'. The curses passed each other. Malfoy had had to drop his shield to launch the Killing Curse, and he was knocked out. Unfortunately, Ron was tiring, and his reflexes were slowing. He had tried to avoid the third killing curse, but while he avoided the actual Curse, it struck back of his broom, ripping the bristles off.

Ron plummeted off the broom. Luna tried to summons Ron, which should have at least slowed his fall, while one of the Fifth years tried to cushion the fall. Unfortunately, the summoning charm and the cushioning charm hit and cancelled each other.

Ron completed the forty foot free fall, landing not on the grass, but on a rocky outcropping.

Meanwhile, over half a mile away, Draco Malfoy had tried to stop spitting up slugs. In trying to do so, he inadvertently swallowed one slug while another was working its way out.

Draco started gagging and choking.

Voldemort appeared in the cavern that held the entrance to the tunnel under the lake. He approached the snake guardian on the entrance and commanded in Parseltongue, "I, the Heir to Slytherin,

command you to reveal your secret."

"Who are you?" the Green-eyed Snake Guardian demanded.

"I am the Heir of Slytherin! You know me! I have been to this entrance twice before, once on each side!"

"A Parselmouth claiming to be the Heir was here, and you do resemble the one who came to this side," the Snake agreed. "However, we did not test you. Touch the stone near me with your hand."

Voldemort did not feel well enough to be arguing, so he did as directed. He cursed when the Snake bit him! "What did you do!"

"I tested you; I tasted you. You are no Heir to Slytherin! There is not a drop of his blood in your veins!"

Voldemort reared back, about to unleash his temper, when he suddenly realized something.

His blood was Harry Potter's. His bones here his father's. His flesh was Wormtail's.

He truly no longer was the Blood Heir of Salazar Slytherin! Voldemort smiled grimly. If he couldn't get at the Cup, neither could anyone else. "Very well," he told the Guardian, knowing that any attempt to force his way past the magic might destroy the Horcrux. And with that, he left the cavern.

"Wizards have gotten sloppy over the centuries," the Green-eyed Guardian said.

"True," said his Red-eyed counterpart behind the entrance. "He also said nothing about us testing any other Parselmouth that might happen along."

"And the Master said we should trust any Parselmouth who did not arouse our suspicions."

"I'm not at all suspicious about that nice green-eyed wizard," Red stated.

"Nor am I," Green agreed. "I have given the message to fifteen snakes. They will seek the nice Parselmouth in the spring."

"He reminded me of the Master when he made us, not like he was at the end."

"And he commanded us at the beginning."

After a moment of silence, the Red-eyed snake wondered, "Do you think the nice Parselmouth would set us someplace else, someplace where I can see the sun and speak?"

"If that is what you truly desire, perhaps you should ask."

"You wouldn't come with me?"

Green paused. "I will consider the idea."

The two guardians went back to sleep.

"Wake up, Harry."

"Why?" came the mumbled response.

"Because it's well after dark, and Hermione has located Nagini."

Harry sat up. "Really? Where?"

"It crawled behind a fireplace in the kitchens or something, where it could be warm," Tonks said.

Harry stretched, trying to work the kinks and aches out of his back and shoulders. "Is she active?"

"The snake? No," Tonks answered.

Harry stood, still working on his neck. "I suppose everything else is going according to plan?"

"As well as can be expected," Tonks agreed. "I mean, this is the largest military exercise in the history of magic in some ways. We're all improvising more than we'd like to be."

"That's true," Harry said. "Are you coming, or should I just apparate over?"

"Apparate to the back courtyard, if you remember where that is," Tonks suggested. "There should be someone waiting to guide you."

"Do you want to come along, Fawkes?" Harry asked the bird, which was perched nearby. Fawkes sang a short affirmative.

Harry said his goodbyes, and disappeared. He found his guide at the castle courtyard, and he followed her into the castle, Fawkes perched now on Harry's shoulder.

In less than ten minutes, Harry was with Hermione at a broken grate. "The castle has some hidden passive heating built into it," she said. "These areas circulate air heated by some of the larger fireplaces and cooking areas to the upper residential rooms. As best I can tell, the snake is about twenty yards in, after a left turn. This is the closest opening, but I have no idea which end is facing this grate."

"Thanks, Hermione. Do you have a location for the other end?"

"I have sets of four people at four other openings," Hermione answered. "There could easily be others."

"I shouldn't think so," Harry said. "If there are too many openings, they would lose the heat too fast."

"Maybe, but this is the only real exit," Hermione explained. "The other four openings are under the fireplaces. There must be at least one on the roof, but it might be too small for the snake."

"We'll have to smoke her out if she won't come voluntarily," Harry commented. He knelt near the opening and called in Parseltongue. "Nagini! Can you hear me?"

There was a long pause, and then, "Not the Master," the snake finally hissed. "The enemy of the Master."

"That's right. The enemy of the Master, not the enemy of Nagini," Harry called back. Harry could hear Nagini making little hisses, which he thought was the snake equivalent of 'H'mmm.'

Finally, after some five minutes (for chilly snakes do not think quickly), Nagini said, "The Master has made me powerful and fed me well. What do you offer Nagini?"

"You must give up that source of power," Harry said sternly. "You will be fed well, and you will be housed better. If you do not yield the jewel he had you swallow, we shall have to destroy you. I would prefer not to seek your end."

"Brave words, young wizard."

"Do you seek for me to prove them true?"

There was another long pause. Finally, she said, "Yes, young wizard. If you can drive me from these tunnels, I shall yield my power to you in exchange for my life, on the terms you named."

"If you hurt anyone, the deal is off," Harry warned.

"We shall see, little wizard," Nagini dared.

Harry stood and turned to Hermione, whom he had been translating Nagini's speech before this. "I don't know if smoke alone will drive her out," Harry said.

"Oh, this smoke will," Hermione said with a grim smile. "I came prepared." At Harry's surprised look, she said, "Harry, Nagini was one of the main objectives of this invasion! Of course I came prepared!"

"With what?"

Hermione held up a small vial. "This, added to a fire, will generate a smoke which will drive any reptile, especially snakes, away. The wizarding equivalents of exterminators use it."

"Then go to it," Harry said, impressed.

"Well?" Professor McGonagall asked. "Is there any good news?"

Moody spoke first. "we've disenchanted all the Inferi. The Ministry people are going to burn the bodies a bit south of the train platform. The prevailing winds should take the stench away from both Hogwarts and Hogsmeade."

McGonagall nodded. It took a fair bit of Dark magic to create an Inferi, but it was far too easy to reanimate one. Therefore, all had to be destroyed, rather than buried. "Anything else?"

Moody shook his head. "If there were any more than those three controlling the Inferi, they're well away without any sign."

"Very well. Madam Pomfrey?"

"All of the students are upset, of course," the Infirmarian said. "The flyers are especially upset. Just encountering that many Inferi would be enough to give most people nightmares. Hot chocolate should suffice for most of the students, but the flyers might need more professional help than we can give."

"What do you suggest?"

"St. Mungo's has a councillor the aurors use," Moody pointed out.

"Exactly," Pomfrey agreed. "I do, however, need permission from you to contact her."

"You have it, of course," McGonagall said.

Moody stood. "If there's nothing else, I should be going."

"Where are you going, Alastor?" Pomfrey asked.

"Romania," he replied. "I'm escorting Miss Lovegood. We need to make a report to the White Warlock, and I for one would prefer not to do so."

"I don't envy either of you the task," McGonagall agreed, "but I have to tell Arthur and Molly."

It had taken a much longer time and a great deal more potion than Hermione had expected to use (since a few drops were normally more than enough), but after nearly two hours, Nagini slowly emerged from what passed for an air system in the castle. Harry kept up a conversation with the huge snake, now over thirty feet long.

Getting Nagini to give up the Ravenclaw jewel was a great deal more difficult. The only thing Harry ever said about the process was one mumbled, 'I had hoped she would cough it up.' Hermione never said anything at all about the recovery; she merely wrinkled her nose at any mention of it.

When the whole process was over, with Nagini being shipped off to a magical zoo in Tunisia (one of the North African wizards in the occupying forces had connections there) and the jewel successfully destroyed, it was just before midnight.

Harry and Hermione searched out Tonks and Remus, anxious both to report their success and to receive any news. What they had not expected was to see Mad-eye Moody and Luna waiting for them instead.

"What happened?" Harry demanded.

"Voldemort ordered an attack on Hogwarts today, using somewhere between seven and nine hundred Inferi," Moody said. "Those anti-Inferi missiles disenchanted most of them. Without 'em, we would have been hard pressed to defend against that many."

"So they were all destroyed?"

"If not, they were disenchanted and have now been destroyed," Moody agreed. "Lucius Malfoy, his son, and one of the Walpurgis wizards commanded the Inferi. Weasley led the flying squad, and they did almost all of the actual fighting. He caught the Walpurgis wizard with an anti-personnel missile. . . ."

"Dead?" Hermione asked, which made Luna flinch.

"Dead," Moody agreed. "He and young Malfoy apparently fought it out, and Weasley immobilized him with some sort of slug-puking hex." Harry and Hermione smiled at that, until Moody added, "Malfoy fought against it instead of letting it work itself out. He choked to death on one."

"Draco . . . choked to death on a slug?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Aye," Moody agreed. "Now Lucius fought back hard, although he is under arrest at the Ministry. He caught Hooch with a Killing Curse. He shot one at Weasley, but it only came close. However, it did knock Weasley off his broom from about forty feet."

"Is he dead?" Harry asked.

"He died instantly," Luna answered.

Hermione teared up, but was watching Harry as his jaw set. "Look after Hermione," he told Luna, and then disappeared.

Luna and Hermione embraced, both now crying. No one asked where Harry might be going.

They all knew.

Chapter XXX

Sunday, December 28, 1997

"Well, Potter, I must say, despite your personal losses, yesterday was highly successful from an operational point of view."

"I suppose, from that point of view, it could be considered an over-all success," Harry snapped. "Still, that doesn't answer my question."

"No, it doesn't" Scrimgeour agreed. "Very well. The problem is that while Lucius Malfoy has of course already been to be condemned to death, no one in a position to do so can say how to execute him."

Harry looked confused for a moment. "Why not?"

"It should be painless, or at least very quick, yet we can't use the Killing Curse, and no one has managed to suggest anything better, let alone agreed to do actually it."

"Not even Percy?"

The Minister shrugged. "He might be tempted to be too cruel."

"True," Harry agreed, "unless he was well-supervised. So, when do I have him executed?"

"You . . . you're going to do it?"

"I'll organize it at the least, certainly," Harry said. "If I were unwilling to do it, then I couldn't ask someone else to." Harry face hardened. "I can't be the one to condemn him. You've done that. I'll take care of the rest, with your approval. Just don't expect me to do this often."

That piqued Scrimgeour's interest, to say the least. "How do you suggest it should be done?"

Harry told him.

A little after 2:00, Lucius Malfoy received an unexpected visitor. "Potter!"

"Hello, Mister Malfoy," Harry said politely.

"To what do I owe this honor?" Malfoy asked snidely.

"I came for two things. First, to give you this." Harry held out a small roll of parchment.

"And what is that, boy?"

Harry almost smiled. "The order for your execution."

"What!" Malfoy snatched the parchment, unsealed and unrolled it, and then read it. "But . . . but . . ."

"But what?" Harry growled. "But there has been no trial? You were on the Wizengamot; you know on these charges, since you were already found guilty of similar offenses, the only way you get a trial is if a member requests it. None did. And with no dementors, the death penalty automatically reactivated."

"No one would dare kill me!" Malfoy shouted as he stood. "Certainly not you!"

"I would, if no one else would," Harry answered. "However, I found two volunteers to help." Harry pulled out his wand and Malfoy's arms were quickly and securely tied behind his back. Harry reached over and grabbed the older man's shoulder. "What?" Harry asked as the man flinched.

"Don't tell me you're so evil just touching me hurts? That's how I killed Voldemort's host back in 1992, you know. Nothing to say? Then I might as well gag you, too."

Lucius was shocked when Potter disappeared the pair of them, which should have been impossible within the cells of the Ministry of Magic. His eyes went wide when he saw where they had appeared --

-- in front of the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. Even worse, he saw there was already a person there -- Percy Weasley. Oddly, his traitorous house elf was there as well. Potter marched the taller wizard over to the Veil -- Malfoy was surprised at how strong Potter was. Just short of the Veil, Potter let go, but stayed behind him.

"You have three choices, Malfoy. One, you can go through the Veil on your own. Two, Percy and I will throw you through it. Three, Dobby here will sever your head. Which do you choose?"

Malfoy turned around to face Harry, his eyes wide, both with terror and with pleading, begging. "What?" Harry demanded harshly. "That's more consideration than you ever showed your victims."

Lucius swirled around and around, his heart racing. Finally, Harry asked, "Dobby, would you care to?"

Lucius' head fell bloodlessly to the floor -- that was how house elves of the Houses of Black and Malfoy and other such Old Families killed one of their own when ordered to do so (it was so much easier to clean when there was no blood). Harry and Percy grabbed the body and tossed it through the Veil. When they turned around, Dobby and the head were gone. Harry, remembering the upper hallway at Grimmauld Place, decided then and there not to look in at Dobby and Winky's private spaces there or at Godric's Hollow.

Percy turned to Harry. "Tell me, did you think there was any chance of an attack at Hogwarts while you were gone?"

"None," Harry said. "I left Ron in charge so he would feel useful."

"At least he was," Percy said. "It's not enough for me to forgive you, Potter, but at least I'm sure Ron would forgive you." With that, he walked away.

Harry decided he could live with that as well.

A very tired Remus Lupin met with Harry that night in Harry's office. Tonks and most of his other followers were still in Romania. "How goes it?"

"As well as could be expected, which means these are tough jobs," Remus replied. "There have been no counter-attacks, that's something."

"Any guesses on why there haven't been?"

"Not really, although this Theseus has hinted that they are partially responsible." Remus frowned. "I'm not certain, but I think they might be holding back some records or information or something, and are using that to blackmail the Walpurgis people."

"That's possible," Harry agreed, "although I don't think that would work for long."

"Anyway, you can hash that out with Theseus and the rest of his loonies." Remus shook his head. "Imagine, dressing up like that." Harry said nothing. "The peasants are happy the Walpurgis people are gone, and aren't overly thrilled by the vampires. The vampires claim this is because of the anti-vampire Walpurgis propaganda, but I wouldn't bet on that being the whole story by any means."

"I'd say let the Romanians deal with it, letting Hermione keep a watching brief over it."

"I agree, and Luna said pretty much the same thing."

Harry sighed. "How are Hermione and Ginny dealing with Ron's murder?"

"Not well at all," Remus admitted. "They aren't hysterical or anything, but they are taking things hard. Ginny because Ron was doing her job, even if she was needed in Romania, and Hermione

because they still weren't formally back together."

"I should be with them, but I had to deal with Malfoy," Harry almost whined.

"They know," Remus assured him. "Neville has been comforting Ginny, and, well. . . ."

"Luna has been comforting Hermione in a similar way?"

"You knew?" Remus asked, surprised.

"Since last August," Harry said.

"Are you and Hermione involved, too? Is that why she and Ron broke up?"

"Not really to either, and it's none of your concern," Harry said firmly.

"Not really?"

"It's really not any of your business," Harry said harshly.

"Yes, my lord," Remus answered sarcastically.

Harry winced but moved on. "Let me summarize where I'm betting we are. We did everything we needed to at the valley, except that we have no idea where the final Horcrux is, and I failed to capture or destroy Voldemort's current form."

"That would be the short form," Remus agreed. "That overlooks the facts that we are far, far ahead of the game now. Voldemort is still out there and dangerous, but we seem to have stripped him of every ally he had."

"If he was as smart as he likes to think he is, if he was smarter than his ego was large, he would take advantage of still having that last Horcrux," Harry said. "He could go away for two hundred years and start over. I'd be gone, and I'm sure there's still be plenty of greedy and gullible people ready to follow him."

"True," Remus agreed. "Oh, we've just skimmed a bit of the Walpurgis information, but we did learn one thing."

"What's that?"

"What's the greatest medical threat the Muggles are under?" Remus asked.

Harry thought hard about that, and came up with, "AIDS?"

"Exactly. This group developed it and loosed it in the Muggle population of Africa. Anyone magical, including most Squibs, are immune. The other Squibs are carriers of the virus, but don't develop the disease."

"Nasty," Harry said.

"Very," Remus agreed, "and also very typical of this group. Still, these aren't your problems, at least not yet."

"We still have to figure out where Voldemort and the last Horcrux are."

"Starting Tuesday afternoon, if you want," Remus agreed.

"And what am I doing over the next thirty-six hours or so?" Harry demanded.

"Ron's cremation will be tomorrow afternoon," Remus reminded Harry. "We all need some down time, after fighting one battle and losing a friend in another."

"And tomorrow morning?"

"Theseus will be here early, and Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and George will be here a bit later."

"And you?"

"With all of them coming back, I need to help Tonks and the Ministries," Remus said.

Harry leaned back in the office chair, his hands pressed to his eyes. "At least I don't have to be overly involved with that mess," Harry said.

"No, you don't. No offense, but I don't think you'd be any good as an administrator."

"I'd stink," Harry agreed.

"Go to bed, Harry," Remus urged.

"It's only Nine-thirty!"

"Go to bed!" Harry shrugged, and went back to the hut to sleep.

Monday, December 29, 1997

"Thank you for letting us join in, Harry," Theseus said. "That was more fun than I've had in several hundred years.

"Fun?" Harry demanded.

Theseus shrugged. "Such combat is not totally without risk, even to me and my associates, but the risks were low, and the action exciting. I am sorry about your friend. I did not wish to seem to be making light of his death."

"Thank you," Harry said drily. "What can I do for you?"

"Very little, I am glad to say. I am certain your werewolf has told you we have some sequestered information about the Knights and Companions?"

"Basically, yes. He mentioned that your group might have prevented them from launching any counter attack."

"We will withhold news of the groups' other hidden locations for five years, and they will not attack the Valley for five years."

"They will be able to reenforce their positions," Harry pointed out.

"True, but by then the Valley of Dacul will be totally secure, your Ministries will have a better idea of how to deal with the Muggles and less-than-willing participants in the Companions' programs, and of course, at this point none of those Ministries could launch a decent attack anyway. The Knights will have to decide if they wish to continue in those places, since they will have to defend them at some point. Oh, and they have broken their alliance with Voldemort."

Harry scratched his head in confusion. "I hope you know what you're doing," Harry finally said.

"Are you going to help us out finding Voldemort or the final Horcrux?"

"If any of my community hear anything, we will pass it on, but we will not go out of our way to find that information," Theseus said. He held up his hand to forestall any comments. "Some of my brethren created the vampires. We owe it to them to help them reestablish their community's capital. At the same time, while we can not go out looking for information, and Voldemort is unlikely to approach us, we do come across tidbits which we will pass on. I have prepared you to deal with Voldemort's body, should you fight and defeat him before that last Horcrux is found. I am sorry, but there is no way to search for a Horcrux. All you can do is search out Voldemort's hiding places." Theseus tossed a small scrape of parchment on Harry's lap. "That gives the location of two of Voldemort's hiding places."

Harry sighed.

"What is primarily bothering you?"

Harry looked at the ancient warlock, and gave in. "At times, I worry I cannot defeat him. At others,

I'm pretty certain I have a good shot, but I worry about how many people are going to have to die before I can face him in that final battle. Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Fred, Ron, the Prof. . . ." He shrugged.

"I understand, Harry," Theseus said. "One penalty living as I do is that I have outlived nearly everyone I have ever cared about."

"Is that why vampires were created?" Harry asked. "Some of your sort trying to preserve lovers?"

"Muggle or Squib lovers as opposed to magical? Yes." He smiled. "The Children of the Night have long ears. They may hear of Voldemort." And with that, he took his leave.

Harry had never been to an official wizarding funeral before Fred's. Dumbledore's had been close, but it had been both in an unusual location and a major public event. Now, after Hagrid's and then Fred's, and the Prof's memorial service, Harry was feeling something of an expert.

Wizarding funerals were held outside, as the body had to be destroyed (to prevent its use in Dark magic). Ron's was in the pasture the Weasley used for flying. His body was on a pyre, and chairs with warming charms were set around in a semi-circle in front of it.

Harry and his remaining living Paladins (Russell was staying at Hogwarts) stood at attention on one side of Ron's coffin, all in their 'formal' denim uniforms. The rest of the Weasley family sat in the front row. Part of the Hogwarts staff and the fliers and some of the students were also in attendance. There were Ministry officials, most of them friends of Arthur Weasley while the rest of them were suck-ups who were there because Scrimgeour was there.

Harry saw that all of the non-Slytherin students from their year were present, and even Daphne Greengrass had joined them.

Harry took a deep breath and stepped forward. "Today we honor the life of Ronald Bilius Weasley, my best mate. I consider it my great good fortune to have met and become friends with Ron on my first trip to Hogwarts. He helped me truly join the wizarding world. I cannot say here how much Ron meant to me." Harry knew that if he tried, he would break down crying, and he was not going to do that and give Voldemort and others the satisfaction. "I know Ron would have preferred dying of overeating in very old age, but his second preference would have been to go down fighting for what was right while flying. He generated the successful defense of Hogwarts, commanding students he and his sister had trained. I am pleased to announce a new Hogwarts prize, going to the best flyer in each year's flying class. The winner of the Ron Weasley Flying Prize will receive a new racing broom. In this way, Ron's memory will go on at Hogwarts. Also in his memory, there will be no trophy. I know how much he hated polishing trophies in detention, and I'm sure he wouldn't want to add to the punishment."

That drew a few smiles, especially from George and Ginny.

"Ron's loss brings home the fact that while we are winning the fight against Voldemort, the fight is not over. I thank you all for joining in the commemoration of his life." Harry stepped back.

Hermione took a step forward, but broke down crying, which set Ginny off. Neville took hold of Ginny, while Luna comforted Hermione. George then spoke a few words, as did McGonagall, and then Dean Thomas. Seamus stopped Lavender from saying anything, for which Hermione was later grateful.

Then Percy stepped up to speak. "I have lost two brothers now. I do wish that neither had gotten involved with this fight, but that is a selfish wish. I have lost my wife and two brothers to this war, and I wish it was over. But it isn't. To honor the life of my baby brother Ronald, we can only keep this fight going. We must destroy this Dark Wizard, and take whatever steps we can to insure that another Dark Wizard does not come along in our lifetime." He looked around. "I see many fellow members of the Ministry here today. Many of us have shared a common viewpoint over the last two

years or so. We supported Minister Fudge. We opposed Dumbledore and deplored the creation and acknowledgment of a White Warlock, feeling that the honor set the cause of good government back hundreds of years."

"In one sense, we were right. In another, however, we have to acknowledge that powerful, organized evil in our world is on a different level than in the Muggle. Therefore, the other way I honor my brothers is to do this." He walked to in front of Harry and knelt. "I, Percy Ignatius Weasley, freely offer my fealty to Lord Harry Potter, the White Warlock. I am his man to command. I offer my self in the place of my brothers, freely and totally, to use as he sees fit."

Harry stood and placed his wand atop Percy's head. "I had intended never to take the Oath of anyone other my Council, but I shall make one exception. I accept your oath." A spark flashed between Harry's wand and Percy. "Arise, Percy Weasley," Harry said. "I find myself in need of an ambassador between myself and the European Ministries. You will coordinate with your father and Remus Lupin."

Percy stood and then sat back with his family. Harry and Bill Weasley walked over to the pyre and lit it with their wands.

Most of the group drifted away as the pyre returned Ron to the elements. Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Percy stayed until the last ember died away, several hours later.

The fourth member of the Council of the White Warlock was dead, and now he was gone.

Chapter XXXI

The capture of Nagini was given wide publicity. The nature of the enchantment on the snake was not revealed, but the fact that a source of magical power had been removed was. Voldemort would therefore know that he was down to one Horcrux. The Ministries all around the world were searching for any hint of Voldemort's location, but as the New Year dawned and moved from January through February and on into March, not a hint would be found anywhere.

Voldemort had seemingly disappeared.

The Ministries were also searching for the Walpurgis groups. The open announcement of the groups' existence and their practices would rock the magical world from the New Year through the entire spring and into the summer. There were calls for greater protection of Muggle rights from the magical world, and a greater appreciation for the place of the Muggle-born. While no one was anxious for the Muggle world to discover the existence of the Magical, it was seen that some ways to avoid that was to have greater precautions against the magical world from harassing Muggles and to ease the Muggle-born into the magical world with greater acceptance.

Voldemort's sending the Companions to attack the Weasleys and then having the Malfoys direct the attack on Hogwarts had backfired. It had brought home to the British public that the war would likely only be over when Voldemort was destroyed. The tactics of the Walpurgis groups, plus Voldemort's, had discredited the extreme Pure-blood agendas for most (although not all) of their sympathizers. Therefore there was not a peep from the remaining Pure-blood sympathizers to cut back on the hunt for Voldemort.

Harry and his friends continued their training. On top of that, Hermione decided that she was going to take at least some of her N.E.W.T.s. She talked Harry into preparing himself to take his N.E.W.T.s in Defense and Charms, while she would also do Transfiguration, Arithmancy, and Runes. Then they could prepare to take more exams the next year with Luna and Ginny.

Much to Harry's disgust, he also had to work again with Professor Trelawney. Desperate to make any gamble to locate Voldemort, Russell had again suggested that Harry try to reverse the link to Voldemort. When Legilimency produced no results in January, Russell proposed Astral Projection. Unfortunately, no one could locate an expert by late January, so Harry started studying the theory with Trelawney the First of February.

Harry and most of his friends slowly recovered from their losses of the previous year. The exception was George Weasley. While he was not quite clinically depressed, he was mostly avoiding it only by putting in fifteen hour days at the shop.

Oddly, the other thing that was helping George was the fact that Percy had moved in with him. Everyone, including George, had worried that Percy would drive George to distraction. Instead, Percy had taken over the household chores whenever he was in town plus the store's bookkeeping. George still missed Fred beyond what even he had expected, and missed Ron as well. Still, Percy was his brother, was on his best behavior, and was working hard to fit in. Staying with George also helped Percy deal with the loss of his brothers, his wife, and his possession by Voldemort.

Hermione and Harry dealt with the loss of Ron by throwing themselves into their training and study.

Wednesday, February 11, 1998

"Good evening, my lord."

Harry repressed a sigh and merely said, "Good evening, Professor Trelawney." He hated these lessons, which really were not accomplishing much, but this night he had had the choice of a session with Trelawney and a study session in Transfiguration theory. Harry had quickly

demonstrated that he could do the N.E.W.T.-level practicals in Transfiguration as well as Charms and Defense, and so Hermione had convinced him he should take that N.E.W.T. as well. He had managed to convince Slughorn that he would study Potions the following year to keep the elderly professor from bothering him about it, as Slughorn still did not know the reasons behind Harry brilliant brewing the previous year.

"Now, tonight we will be trying a new incense."

"Great." Trelawney was convinced that the right 'atmosphere' would help Harry project his mind. Harry was just glad he didn't have any allergies. Harry managed to get into the lotus position on the prayer rug Trelawney had provided. He slowly cleared his mind while trying not to trigger his Occlumency defenses.

Harry's breathing was controlled; slow, and even. Suddenly, Harry was outside of his body, looking down at himself and Trelawney, who had her eyes closed as she sat on an over-stuffed chair.

Harry was so surprised that he snapped back into his body. He smiled, opened eyes, and looked at Trelawney. Harry frowned. This was not the first time she had fallen asleep, but at least this time she had been sober.

Harry wriggled, trying to get out of the lotus position. He was on his side, letting the blood flow back into his legs, when Trelawney's eyes opened, but Harry saw that she was not really looking at him.

Nor was she looking at anything else. In a voice that Harry knew only too well, she intoned:

*"On the day after the next full moon,
The Children of the Night Forest
Shall attack the legend of Hellas.
Only the Son of the Phoenix can decide
If he shall warn the lesser of evils."*

Harry left Trelawney as soon as he could, calling Hermione and Russell to his cabin to join him and Luna (who had moved in with him).

"Since the Knights of Walpurgis have also called themselves 'the Children of the Night Forest, this seems to be a remarkably straight-forward prophecy," Hermione remarked after Harry had explained what had happened.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "Can anyone think of any reason why wouldn't I warn Theseus?"

"The Ministries are uncertain who he is, where he comes from, and how powerful and who his friends are," Russell pointed out. "They would no doubt be grateful if we allowed the Knights and Companions to attack and destroy Theseus in his current form and then swarm the attackers."

"Maybe," Harry retorted, "but I would never do that. Even leaving aside that Theseus has been a great help to us. . . ."

"He has," Hermione interrupted, "but he was fulfilling his own ends."

"True, but leaving that aside, Theseus would not be destroyed, and we don't need him or his friends as enemies. Furthermore, how many of his Muggle and Squib women would be killed or raped?"

"It is also possible that the 'Legend of Hellas' does not refer to Theseus," Luna pointed out. "It is the obvious explanation, but that does not mean it is the correct one."

"I think you should visit Theseus and talk with him," Russell said.

"I'll send word to Marcia to set it up," Harry agreed.

"Take Hermione," Luna said.

Harry frowned. "Why?"

"As a sign of good faith," Luna suggested. "You are, after all, powerful enough to escape if you were trying to fool him in any way."

Harry looked at the Prof, who shrugged his ghostly shoulders. He looked at Hermione, who shrugged as well. "Alright," Harry said.

Valentine's Day at Hogwarts was a very sedate affair, with all of the older students gone. Harry and Luna had a romantic lunch, and made certain that they were seen at dinner that night.

Right after dinner, Harry and Hermione left for France.

Sunday, February 15, 1998

Theseus met the pair at breakfast. "You have visited more often these last nine months or so than any other wizard has in any five year period," Theseus told Harry as they settled in to talk. "You are a harbinger of some sort."

"If you think that now, I'm afraid I'm about to reenforce it," Harry replied ruefully.

"And why is that? Are those silly Ministries pestering you for information about me and my friends?"

"They are," Harry agreed, "but I really could not care less about that kind of pressure. No, the problem is yet another prophecy."

"Is the seer reliable?" Theseus asked, amused.

"About just about anything else, no," Harry answered. "She has made a few accurate ones about me, however."

"I see. And what is this new prophecy, which apparently also concerns me?"

"On the day after the next full moon,
The Children of the Night Forest
Shall attack the legend of Hellas.
Only the Son of the Phoenix can decide
If he shall warn the lesser of evils," Harry simply repeated, letting the Prophecy speak for itself.

"Well," Theseus admitted, "that's pretty straight forward for a prophecy." He grinned, making him look fully human for once. "I'm not keen on being 'the lesser of evils', but I do like the sound of being 'the legend of Hellas'."

"Could it mean anyone else?" Hermione asked.

"It could," Theseus agreed, "but if so, I don't know why these Walpurgis fanatics, who absorbed an older group known as the Knights of the Dark Forest some two hundred years ago, would attack anyone else. They obviously figured out that I who was involved in the recovery of Valley Dracul." He thought a moment. "The full moon is just past. The next day after the next full moon is what? What you would call March Twelfth or Thirteenth?"

"The full moon is at Four thirty-four in the morning, Greenwich Mean Time, the Thirteenth of March," Hermione stated.

"So, the attack would be that morning, most likely, or possibly that of the Fourteenth," Theseus mused. He looked at Harry directly. "You weren't at all tempted to let them attack me?"

"Of course not," Harry answered. "I don't approve of you, but there are lots of people I wouldn't approve of if I knew them. That doesn't give me the right to do anything about it. Plus it would most likely be the Muggle and Squib girls who were hurt or killed, not you."

Theseus' now-cold smile made him look less human this time. "Tell me, o White Warlock, what special wards have you ever detected on your arrivals here?"

"Just some very powerful Muggle distraction spells," Harry admitted with a small shrug.

"Most wizards would not even detect those," Theseus replied, impressed. "I can assure you, only a wizard older and more powerful than myself would have any chance of cracking these wards. I don't care if the entire magical community of Europe showed up and tried, I doubt they could put the right kind of force against them. The Knights and Companions may come and try. They will suffer, not succeed."

"It might be useful if some of them could be captured and questioned," Harry suggested off-hand.

"Questioned by you, your Ministries, or by myself."

"If you capture them, you decide," Harry said.

Theseus nodded. He and Harry understood each other.

"Would you like any assistance?" Hermione asked, phrasing her question cautiously.

Theseus' face grew mask-like. "No, thank you. We will take care of things. We shall send any information we gather to you. You worry about finding Voldemort and destroying him."

"You won't be too confident, will you?" Hermione asked, still trying to be polite.

"I won't be facing them by myself, no," Theseus said, managing to take the question lightly. "My little cadre is quite upset with Voldemort, bringing all this attention."

"They aren't upset with you, are they? For talking with me?" Harry asked.

"No," Theseus said firmly. "I did not leak my name to John Russell through my vampire contacts on my own initiative. Once it became known that you knew about Voldemort's Horcruxes, it became easier to contact you to indirectly help you destroy him than any other course of action. Even if we had moved him and somehow destroyed him and his Horcruxes, you would have sought answers as to how he was destroyed. Besides, well. . . ."

"You don't destroy other wizards' Horcruxes, at least not directly, because you don't want to give each other ideas," Hermione stated.

"True," Theseus agreed. "One wizard with one Horcrux is likely not dangerous. One with five or more, well, they tend to be power hungry. It is not universal, but nearly so. It may be that nearly all who have had that many tended in that direction, or it may be having that many at one time draws those feelings out." He leered slightly at Hermione. "I assure you, my dear Miss Granger, I will be here a long time."

Hermione blushed slightly.

Sunday, February 22, 1998

'People rarely learn the lessons of the past,' thought a heavily-cloaked figure, standing just down the street from the Leaky Cauldron. Peter Pettigrew was at best an average wizard in most ways, yet he had been able to cause a large explosion by sending a reductor curse against a Muggle gas line. The figure had now verified that large feeder lines not only went right in front of the Leaky Cauldron but also underneath it -- obviously some of the residents there were not above using the fuel. The roads near the entrance to the magical area in Dublin and the British Ministry were almost as well-supplied.

Voldemort smiled. He decided that instead of attacking the Ministry first, he should hit the gas lines in front of the Leaky Cauldron as a start.

Less than twelve minutes later, there had been three huge gas explosions, and three Dark Marks

floated in the air, two in Greater London and one in Dublin.

"How bad is it, Mister Weasley?" Harry asked. He and his Council and other advisors were gathered together late that night.

"It looks worse than it is, from our perspective," Arthur said, somewhat dubiously.

"Meaning what?" Harry asked.

"The main street running near the Ministry has mostly warehouses. They sustained some damage, but no one was injured, Muggle or magical. The wards on the Ministry itself held perfectly. Now the entrances to Diagon Alley and Leprechaun's Row have caused more problems." Arthur sighed. "The pubs disguising the entrances were not damaged. Like the Ministry building, we've gone and added glamors so they actually look somewhat damaged, so that they do not stand out to Muggles. While there were no magical fatalities, there were six Muggles killed and thirty-nine injured. Both the British and Irish Prime Ministers have sent rather sharp messages, to say the least."

"I just do not understand why he did it," Hermione mused.

"I don't either," Harry agreed.

"At the least, this was at least a gesture of defiance," Russell mused. "He's reminding everyone that he isn't gone."

"If that's all he was doing, and it might be, considering his egotism, it was a mistake," Harry said.

"Why is that?" Percy asked.

"Because he should just fade away for a long period of time, years even," Harry answered.

"Wouldn't the Ministries, especially those where he hasn't made any direct impact, start to go on to other problems? By attacking, he reminds everyone he's still a danger."

"And that's not as good a thing as he imagines," Ginny suggested.

"Then we have to make that work to our advantage," Percy stated. He looked at Luna.

"Yes," she stated. "I will talk with Father. He's been running articles reminding people of the danger Voldemort's mere existence creates. I'll ask that he move them to the front page of every issue."

"I'll speak with Skeeter," Hermione added. "Maybe she can put some additional pressure on The Prophet."

"The Ministry spokesmen will keep up the same idea," Arthur agreed.

"Harry," George spoke up, "may I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"What do you think your chances would be, facing Voldemort one-on-one?" Everyone looked a bit uncomfortable with the question, as they all (except for Dobby) had been wondering the same thing.

"I think I would have a good chance," Harry said. "I can't ask the phoenixes for the help they gave me attacking the castle. If they did, I would be able to crush Voldemort in a straight fight."

"But as you said, they may not be helping," Luna pointed out.

"And we all know that Voldemort is unlikely to show up without some dirty tricks," Ginny added.

"True," George said.

"And, if I messed up the Horcrux-trap, we might never track the bastard's essence down," Harry stated. "If we can somehow track down that final Horcrux, I will challenge him."

"Just track down or track down and destroy?" Hermione demanded.

"One way to coax him into that final confrontation would be to announce when and where I'm going to destroy it," Harry suggested.

"What!" Hermione, Luna, and Ginny cried out.

"You wouldn't! You shouldn't!" Ginny protested. "Destroy it the instant you can!"

"I will," Harry said. "That wouldn't prevent me from announcing its destruction later."

"No," Luna said.

"Is now the time to be thinking about fair play, lass?" Moody asked.

"It is, but more importantly, Voldemort would be more likely to seize innocent hostages to trade for the Horcrux than show up to rescue it," Luna argued.

A number of faces fell.

"Let's find that last Horcrux," Ginny urged. "Then we can finish him off."

"How goes your astral projection?" Tonks asked Harry.

"Slow."

"I received word today that a friend of mine will be available in late April," Russell said. "He'll be able to coach you if anyone can."

"And your friend knows how to do this?" McGonagall asked.

"He is a skilled Tibetan wizard. He knows."

Voldemort leered with satisfaction. He would prepare another Horcrux shell, and had decided what it would be. It had been a shock to piece together the story of how the sixth Horcrux had been created without his knowledge. Creating a seventh Horcrux was a gamble, but one he felt he had to make.

Voldemort knew this would be his last chance at putting off death, hopefully forever. He also knew that, if this worked, there could be only one victim whose death would allow the spell to work without destroying his mind.

Harry Potter.

Voldemort would just have to insure that Potter would come and fight on his terms, and without the remarkable power he had shown in Transylvania.

Chapter XXXII

Sunday, March 8, 1998

Voldemort looked at the burnt remains of the Burrow with much less satisfaction than he had anticipated as the dawn approached. The lair of the annoying Weasleys was in total ruins, but the mother of the brood had managed to drag her husband away with a portkey that only Potter could have provided after he had struck down the balding wizard after a brief duel. Voldemort realized that instead of playing with the Weasleys, he should have simply killed them. Now their escape would become what people remembered, not their ineffectual defense of their home.

"Run away, Tom."

Voldemort turned in a flash and sent off a hex. . . .

Which went straight through the target.

"I already killed you once," Voldemort sneered.

"Well, I died during our confrontation at any rate," Russell agreed. "It hasn't accomplished much, from your point of view, has it?"

"Why should I run away?" Voldemort demanded.

"Actually, you shouldn't," Russell said.

Voldemort was not stupid, just egotistical. He threw himself on ground, and a hex flew over him. He instantly disappeared.

"The man has no balls," Harry said, walking over to the Prof.

"Well, Theseus told us that," Russell rejoined.

Harry's smile faded as he looked at the remains of the Burrow. "It was so wonderful here," he murmured sadly.

"I'm sure it was," the Prof agreed. "On the other hand, that was because of the people living here, not because of the house itself."

Harry didn't look entirely convinced. "I've never had a real home, a place where I had roots," Harry said. "I'm glad that the only casualty was the ghoul, but I am also sorry they lost their roots. That doesn't mean anything next to a life, but it still means something."

"That's true," Russell answered. He knew how much his own home had meant to him in life, after all. "Shall we go back and see how Arthur is?"

"We know he's alive," Harry answered. "I just hope it isn't serious." Harry sighed. "I'll start carrying the Horcrux shell around, just in case something like this comes up again. I'll be ready next time to do more than chase the bastard off."

Arthur was not severely injured, but he would be off his feet for a week. Harry made certain that Arthur's success in facing down Voldemort for the second time (the first being surviving the snake attack directed by Voldemort) made the news accounts. The Weasleys' survival boosted morale more than the destruction of their home depressed it.

Friday, March 13, 1998

It had not been easy for Harry to sit back and wait for news from Theseus. Still, he had done so. As darkness fell, he sat on the sofa in his cabin on the Hogwarts' grounds while Hermione and Luna

puttered about his kitchen, trying to make little tidbits which might tempt Harry, almost always a diffident eater, to eat something.

This went on until just past midnight, when there was a soft knock on the door. As expected, it was a vampire, but this time it was 'Sanguini' -- the vampire Harry and Hermione had met at Slughorn's Christmas party, and who had also been the Minister's younger half-brother while alive.

"Marcia was busy?" Harry asked, curious. He had grown rather fond of the attractive ancient vampire.

"She is busy," Sanguini stated. "The Basileus has sent word of his victory early this morning over those who would attack his domain. They attacked with sixty wizards. Twenty-one were killed, twelve were captured, and the remaining escaped, most with serious injuries. I have been asked to attend the Basileus in five nights. I will convey the results of any interrogations to you on the sixth night, and leave similar information for my life-brother afterwards. It is up to him to disseminate any information to the other Ministries, but do feel free to encourage him to do what is right." Here the vampire nearly smiled.

"Was anyone injured in the Basileus' community?" Hermione asked.

"Not to my knowledge, and it is my understanding that all of the fighting was done well-away from the actual compound," Sanguini replied.

"H'mm," Harry mused. "I would have thought that at least some of the assault would have come from the sea."

"Ah. You would not know this, but the Walpurgis devils would. There was an assault on the compound from the sea some three hundred years ago. All who participated in that attack were either killed in the attack or captured and killed later."

"That would tend to discourage a repeat," Luna pointed out.

"True," Harry agreed.

The vampire's mask-like face nearly smiled at that exchange. "May I be of any further service to you, my lord?"

"No, and thank you," Harry said. "Please let Theseus know we're happy with his news."

"I shall." Sanguini bowed and walked back out the door, turning into a vampire bat as soon as he was clear of the threshold.

The trio smiled at each other. When Hermione went to shut the door, Harry asked her to open some of the windows. It was the first warmish evening, after all, and the warm spell was predicted to last a week before the cold spring rains lashed northern Scotland.

Thursday, March 19, 1998

It was the late afternoon, and Harry was behind his cabin watching Hedwig soaring in the sky over the nearby lake as she exercised. Harry was meditating, clearing his emotions so that he could process whatever information was brought to him that night.

"Good afternoon, young Harry."

Harry swung around, his wand already out. He was surprised to see that his visitor was, "Theseus! I didn't expect you."

"Sanguini will be taking a copy of the report to his brother a few hours before dawn," Theseus said, walking up to Harry. "I thought I should visit you, since you've paid me visits."

"You are welcome here, of course," Harry said.

Theseus handed Harry a pouch which was stuffed full of parchment. "Here is everything we have. I had everything marked which we also gave to the British Ministry. There really isn't much we held back."

"I believe I understand," Harry said.

"I do not believe there is much I need tell you. The European Ministries and the International can deal with these fools if they desire. I do not believe they need concern you, as they will have problems enough of their own without aiding Voldemort any further."

"That's good to know," Harry said. "How are all your . . . house guests?"

"They are fine," Theseus said with a small smile. "They did not know anything was happening until it was over."

"Are one of you the Good One Who Speaks?" came a small voice from near Harry's feet. Harry and Theseus looked down.

"I believe it's more likely she is talking to you," Theseus said.

"You're a Parselmouth?" Harry asked.

"I am. It was not an uncommon gift in my time."

"Oh," Harry said. He looked back down. "May I help you?"

"You are the One I have been sent to find!" the large grass snake said, excited. "In the Cave of the Stone Snake, many of our kind find a safe winter refuge. The Speaking Stone Snake sent out a message that any who saw you should ask that you visit immediately. The Speaking Stone Snake has something you want."

"Thank you," Harry said. Without paying attention, Harry grabbed a beetle from a nearby flower and fed it to the snake as a reward, accidentally ending the career of Rita Skeeter. "Be careful of the owls," Harry added as the happy snake slithered away.

"Do you know what the snake meant?" Theseus asked.

"Yes," Harry answered. "See that highest mountain? There is a cavern inside. That's where Salazar Slytherin hid the outside entrance to the Chamber he built under the school. The doorway to the passage is guarded by two stone snakes, one on either side. We had some brief conversations last year."

"Shall we go, or will you go tomorrow?" Theseus asked.

"Let me drop these off inside, and we can go now," Harry responded.

"Ah, my polite Parselmouth has arrived," the green-eyed guardian almost crowed. "Wake up, back there! He is here, and he brought another."

"Another what," Red asked.

"Another Speaker," Theseus suggested.

"How wonderful!" Green enthused. "The other Speaker came after the snakes had settled in. He came asking for something he had hidden."

Harry was puzzled. "I don't understand. I thought. . . ."

"You did not ask the right questions that first time," Green reproved. "We had never tested that nasty Parselmouth. This time, I did."

"Did what? Test him how?"

"He had no blood connection to our Creator," Green replied.

Harry thought about that, and smiled. The reconstituted Voldemort certainly did not have any blood connections to Slytherin. "That is true," Harry said.

"Therefore, what he hid need not be under our protection."

"Is what he hid a small gold cup with two handles?" Harry asked anxiously.

"It is."

Harry was glad but frowned. "I thought I had asked if he had been here, and you said he had not."

"You asked if he had been through the door. He had not," Green answered, "He had visited both sides at different times, however."

"I see. Can you, would you, reveal what he hid?"

"I cannot from this side," Green said. "Command me, and ask my counterpart."

"Open," Harry commanded. He and Theseus went through. "Hello again," Harry said to the red-eyed Guardian.

"I greet you," Red said.

"Will you reveal what the self-proclaimed Heir of Slytherin hid?"

"I may," Red said. "I must ask you something first."

"And what is that?" Harry asked, worried.

"My counterpart grows weary of his task, and I have grown even more weary of the long silences and the darkness. If you can replace us with a simple command, which will only open this door to a Parselmouth, we would consider our long duty to our Maker fulfilled."

'Well,' Harry thought, 'that's better than asking me to prove I'm an heir to Slytherin.' He looked at Theseus.

"I can do that," Theseus replied. "I can also offer you both employment and more snakes to speak with, all the year around."

"Do you trust this Speaker?" Red asked Harry.

"I do."

A stone panel at the base of the door fell onto the dirt floor. Inside the niche was Helga Hufflepuff's cup.

"Then let it be done," Red said.

Friday, March 20, 1998

"You mean . . . it's almost over?" George asked.

"Hardly," Hermione snapped.

"No, in some ways George is right," Harry said. "Voldemort is fully mortal again. He's still incredibly dangerous, but with all the Horcruxes destroyed I can't believe only I can kill the bastard. I think my part in the Prophecy might have been fulfilled."

Hermione sighed, drawing everyone's attention. "What?" Harry demanded.

"Luna and I have been going over the wreckage from the Burrow," Hermione answered. She pulled out a silver ladle from her robes and placed it on the table.

"That . . . that's ours," Percy said.

"It's a family heirloom," Ginny said simply. "According to tradition, Edgar, that's who is credited

for founding what became the Weasley family, won it as a school prize back in the 900s."

"Voldemort had also cast the first two spells on it to turn it into a Horcrux," Luna said.

"Shit!" Harry spat.

"It's bad, but the real question is how is it bad," Luna said.

"Huh?" Harry was not the only one confused.

"According to Theseus," Hermione explained, "six should be the maximum number of Horcruxes any powerful wizard should be able to create. The few instances of those trying more either ended in disaster for the wizard, or were accomplished by those skilled in the mental disciplines and of great heart and soul. Those last certainly don't apply to Tom Riddle."

"What would happen to him if creating a seventh Horcrux backfires?" George asked.

"Most of his remaining soul will drain into the Horcrux and the remaining part in the body will be in a coma. How long the coma might last depends on many factors, but should last at least a month."

"So, if that happens we separate the Horcrux from the body, his lordship destroys it, and then we execute what's left?" Percy asked.

"If we're very very lucky," Hermione agreed.

"And the astral projection?" Neville asked.

"I can do the basics, but I just can't get a grip on the link between myself and Voldemort," Harry said. "If he doesn't activate the link, I can't follow it, at least not until I get more training."

"Which will be in late April," Hermione reminded the group.

"So, once again, the initiative is Voldemort's," Percy complained.

"Do you have any bright ideas about how to flush him out, without it being a trap?" Ginny snapped.

"No," Percy acknowledged. "I wasn't complaining about Lord Harry, I was complaining about the situation in general." Everyone rolled their eyes, as Percy insisted on using Harry's title, even though Harry tried to discourage it.

"Besides," Luna said, "Theseus told me before he left that he would see if he couldn't find someone to come and help out more quickly."

"The sooner it's over, the better," Harry muttered, and to that, no one would disagree.

Harry unexpectedly left Hogwarts in early April, only leaving word that his 'astral tutor' had shown up and had taken him away for solitude in his lessons. Harry left Remus, McGonagall, and Hermione in charge of various aspects of his command. At first, everyone was nervous, but they soon took their cue from Luna, who seemed to grow more serene by the day.

Tuesday, April 28, 1998

"Good morning, Harry," Theseus said.

"Where am I?"

"In the guest quarters of my villa, where you have spent time before."

Harry frowned. "How did I get here? That Tibetan you found to help me. . . ."

"Caused your body to be brought here over three weeks ago, while she took your mind, your soul, on a journey. My girls have tended your body, rather happily if it comes to that. I hope you have

learned what you need to know?"

"No offense, but I hope they weren't too happy," Harry said. "I don't want any children running around that I don't know about."

"No, your body was not that responsive," Theseus answered. "Still, they fed and bathed you, and did isometric exercises with you. And, to be honest, I believe you were responsive enough to give them some pleasure, although not enough to get any pregnant."

Harry blushed. "I think it might be a while before I can visit here again," Harry grumbled.

"Don't worry, my boy. You were in good, kind hands, and have nothing to be ashamed of. Now, can I help you stand?"

"Yes, please." Harry's eyes glinted. "Let me see if I'm in shape to take care of an old problem."

"What is it?" Hermione asked Luna as she came back to her suite with lunch for the pair of them.

"Harry is back among us."

"He's at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"No," Luna said, exploring what she was feeling. She had magically linked with Harry the previous summer, but that was often a tenuous connection. They did not share thoughts, but sometimes shared emotions when they were apart. "I hadn't realized, but while what little I've felt of Harry has assured him that he was feeling quite well, I believe most of that time might have involved his astral projection."

"Harry might have spent most of this month out of his body?"

"I could be wrong," Luna admitted. "In any event, he is feeling very empowered, and very determined."

"What do you think that means?"

"I think it means that Harry is going hunting," Luna answered.

Friday, May 1, 1998
Salazar Slytherin's Lair, the Pyrenees

Lord Voldemort glared at the piles of parchment which littered the large, run-down-but-elegant room he was in. To be reduced to such a state -- he, the greatest and most feared sorcerer in history! Reduced to writing out all the ideas he could come up with for drawing Potter into the trap. Well, the trap was relatively straight-forward, the problem was in grabbing the right bait. He needed to create the strongest Horcrux possible; and he knew he was gambling that he would succeed.

Voldemort was still not totally certain he believed that he had accidentally created a sixth Horcrux, but had to acknowledge that it was possible. If he hadn't, then he could create one at any time. If he had, then he was gambling in creating a seventh, and knew his short odds of success were improved if that final Horcrux was created over Harry Potter's dead body.

"Hello, Tom."

Voldemort leapt to his feet. "AVADA KEDAVRA!" he cried out in triumph, for Harry Potter was merely standing there, with a sword over his shoulder.

Nothing happened.

Voldemort tried again. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Nothing.

"What have you done!"

"Ah, just a little trick," Harry answered. "You know what today is, or have you lost track?"

Voldemort frowned.

"What happens on Halloween, Tom?"

"Dark magic is at its height," Voldemort declared.

"And on May Day?" Voldemort took a step back. "That's right," Harry said. "Light magic is at its height. And, thanks to a great deal of help from an old friend of mine, all Dark magic and all magic done with Dark intent in this area has been suppressed from between dawn and noon." Harry raised the sword from his shoulder and brought the tip down until it pointed at Voldemort's neck. "I don't think you can even do magic anymore without Dark intent. In fact, I don't think you can do ANYTHING any more without Dark intent. Shall we test my theories, Tom?"

"Stop calling me that!" Voldemort tried to disappear, but because his underlying motivation was to be able to kill Harry, it failed.

"Goodbye, Tom," Harry said. "It's been hell knowing you."

Chapter XXXIII

The great hall of Hogwarts was full, as Luna had first convinced Hermione to call the Paladins to the room before breakfast, and then convinced the Headmistress to keep the students and staff there. Remus had been sent to call the Minister, the press, and others. Each time, when so many of the people had asked why one at a time and in groups, Luna had merely said, "The last battle will be some time this morning."

That had been more than enough.

The elves served a light lunch, which was cleaned up well before noon. Hermione wished Ron was there, to hold onto in her nervousness, and because she knew Ron would still be eating, and that would help everyone else relax as they teased him.

When Hermione sniffled, Luna clasped her hand under the table. "Have faith," Luna said simply. "Remember what day it is."

"It's the First of May," Hermione answered.

"The Day of Light Magic, and even the Darker Celtic ceremonies associated with this day tended to celebrate justice," Luna pointed out. "I expect Harry to be here sometimes between a few minutes after One o'clock and One-thirty."

"Then why did you start getting everyone here so early this morning?" Neville asked.

"So they could all be here by One," Luna said. She nodded at the doors to the great hall, where Remus Lupin was escorting in a group of scowling goblins and the French Ambassador. "There are still more to come."

The minutes passed, and finally Hermione said, "It's One o'clock."

"Harry will be here." Luna stated.

At 1:12, Luna suddenly stood and looked towards the doors of the great hall. The crowd quieted. "All rise," she commanded, her voice carrying easily and with very surprising authority. Hermione rose, followed by Ginny. "The White Warlock, the Chosen One, arrives from battle!"

The rest of the crowd stood, and so missed the noise of Harry's arrival. Still, in just under a minute, Harry came into the great hall, with Theseus following behind him. The sword of Gryffindor was sheathed at Harry's side, and he was carrying a leather bag. Theseus had a long carpet rolled and thrown over his shoulder. They walked up the center of the hall to the dias, where the staff, his Council, and the representatives of the wizarding world were sitting.

"The war is over," Harry announced.

"Perseus?" Luna asked quietly.

"Well, I may have the head of a gorgon, but that ain't Cleopatra," Harry replied equally softly, but gesturing at the carpet. Harry walked up to Minister Scrimgeour. He reached into his pocket and tossed a wand on the table. "The wand of Tom Marvolo Riddle, who called himself Lord Voldemort," Harry stated loudly enough to carry. "I have his head, and my ally here was kind enough to bring the body." Harry set the bag on the dias and Theseus did the same with the body rolled in the carpet.

Harry turned so that he was addressing both the dias and the students while Theseus willed himself to be all but invisible to everyone but Harry, Hermione, and Luna. "Let the word go forth that between the efforts of the British Ministry and others, the efforts of fine educators such as those

here at Hogwarts, and by the efforts of my Council and I, we have won and that we will not tolerate another dark lord in our life times!"

The hall erupted in cheers. After a few minutes, Harry raised his hands, and the noise died down. "We need to learn how to live and work together. We need to learn how to live with Muggles while preserving our wizarding heritage. We need to learn how to appreciate goblins and centaurs and merpeople and elves and even, if they are willing to live peaceably with us, giants. That is why I named a half-giant, an elf, and a werewolf to my Council. While I can name up to twelve, I need to have at least eight. I will have nine." Harry turned to the group of goblins. "Ringshank, the Chief Hobgoblin of Gringotts of London, please stand."

Ringshank stood, confused.

"I would consider naming a goblin to my Council. I shall meet with any you think might be worthy at your bank two hours after opening time on the First of July."

Ringshank bowed deeply. "We shall consider your offer, and present any candidates for your consideration at that time, my lord."

Harry bowed in return and turned to face his Council. "Dobby?"

Dobby popped out from behind Luna, where he had been hiding. "My lord?" Dobby squeaked.

"Could you arrange with your former co-workers in the kitchen to send up glasses and sparking cider for everyone?"

"Yes, my lord!" Dobby popped away. In less than three minutes, the goblets appeared, and the bottles of sweet cider appeared shortly thereafter.

"Open those carefully!" McGonagall warned the students. Despite her warning, many students followed the lead of George Weasley in letting the corks fly. When everyone appeared ready, Harry raised his glass. "My friends! Two toasts! First, to those we lost in this war!" Every raised their glasses and drank off half. "And finally, to peace!"

"TO PEACE!"

Percy Weasley waved for attention. "My friends! Three cheers for the White Warlock! three Cheers for Harry Potter! Hip Hip. . . ."

"HURRAH!"

"Hip Hip. . . ."

"HURRAH!"

"Hip Hip. . . ."

"HURRAH!!!"

Wednesday, June 17, 1998

The O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were over, and the regular exams started the next day. Therefore, Harry, Luna, and Hermione were sitting out on the porch of the cabin, watching the Hogwarts students enjoy the bright sunshine and cool weather. Many were studying (or pretending to), while the others had given up any pretense and were playing tag or other games, or just sunning themselves.

"It's still hard to believe that it's over," Hermione said. "That there won't be some crises or other before the end of the month."

"No, no crisis this month. Next month, of course, my scores arrive," Harry joked.

"Right, Potter, like any examiner would dare give you a bad score in Defense or Charms,"

Hermione retorted.

"Oh, you're saying I did poorly in Transfiguration?" Harry teased back. He had not even attempted any other N.E.W.T. other than those three.

"No, I'm sure you did fine," Hermione acknowledged.

"So, seriously," Harry said, "what are your plans? You don't have to dance attendance on me, you know."

"I know," Hermione agreed.

"So, I know you must have plans," Harry said simply.

"Don't get the wrong idea," Hermione warned, "but I'm going to spend most of the next year at Theseus', if you don't need me." Harry grinned. "Not doing that, you perv!"

"If you say so," Harry retorted.

"Don't tease," Luna reproved gently. She turned to Hermione. "Do you have enough of Ron's sperm preserved to have his child?"

"I should," Hermione replied, blushing slightly. "I was thinking having it in a year or two. I'm certainly not ready now!"

"You told me once that you want two or three. . . ." Harry probed.

"You will have one son by Ron and one daughter by Harry," Luna said simply. "I believe I will have four, two each."

"Are you using your inner eye without a permit?" Harry teased.

"No," Luna said regretfully. "The rest of our futures are hidden to me."

"Even our N.E.W.T. scores?" Hermione asked. Then she flushed slightly, having realized she had not changed as much over the years as she had hoped.

"Even those," Luna said.

"Come with me to vet the goblins on the First," Harry said. "We should get our N.E.W.T.s scores that afternoon."

"Sure," Hermione said, but then she frowned. "Harry, would you tell me something now?"

"What?"

"Who were the four optional people on your Council?" Harry had been led to eight by Higher Magic, but chose four on his own.

Harry thought a few moments, looking up into the sunlight. "Ron, Fred, Professor Russell, and Ginny," Harry finally answered. "Whichever goblin I'm led to choosing will be replacing Hagrid."

"You won't be replacing the others?" Luna asked.

"Not for a while," Harry answered. "Right now, I'm thinking of Mister Weasley, Professor McGonagall, and Marcia."

"Good choices," Hermione said, "although I'm sure the Ministry die-hard will complain about Mister Weasley serving two masters and all that." She wondered if Harry had taken that into account.

"He'll have thirty years in at the beginning of August," Harry said simply. "That's when he can start collecting a half pension. Between that and what we can pay him, he'll come out ahead if he wants to take the job."

"That's good to know," Hermione said.

"I'm sure there'll be a bigger fuss about Marcia," Luna said.

"True," Hermione agreed.

Harry shrugged. "Too bad." He grinned. "Besides, who better to help us learn wizarding traditions than a witch over two thousand years old, even if she's also a vampire?"

"Did you consider asking Theseus?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry said. "He needs to hide back in the shadows fast. There are too many people sniffing around him now for him to be comfortable."

"Is he worried?" Hermione asked.

"Not really," Harry answered.

"That's not surprising," Luna said thoughtfully. "He's had three thousand years of practice."

"True," Harry agreed. His smile went away as he said, "By the way, I'll need both of you to meet me in the atrium of the Ministry at Nine on the morning of the First."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"So we can all say goodbye to Professor Russell," Luna said sadly.

The trio sat in the shade, feeling gloomy. After more than five minutes of silence, Luna stood. "It looks like those Second years are having fun. Let's play tag with them!"

Harry stood. "You, know, I never played regular tag. Have you, Hermione?"

Hermione, who had been about to object to such a childish thing, thought about that. "You know what? I haven't either. It's time we took care to eliminate such a glaring omission." The three smiling teens went off to play.

Wednesday, July 1, 1998

Deep in the Department of Mysteries, Harry Potter, Luna Lovegood, and Hermione Granger stood in the Room of the Veiled Arch with the ghost of Professor Russell and, surprisingly, that of Professor Binns.

"So," Russell was saying, "all my earthly possessions are distributed correctly." He turned to his companion. "Anything to say, Binns?"

The dour little ghost frowned. "Someone might have mentioned I died long before now!"

"Binns, people have been telling you that for almost a hundred years. You just keep forgetting."

"Hopefully," Binns replied with dignity, "my memory will work properly again in whatever lies ahead."

"I'm sure it will," Russell replied. He bowed to Luna. "You have been one of the most interesting people I have ever met, Luna, as well as one of the best students in our field I have taught."

"I shall remember you with honor," Luna replied as she bowed back.

"Harry . . . my lord. . . ." Russell bowed again, "it has been the greatest honor I could know to have helped you."

"Thank you," Harry replied, also returning the bow. "It would have been almost impossible to succeed without you."

"Somehow, I doubt that, but thank you. Hermione . . . I meant it when I said you were like another daughter to me," Russell said. "Find happiness as well as knowledge."

"I'll do my best to do both," Hermione said, tears running down her cheeks.

"Ready?" Binns asked.

"I am."

The two ghosts floated over to the Veil, where they stopped.

"Strange," Binns said.

"What is?" Harry asked, coming a bit closer. He stopped when Russell raised a head.

"Harry, Luna, you can hear the murmurings?" Russell asked.

"We can," Luna answered. Hermione wrinkled her nose in disgust, since she still heard nothing.

"We can hear some of the individual voices," Binns said. He and Russell stood there, listening and murmuring back for several minutes. Then they face the trio.

"Three, no four spirits had messages before going on to the next stage," Binns said. "They will not be this close to this plane again. Albus Dumbledore wishes to make it known that he is very proud of Harry Potter, and that he apologizes for not preparing him better."

"Tell Albus that I forgive him, and that I love him," Harry said.

"I shall," Binns said, and floated through the Veil.

"Harry, your godfather said much the same thing, in rather cruder descriptions of himself," Russell said with a smile. "Ron also wished to say goodbye, and that he loves Hermione and wishes all three of you well. Oh, and Fred asked that you tell George to have more fun."

"Thank you," Hermione said. "Tell Ron about the child I'm planning."

"I shall."

"Tell Ron and especially Fred to be good, or the sulfur they smell might not be from dung bombs," Harry added.

Russell smiled. "I'll pass it on." And with that, he disappeared through the Veil as well.

Harry, Luna, and Hermione stepped out of imposing front doors of Gringotts and squinted in the late morning light. "That went well," Harry said.

Hermione snorted. "Ringshank did look a trifle nonplused," Luna agreed.

"I came to pick a goblin, and I picked a goblin," Harry protested.

"Just not one of the dozen Ringshank had arranged for you to consider," Hermione pointed out.

"Gwenbauble. . . ."

"Is a female, and therefore plays a different traditional role in goblin society," Hermione stated.

"Well, I did say I was looking for someone who understood the goblin point of view, not a warrior or banker," Harry pointed out.

"I thought Ringshank took things well, after he stopped choking and Harry explained his reasoning," Luna said.

"I did too, but it was a near thing," Hermione said in turn. She paused. "Where should we go to wait for our N.E.W.T.s?"

"You mean these?" Harry asked, pulling out two envelopes.

"Harry!" Hermione grabbed hers while Harry chuckled.

"How did you do?" Luna asked Harry.

Harry shrugged and handed the scores to Luna. "Oh, well done!" Luna said. "E in Transfiguration,

O in charms, and O and a special recognition in Defense."

"Not bad, since I really didn't know any of the theory well enough," Harry said. They turned to Hermione. "And you."

Hermione had a disgusted look on her face. Harry sighed and snatched the parchment. He glared at Hermione after a glance at her scores. "You only were allowed seven N.E.W.T. classes, and only took one year of formal training in those, and you still took all eleven of the N.E.W.T.s you got O.W.L. in?"

Hermione shrugged and sniffled.

"O in Arithmancy, O in Astronomy, E in Care, O in Charms, O in Defense, E in Herbology, O in History, E in Muggle Studies, E in Potions, E in Runes, O in Transfiguration."

"I should have waited and taken them next year," Hermione said sadly.

"Six Os and five Es, when no one has ever scored more than nine N.E.W.T.s in history, no one, and most of the best students only score five or six N.E.W.T.s in total?" Luna pointed out. "You did very well."

"The professors Minerva are bringing over to teach Care, Transfiguration, and Runes, and possibly History, aren't going to stay that long," Hermione said, "between five and seven years at most. And Professor Flitwick is going to retire in a few years. I was hoping for one of the positions. Well, not Creatures. . . ."

"You could still get Charms, Transfiguration, or History," Luna pointed out. "You couldn't have gotten the Runes position without the Minor Gift in Languages."

"I suppose not," Hermione said. She squared her shoulders. "Well, I shall be ready for any of those. George has the store, Neville has the estate, Ginny plans on out-producing her mother in the babies department starting next year, Remus and Percy are helping George part time while Remus will be teaching at Hogwarts, and Tonks plans on competing with Ginny on making the most babies in wizarding history. What about you two?"

"I will finish next year," Luna said. "Over the next eight to ten years, I plan on having those four children and helping Daddy with The Quibbler. After that," Luna shrugged. "Perhaps I'll be ready to teach Runes. We shall see."

"Evil hasn't gone away just because a big chunk of evil is gone," Harry pointed out. "The Walpurgis groups are still out there, even if they are partially broken up. There could be other neo-Grindelwald groups for that matter, and now that he's gone, some lunatics will no doubt make Voldemort into more than he actually was. I am still the White Warlock." Harry shrugged. "My job is still to try and save at least part of the world, Hermione. I just have more tools to succeed than I did during our Fifth year."

"You're never going to let me forget I said that, are you?"

"Nope," Harry teased. "What are you up to in the short-term?"

"I'm off to Mum and Dad's for a few weeks. I go to Theseus' in the beginning of August. Oh, and Theseus said you were welcome to visit anytime you wish."

"I may do just that," Harry agreed. "I'll mostly be at Godric's Hollow or the cabin. You are welcome in my home any time, too."

Hermione lightly kissed Harry and Luna and disappeared.

"When are you going to your father's?" Harry asked Luna.

"Saturday," Luna answered. "I think we should go to the cottage at Godric's Hollow until then."

Harry smiled. "Brilliant idea."

"I have several more for once we get there," Luna added. She smiled brightly. "Let's go have fun!"

The End