

Harry Potter and The Old Belivers

By

DrT

Chapter 01

Tuesday, June 27, 1995

Normally, the week after exams was a noisy one at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This year, the Tuesday after exams was quiet. Only one amongst the students really knew what had happened the previous Saturday, but all knew that another student, Cedric Diggory, had died. They had all seen his body reappear, carried by the other Hogwarts Tri-Wizard Champion. The student who lived, The Boy Who Lived (again), Harry Potter, had been in the infirmary until Sunday evening, and was now only seen briefly as he avoided the Great Hall and other crowded areas as much as possible.

Headmaster Dumbledore had commanded the students not to harass or query Harry, and that an announcement would be made before they left on Friday morning. Most students were more than willing to avoid him. The Hufflepuffs were mourning Cedric more than the rest of the school put together; the Ravenclaws were supporting his girlfriend, Cho Chang; and the Slytherins almost always preferred avoiding Harry Potter on general principle.

The Gryffindors quietly supported Harry by leaving him alone, and silencing anyone who muttered suspicions that Harry might have been to blame for Cedric's death in any manner. With Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, this meant at most a few dirty looks and sharp whispers. Once everyone realized there would be no House Cup awarded that year, silencing the Slytherins already often involved minor hexes and a few split lips. No Gryffindor moved about the castle alone -- they were usually found in groups of at least three for fourth years and above, groups of four or more for the younger students.

It was the end of luncheon, and most of the students were mostly in their Common Rooms, with just a few out on the grounds (it was a chilly day, which accounted for the popularity of the Common Rooms). Only seven students remained at their tables -- three Slytherins and four Gryffindors. As Harry finished his lunch, his close friends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, and Ron's sister Ginny, surrounded Harry and let him direct them out of the Hall.

Draco Malfoy and his two followers, Crabbe and Goyle (by now, few people other than their mothers thought of them by their first names) sneered at the quartet in practiced unison. Draco decided to get some air, and so also got up, moving to leave the dining area and go out the front doors. Crabbe and Goyle followed, as usual.

"Poor potty Potter," Draco muttered with a sneer. He had just finished decoding and reading a message from his father, and now had a broad outline of what had happened to Potter the previous Saturday. Reading between the lines, it was in fact rather worrying. Could Potter really have defeated, or at least come out ahead, the Master in a duel?

'No,' Draco decided just as he was almost in range to trigger the doors to open, 'I must be misunderstanding that part. The important thing is, He's back.' That realization gave Malfoy a great deal of confidence -- misplaced, since he didn't realize he as yet had no place in the Dark Lord's hierarchy.

The doors suddenly sprang open, surprising the trio, since they weren't quite close enough to trigger the response. They saw who had triggered it, however; a huge burly man, in what looked to them like Muggle clothing and a scowl on his face.

This should have been surprising. The doors were on alert status, meaning that they should only open to students (including the visiting students from Durmstrang and Bauxbatons), faculty, the Governors, and a few Ministry Officials. All three should have known this meant the man had to be

someone important in the School's scheme of things. The thought occurred to none of them.

The man walked up to Draco. Although nowhere near the size of the half-giant Hagrid, this man was some six and half feet tall, and built on equally broad lines as the Care of Magical Creatures instructor. Draco correctly put him at well over 21 stones (ie over 300 pounds) of muscle. The man was dressed strangely, by wizard or Muggle standards, although Draco didn't realize the latter. The man was dressed in worn denim -- jeans, shirt, vest, long jacket, and most oddly, cloak. He wore a blue workman's cap, and dragon-hide combat boots. He had longish black hair, short sideburns, an untrimmed mustache, and piercing dark blue eyes.

"Boy," came a deep bass voice, "do you know where the Headmaster is at the moment?"

Draco had been startled, and had a fair typical reaction for him. To him, this was a Mudblood or more likely squib workman, who should be taught how to address his betters. He sneered and said, "Why ask me, squib?"

Malfoy suddenly found himself slammed against the wall, pinned six feet above the floor by a spell. "Do not meddle in the affairs of warlocks, for they are subtle and quick to anger."

A loud cackling laugh distracted the man, as well as the surprised Crabbe and Goyle. "Poor little Malfoy, pinned like a may-fly!" Peeves the Poltergeist taunted.

"Peeves!" the warlock boomed. "Remember what I said I would do to you the next time I saw you?"

Peeves peered at the man, then screamed and fled through the ceiling.

"Finite Incantatem!"

Draco managed to shift his eyes, and saw Professor Snape, wand out, and a surprised look on his face. "Finite Incantatem!" he said again, but Draco was still stuck up on the wall. He also finally noticed that the stranger didn't have a wand in his hand.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

"Who am I? I am Professor Snape, potions master. Who are you?"

"Who I am is of no concern to you. Can you give me a civil answer to a simple question? Because if you call me 'squib' like this little twerp, I'll disembowel you on the spot."

Snape gave Draco a slightly disgusted look, then turned a wary eye on the stranger. Any warlock who could pin Draco to the wall without a wand, especially against his own powerful ending spell, was a warlock to be wary of. "He's young, and all student tempers at Hogwarts are strained at the moment. What is your question? After you release him, I'll do my best to answer it."

The man lowered his hand, and Malfoy fell to the ground. "Boy, are you Lucius Malfoy's son?"

"I am," Draco snarled as he got to his knees.

"Tell your father to tell his Master that the Doctor is looking for him."

Draco's eyes widened. None, not even Potter, had ever dared address him or his father in tones like that. "What. . .what do you mean? And Doctor who?"

"Close enough. And it's a message simple enough for a Malfoy to remember." The man shifted his eyes to Snape, ignoring the sputtering Draco as he had ignored Draco's henchmen. "I am looking for the Headmaster. Is he in his office?"

"I believe so." Snape first saw that Draco was physically alright, and hurried to catch up to the stranger, striding quickly towards the Headmaster's office.

The stranger and the pursuing Professor Snape met up with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, who were approaching the guardian gargoyle from the other end of the corridor. Flitwick stopped in

shock, his eyes wide and his jaw open. Snape and McGonagall stared at the two men.

"Filius, Miss McGonagall," the man stated. He waved his hand, and the door opened without a password. "I shall probably talk with you sometime this week or next." McGonagall's face registered extreme confusion, and then shock at least as strong as Flitwick's.

The door shut.

"Who was that?" Snape demanded.

"Well, it looked. . .and sounded. . .like Doctor Titus Pwy," Flitwick said in a bewildered voice.

"Who is?"

"He was my first Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," McGonagall said.

"And my only Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," Flitwick added. "And Albus' for that matter."

"Impossible! That would make him at least fifteen years older than Dumbledore!"

"The Doctor was the most powerful wizard I've ever seen," McGonagall said, still in shock. "But except for his hair, he always looked very young."

"And, come to think of it, the Doctor's whitening hair looked a bit like it was bleached," Flitwick mused. "Those few strands of grey look a lot more natural, but could it be?"

"The Doctor?" Snape asked.

Flitwick smiled at the memory. "He had a Muggle doctorate in Classics. We simply called him 'the Doctor.' If any newcomer asked Doctor who, he'd laugh, because Pwy means 'who' in Welsh."

"That's. . .that's what he said." Snape looked at them. "You meant 'the most powerful, other than Dumbledore, right?"

They both shook their heads. "Most powerful," McGonagall said simply, "or so he seemed at the time. Not as. . .wise or as broadly knowledgeable as Albus, although he was certainly brilliant in most fields."

Flitwick agreed. "True; Charms, Transfiguration, Defense, Runes and languages, History, Astronomy. The most brilliant dueler I've ever seen." A dueling champion in his youth, that was a major compliment from Flitwick. "Quite knowledgeable in potions, although not quite in your or Albus' league, Severus. Not much on Care of Creatures or Arithmancy, although that might have been because we didn't very good teachers for the subjects, then, and he didn't talk much about their areas."

"He certainly mentioned history," McGonagall said. Like most students and faculty throughout the 19th and 20th century, she didn't think much of the History of Magic teacher.

"-He really disliked Binns, before and after he died," Flitwick agreed, remembering talk from his first years on the staff.

"But could that man, who looks about thirty at most, actually be this Pwy? And if he is, how. . .and why is he here?"

"The only answer possible to guess at is to your last question," Flitwick said. "Whomever that man is, he's likely here because of the events of last Saturday."

Albus Dumbledore was studying his pensieve, when a sharp knock on his office door startled him. Startled him, because he normally was aware of anyone coming close to his office. That this approach hadn't rather disturbed him, although he quickly decided he had been deeper in study than normal. "Come in?"

Dumbledore came to his feet as the big man came in, shocked.

"Hello, Mister Dumbledore. You haven't been too successful keeping the peace recently, have you?"

"Doctor Pwy?"

Fawkes flew off his perch and lit on the man's shoulder. "Hello, Fawkes. Looks like he's at least been taking good care of you since I've been gone." He stroked the phoenix. "How's my best friend at Hogwarts." The phoenix trilled a short burst of happy song.

"How?"

"I left after nearly thirty years here because it was becoming too obvious I wasn't aging normally. Bleaching small parts of my hair white wouldn't work any more and people like you can see glammers. There wasn't a good faux aging potion that I could take long term back then, either. I also left, as I said at the time, to defend America from Grindelwald's stooges. I could hardly come back unaged. I helped clean up the remains of problems in the US, and then went into research for over a decade, partially on my own, partially at the Sefydliad. I then went back to a Muggle university, and ended up getting another Muggle doctorate, again in ancient history, this time specializing in Egyptology and ancient Mesopotamia. I've been teaching for the last thirty years; this gave me access to Muggle-controlled areas of Egypt, where I made some interesting discoveries."

He sighed. "I really enjoyed my time in the Muggle world. Still, I knew I would have to retire soon. I still own the valley in the far west, almost inaccessible to Muggle or magic, but I didn't feel like retiring back there again, like I did in the Fifties. So, I started getting back into greater touch with the general Magical world just before Christmas. I didn't like what I was reading. I came here in late May, setting up a new persona in Muggle London, just in case I need it. Then, I heard part of what happened Saturday night. He's back, isn't He?"

"He is."

"Then I am, too. Harry Potter may be the key, but I cannot let him bear all the weight you seem to have put upon him."

"How are you here? Not why, we can discuss that later. How?"

The man shrugged. "An unrecratable accident back in Eighteen-ninety, when some other students and I were trying to make a Philosopher's Stone, or Sorcerer's Stone if you prefer. Essentially, it seems as if I age about a year for every ten. Surely you must have suspected?"

"No, I didn't." Dumbledore looked abashed. "So, you are. . . ."

"I was a hundred and twenty-three a few days ago. I probably look a little under thirty, right?"

"True."

"Now, tell me everything I need to know. Then, I'll think about it, and then we can talk about possible . . . situations and solutions."

Chapter 02

Friday, July 8, 1910

"So, despite the opposition of many of the faculty, you have decided to confirm this appointment?"

Armando Dippet, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for just one week, wondered how long he could handle this job. At 66, he should have still been in the prime of life for a wizard educator. The job, however, was more difficult than he had imagined when he had been the Defense teacher, Deputy Headmaster, and head of Hufflepuff.

George Binns was the major problem. He had been a little too young to be considered for the position of Headmaster when the now-retired Headmaster, famed reformer Alfred Longbottom, had started his long tenure. He was now certainly too old for the job. He was determined to be annoying, however.

"No one has come up to any reasonable objection to the appointment of Doctor Pwy, other than the fact that he is an American and has a Muggle degree. And the latter only seems to bother you."

'Because it shows he knows about history than you ever will,' Dippet thought. 'Of course, some rocks know more about real history than you do.'

"His only real qualification is that he killed some native shaman in the American west, then helped the American Muggles by killing another native shaman in the Philippines a few years ago. Having a killer at the castle does not reassure many of us!"

"Defense has for too long consisted of five years of dark creature study and two years of dueling. It's time it expanded."

"There's nothing wrong with our curriculum!"

"George, Defense hasn't changed since King William's time!"

"That was less than a century ago." Binns frowned. "Wasn't it?"

Binns' tentative grasp on history not directly connected to interesting magical inventions and goblin rebellions was, at times, unnerving; in general since he taught history and this time because William IV had become king the year before Binns had become a student at Hogwarts.

'Still,' Dippet thought, 'the old bastard is ninety and drinks like a fish; he can't live too much longer.' He had to speak, however, "William the Third, not Fourth. That was over two hundred years ago. Now, the contract has been offered, signed, and accepted back. He will be joining us in late August, and, on related matters, we will continue to offer Muggle Studies, and the train will still bring all the students on the First. It's good to have the older students looking out after the younger students instead of hazing them, and after fifteen years, it's now the tradition."

"Very well, Headmaster."

Tuesday, August 9, 1910

"Can I 'elp you?"

The Leaky Cauldron opened at 9:00 am and closed at Midnight. Other than those times, you didn't get into Diagon Alley without knowing the secret ways in (only the shop owners and their families really knew the few secret entrances, and the only other ways were flooing in general or apparating or flooing into the Ministry basement -- the first was seen as an invasion of privacy and the second was frowned upon other than for members of the Ministry and their families). There was usually a

small crowd waiting in the Muggle street at 9:00, but it cleared through fast, and most days the pub was fairly empty between 9:30 and 11:00, as it was today.

"I understand this is the public entrance portal to Diagon Alley?"

The inn-keeper stared for a few seconds. "Tis indeed. Where you from, mate? If you don't mind me askin'?" The man asking was huge, maybe even a quarter giant, and even quarter-giants were best not aggravated. On the other hand, he was dressed in the latest upper-crust Muggle fashion, and his accent, although odd, wasn't like any giant's.

"America. Am I right in believing you have rooms for rent?"

"Aye, that I do. Interested?"

"Well. . . ." the young man seemed embarrassed.

"Out with it, lad."

"I've had to rough it at times over the last few years. I decided, after the last time, I wasn't staying anywhere without modern plumbing again."

The older man laughed. "Well, then, it's a good thing we just finished installing new crappers and tubs a few weeks ago! Aye, sir, 'ired the same firm what finished 'ogwarts a few years ago -- Goyle and Crabbe it's called, though mark my words, they work fer that Dark sod Malfoy. Still, let me show yer."

The plumbing was indeed state of the art, and the young man engaged a room for two weeks. "I believe there is a train from London to Hogsmeade every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday?"

"Aye, sir. Least ways that's the through trains. Return every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Lots of travel 'tween London and 'ogsmeade, and 'tis 'ard to floo with anything more than one -trunk or aparate with more than two. You got business at 'ogsmeade?"

"I'll be teaching at Hogwarts."

"Ah! Well, then that's a good time to go. Teaching what, may I ask?"

"Defense."

"Really?" The man looked barely twenty-one at best, despite the mustache.

"Really. I'm Titus Pwy."

The older man shook the offered hand, slightly surprised. Few offered their hands like that to him. "Just call me Tom. That's all we've been called behind the bar at this tavern for well over eight 'undred years, no matter what name our mothers gave us."

"Glad to meet a tradition, Tom. I'll have my baggage sent over from the Muggle hotel this afternoon."

The next day, Titus Pwy walked into Diagon Alley for the first time. It was cramped, and in every way very different than any other wizarding settlement he'd ever been in. Before he could explore, however, he went to Gringotts, and opened his account.

"Any questions?" he asked the chief goblin after showing his correspondence and identification from his local branches.

"No, Doctor Pwy! Here is your key, vault number seven hundred eighty. Shall we transport in the entire proportion of this quarter's dividend?"

"No, I need a hundred and fifty galleons and sixty British pounds, also in gold." He tossed down two leather pouches.

"At once, sir!" Being a part-owner of the bank (for even though it was operated by goblins, wizards still actually owned the bank and controlled more than half the Board of Directors) and a known killer certainly brought respect from the bank goblins.

Once out of the bank, Pwy walked all of Diagon Alley, and both forks on either side of Gringotts -- Ministry Row, where some of the Government agencies and wizard law firms were located along with the headquarters of some of the larger firms and organizations (the Daily Prophet, some other publishers, the Quidditch League, etc.) and Knockturn Alley, obviously where some of the shadier businesses operated. Most of the businesses throughout the area had been in operation for many generations.

Madam Malkin's had been suggested to him as the best for robes ("In business since Saxon London!" several patrons had told him the night before). He ordered six sets of faculty robes, two sets of dress robes, and a new cloak (also with the faculty crest).

He went back to the pub for an early lunch. There were two more upscale restaurants in Ministry Row, but Pwy put those off for his dinners. After lunch, he sought out 'Ollivander's Wands', carrying a mid-sized case.

The shop was empty except for the shop keeper and what appeared to be his pre-teen son, although Pwy was certain there had been a crowd of youngsters with their parents earlier that morning.

"May I help you? Ah, a stranger. I'm Richard Ollivander." He was a fairly young man with very intelligent eyes. His son slipped out the back.

"I was wondering if you'd care to look at a consignment of wands."

"We make all our wands here, sir. Still, I'm always happy to look at other's craft."

Pwy set the case on the counter, and opened the case, unfolding several inner pockets as well, until 120 wands were visible.

"Quite an assortment. Your work, young man?"

"I ran off thirty-three of them on the lathe, and did the combining spells on eighteen others. It's a family business, back in America."

Ollivander did a quick examination. "Really, let me see. . . a wide choice of woods, but all wyvern? Shame the Old Believers took most of the wyvern stock with them when they left; they've died out over here now. They do make nice wands. Mostly feathers, a few mane hairs and heart-strings. Very, very nice. . . ." He started looking more closely. "Oh, my!"

"Yes?"

Ollivander pointed at the tiny, almost microscopic brand near the base of the wand he was holding. "Pwy?"

"Yes, I am Titus Pwy. And each is a genuine Pwy llath."

"I have never seen a new Pwy wand. Your family was the only real competition my family had, before the Old Believers left back in the Fifteen-hundreds!"

"Thank you. Interested?"

"What are you asking for them? Each one is a masterpiece!" Pwy wands were the premier wands in the States and Canada, just as Ollivander's were in the United Kingdom and Western Europe.

"What are your wands going for?"

"Well, the most expensive are just over three galleons."

"Then how about forty-five galleons and a wand. I like having three different ones, and my second best was destroyed two years ago. I haven't found one good enough to replace it. I'd like one for general defense and transfiguration. I like the other two for defense and charm work."

"I should offer you at least sixty and a wand."

The young man smiled. "No, forty-five is fine." He gave the man a card. "Feel free to order some more at your price. We also do dragon heart-strings and the occasional phoenix feather. While I'm in Britain, my family would be willing to sell to you, or trade for some of your unicorn wands." Unicorns were as rare in America as wyverns now were in Europe.

"Sounds good. Anything else, before we find you a wand?"

"Take a look at these." He pulled a different bunch of wands from under his cloak. "I regret to say these are all my own work."

"Eewwhh." The man wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Yew and. . .kappa bone?"

"Six kappa bone, six gindylow finger. Nasty, aren't they?"

"Very! Why?"

"I'm going to be teach Defense against Dark Arts at Hogwarts. I need to meet some of the vendors in Knockturn Alley."

"Those would do it. What do you want from me?"

"Would you be willing to write an appraisal? Obviously, I wouldn't want you to soil yourself actually selling something like these."

Ollivander grinned. "Worth at least two galleons wholesale, I'd say."

"Yes," Pwy grinned in return, "why not make them pay for it?"

Ollivander examined them carefully. He was impressed by the quality of the workmanship, but saw it was more show than substance. A glance showed him that Pwy knew that, and had intended it as well. "Do you think anyone in this country, outside you and my family, would know that after about three years of hard Dark use, and twelve years of regular use, the bones in these wands will likely shatter and then throw the last Dark spell on the user?"

"No, and if you write the letter right, no one will know that you knew."

"After all, even the best-made wands may suffer defects if too much Dark magic is channeled." They smiled.

"Let's get you a wand. We don't use wyvern or griffin; phoenix feather, dragon heart string, and unicorn hair only. What's your usual wand?"

"Hazel or oak, along with the wyvern feather. I thought maybe oak and phoenix? Still, I've never tried unicorn."

"Let's see." Ollivander thought a moment, and then moved in to search the boxes the wands.

All in all, it was an informative two weeks the youthful-looking professor spent in London. He had traded the wands in at three of the most infamous Dark Arts supply-stores of the period (Borgins, Hares, and Burkes) and come away with some very interesting material and books. He was also impressed by the excellent craftsmanship of most of the items on sale in Diagon Alley itself.

Still, soon it was time to leave. Now that his consignments of wands were gone, he could shrink all his trunks and packages so that they could fit into one magically enlarged trunk (he hadn't wanted the wands to need any time to regain their full power, as could sometimes happen under the shrinkage spells).

So, on August 23, he flooded to Platform 9 3/4, the magical train station. Three days a week, there were express trains to Hogsmeade (there were trains that made other stops every day). He had Tom book him a first class ticket two weeks before. The train left at 10:00 am, and took 8 1/2 hours to

make the trip; fortunately, there was a dining car.

The first class carriage wasn't full, but there was someone in every compartment but one. He had noticed the other men had left their Muggle clothes and hats on, and so he settled into his seat with his hat and cloak on, since it was rather chilly for August.

Just before the train left, three ladies opened the door. "Excuse me," the oldest said, "May we join you? There are no other compartments with three free adjoining seats."

Titus stood and removed his hat. "Of course. May I help with any packages?"

"No, no," the woman informed him. "We only have a few things that couldn't go with the luggage." They came in and claimed the three seats opposite him.

"I see you're at Hogwarts. You must be the new Defense teacher," the woman continued after she saw the crest on his cloak.

"Yes, I am. Doctor Titus Pwy. Does this mean I'm the only new instructor?"

"No, but we know Alan Dinsdale, who is the other new instructor. I'm Henrietta Evans, the Chaperon of the Gryffindor witches. This is my sister, Misses Harriet Weasley, and her sister-in-law, Misses Joan Dumbledore."

"Pleased to meet you." All three women were strikingly attractive red heads, Miss Evans in her early-to-mid forties, the others perhaps a decade younger. "I wondered how the witches were supervised."

"There are four Houses, but twelve Common Rooms and eight Dormitories. The witches are housed near the young wizards, but not in accommodations that are directly linked. However, my room adjoins the witches' Common Room. The witches may only mix with the wizards outside of classes in the Dining Hall and in the Library, and in the witches' Common Room on Sunday afternoons. The witches' common room and the wizards' common rooms are linked by what we call the 'Tea Room.' Students may also sit there with tea or juice between nine in the morning until their respective curfews. Since the entrance to the Gryffindor areas and the Common Rooms all go through the Tea Room, there is little chance for inappropriate behavior."

"Very decorous, I'm sure. Do you ladies also live in Hogsmeade or the school?"

"No, we're shopping in Hogsmeade," Mrs. Dumbledore answered. "We both have our eldest sons starting this term, and also wanted to arrange accounts for them to order supplies."

"What Houses will they be in?"

"Well, the children are magically sorted," Miss Evans told him. "Evans', Weasleys, and Dumbledores are usually sorted into Gryffindor, but there have been the odd member of other Houses, especially a few Dumbledores into Ravenclaw."

All three witches had attended Hogwarts for at least five years (most witches, he was told, only attended for four or five years), although Miss Evans had attended for all seven. Technically, all the teachers were male, but the chaperons were picked for the ability to coach the students as well as their social and moral standing. Miss Evans coached Charms, Transfiguration, and the Dark Creatures portion of Defense.

By the time the train arrived, Titus had learned a great deal more about the school than he had anticipated. He seemed to have made a friend, at least as much as such was possible given the social conventions at the time. He had escorted the ladies to luncheon and dinner in the dining car, insisting on hosting them to each, and escorted the married ladies to their lodgings before escorting Miss Evans to the carriage which would take them to Hogwarts.

Chapter 03

Titus met the other faculty and staff members over the following week. Most seemed rather aloof; and Miss Evans informed him it was simply because he was an outsider and that most would gradually warm up to him over the coming months, once he'd shown his worth. The three Slytherin professors and Binns, the History teacher from Hufflepuff, seemed the most hostile. Shawn 'Sandy' Wood, the head of Gryffindor and the Charms instructor, and Howard Hubble, the Astronomy teacher and head of Ravenclaw, seemed the most friendly of the established faculty. Alan Dinsdale, the youngest faculty member at 30, and just retired chaser for the English National Quidditch team, quickly became Pwy's friend. Considering the rules of decorum, Henrietta Evans couldn't be a close friend, but she was a friend.

Despite September 1 falling on a Thursday, the now-traditional gathering day brought all the students to the Hogsmeade train station. Pwy found the sorting ceremony fascinating; very different than the simple process at the Ysgol -- the school established in Maine by the Old Believers back in 1539.

The students, especially the Gryffindors, applauded loudly for Dinsdale, their Quidditch captain 1896-98, when they'd captured the Quidditch Cup both years. Everyone's applause for him had been the smallest of the evening, but still respectful, no doubt due to Dippet's introduction.

"Our first new faculty member is Doctor Titus Pwy, from the Ysgol and the Sefydliad in America. Doctor Pwy will be taking my place as the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor. Doctor Pwy already holds the Order of Merlin (First Class), is both a Sorcerer and Warlock, and has been an independent Auror for both the International Confederation of Wizards and the Druidic Council of Old Believers. He was also the North American dueling champion in Eighteen ninety-nine, Nineteen o-five and o-seven, and world champion in Nineteen o-eight and Nineteen-o-nine."

Many of the students had little choice but applaud that speech.

Friday was the first day of class. There were 14 two hour DADA classes scheduled each week, making it one of the more draining teaching positions to hold, three each day Monday - Thursday and the two beginning classes on Friday. Titus' first class was with the First Year Gryffindors and Slytherins from 8:00 - 9:50, then Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff 10:00 - 11:50.

Twenty students appeared, rather sleepy-looking and confused, but at least they were all on-time.

"Welcome to your first class at Hogwarts. As you should have gathered last night, and by your schedules, I am Doctor Pwy, and yes, that's pronounced 'Pow-eh.' Please arrange yourselves in pairs. I see there are both an even number of boys and girls in each House, so it would be best if you would arrange yourselves in pairs by House and gender -- it will make your studying together easier."

Titus waited until there had been a little minor rearrangement. "All set? Please remember where you are sitting for the remainder of the year, alright? As I call your names, please raise your hands."

"Let's see, Slytherin: Avery, Marilyn; Flint, Marcia; Malfoy, Jane; Marvolo, Sally Ann; . . . Bulstrode, Maxillian; Crabbe, Victor; Lockhart, Albert; Lestrangle, Wilber; Macnair, Walter; and Snape, Septimus."

"Gryffindor: Fudge, Livia; Pettigrew, Paula; Pippen, Mary; Potter, Angela; . . . Brown, Thomas; Dumbledore, Albus; Hagrid, Richard; Lupin, Julius; Weasley, Percy; and Whisp, Warren."

"As some of you many know, you are in the first year of a revised, more stringent, curriculum. The

Headmaster has graciously consented to help me teach the current Fourth through Seventh years under the old curriculum, until they have all left the school. The old one was five years of studying dark creatures and phenomena, followed by two years of dueling. We will be collapsing the first five years of study into three." There were some soft groans. "If you believe you will be studying hard, so will the Second and Third years, as they make up for lost time!"

"In your Fourth and Fifth years, you will be studying basic curses and counter-hexes. Some of these are also covered in Charms, just as some of the antidotes we'll be discussing will also be mentioned in Potions, but these are important, so a little duplication is good. In your final two years, we'll be practicing more advanced magic, charms and hexes used in dueling as well as more general purpose defenses. Rest assured, you will still be learning the principles of dueling, as well as fighting."

A hand shot up. "Yes, Mister Snape?"

"Aren't dueling and fighting the same?"

"Good question. No, they are similar but not the same. Dueling has very strict rules, fighting has few, or even none. We will be practicing the former, but not the latter. However, you will still be expected to know how to fight."

Pwy paused a second, then decided to continue into an explanation. "There are two forces constraining the Magical communities of the world. As the Muggle population grows and advances technologically, we are being forced into smaller niches. At the same time, the Magical communities are strengthening as communities."

"Some individuals, Muggle and Magical, opt out of their society, although it's easier for one of us to become a warlock, with no resources other than our knowledge and our wands, than it is for Muggles without significant resources. Others, seeing the growing power of their community, wish to take it over and make it serve their needs, rather than the community as a whole. You need to be able to recognize those wizards, and, if called upon, to fight them. By the time you leave after your Seventh year, you will be able to. Yes, Mister Weasley?"

"Might you not be teaching future Dark Wizards to fight better, too?" That brought a few grumbles from the Slytherins.

Pwy smiled a little. "Dark Wizards have never had much trouble figuring out how to manipulate others, and how to curse and kill them when necessary. And, when they do, they rarely do so in proper duels. Are there any further questions? Yes, Mister Lestrangle."

"Mister Snape, please allow Mister Lestrangle to ask his question." Snape had been clearly trying to shut Lestrangle up.

"Yes, sir."

Lestrangle tried to arrange his face into the sneer his male relatives seemed to have perfected over the years. "Sir, before we start the class, since we are your first class, a number of students were just curious about your background."

"Ah, an interest reputed to be common amongst Slytherin students I've heard. So, you wish to conform to your stereotype?"

"Uh, yes, sir?" Snape as well as most of the Gryffindors rolled their eyes.

"You are from a family which likes to consider itself 'pure blood,' correct, Mister Lestrangle?" Titus was glad Miss Evans had warned him, and had helped him do some detailed research, although he had anticipated this conversation coming with some of the older students rather than First years. Some of the Slytherins must really feel strongly on the issue, and no doubt other students did as well.

"Yes, sir, we are pure bloods."

"Yet the Lestrangle family first enters the magical records in the Twelve-hundreds, during the reign of Henry the Third. Where were the Lestrangles before then?"

"Sir?"

"Well, perhaps you should all take notes on this, as I do not wish to waste time with my other classes going over this again. The parents of that first magical Walter Lestrangle didn't spring from the ground. Who were they?" Titus paused a few seconds. "No answer? Well, they were either Muggles or came from a line of so-called squibs, who were living as Muggles. Either way, that Walter Lestrangle was not a 'pure blood,' even if his descendants only intermarried with active witches." Lestrangle and most of the other Slytherins, and some of the Gryffindors looked hostile at their teacher's statements.

"In fact, go back far enough and I suspect most of us have a few Muggles mixed in our ancestry, and we all at least have some squibs. I, for one, do not believe that any wizard or witch can come from truly Muggle families on both sides. Instead, since most squibs are driven from the Magical community, the so-called Muggle-born wizard comes from the inter-marriage of squibs who have lost knowledge of the Magical communities, and whose combined blood is again strong enough to create a wizard or witch. Before any of you make fun of such people, remember that you all come from such ancestors as well." The hostility, especially from the Slytherins, was slowly growing.

"Miss Malfoy, for example, is descended from a wizard supposedly born to Muggle shop-keepers in London, back in the Eleven-fifties, who gained fame and fortune as an advisor to William II, for her some twenty-three generations ago. Mister Lestrangle has just twenty generations separating him from some Muggle or squib. Mister Bulstrode has the fewest magical generations in direct male descent in this class of Slytherins -- six. Does that make him worse than Mister Hagrid, who has over thirty generations, or better than Miss Phippen, who has three? Or even Mister Brown, who is the first of his family? No, what really matters is how talented are you? How good a person are you? How good a witch or wizard are you?"

Titus gave them a hard smile. "From all that, since I see I haven't convinced many of you, you might think I must be either Muggle-born, or close to it. Well, if blood matters, then nearly all of you are pure trash." There were some soft noises of shock at that.

"I am of nearly-pure Old Believer ancestry. The one Muggle in my recorded past was a sailor who helped some of my ancestors flee from what is now Surrey to Brittany to safety. That was in the year Three hundred and ninety three. One of the daughters fell in love with him, and because he was brave, and they were poor if powerful, with other daughters, they allowed the marriage. There are fifty-two generations between him and myself. What are fifty-two generations compared to your twenty, Mister Lestrangle? In direct male descent, I am the hundred and second recorded generation, compared to your twenty-first, Mister Lestrangle. In my paternal mother's family, I am descended from the first recorded Master of what you call Stonehenge. I am the hundred and fifteenth recorded in that line -- and the oral tradition puts it much further back than that. In my mother's mother's mother's family, I am descended from King Scorpion of Egypt, the first recorded wizard outside Mesopotamia. That makes me the Two-hundred and twenty-sixth generation. So, in this class, blood does not matter." Suddenly, his deep voice sank even deeper, and the small students really noticed how incredibly large their instructor was. "Talent, intelligence, and character matter. No matter of you're from a young family, like you, Mister Lestrangle, or a new family, like you Mister Brown, make your families proud of you."

"Now, any further non-sequiturs?" There was only silence.

"No? Then please take out your text books, quills, and note books. For the following several weeks, we will be dealing with ghouls, banshees, and similar creatures."

The second Sunday of the term, Miss Evans invited her nephew and his cousin to tea.

"Well, young masters," she teased "now that you're experienced Hogwarts students, what do you think of your classes?"

"They're a little harder than I thought they would be," Percy admitted.

"Really?"

"Well, they're aren't impossible or anything, but. . .applying the magic is harder than I thought it would be."

"Charms and Transfiguration do take concentration. Still, you've only had one class in each. How do you find the other classes?"

"Defense is interesting, History isn't, and Potions, Herbology, and Astronomy are sort of in between. Flying is fun."

"How about you, Mister Dumbledore?" Since they were in public, Henrietta was keeping it formal.

"Learning to control my wand is harder than I thought it would be. . . ."

"You did the best in both classes!" Percy broke in.

Albus shrugged. "If I did, that still doesn't mean it was easy. You did the best on the broom, but was it easy?"

"Well, no, but I've flown a lot before." He frowned. "I wish I could have brought my broom."

"Next year," Henrietta assured him.

Percy continued, "Any way, I like all the teachers well enough, although Professor Binns is rather boring. I like history, but I just don't understand how he organizes the class."

"He goes by topic, rather than sequentially. Why he starts with important inventions, nobody has understood since he started almost seventy years ago."

"Telling us about the beginnings of the wand doesn't make sense to me, when he doesn't tell us anything about the people who made them," Percy complained.

"You need to read the book. It's all in there," Henrietta explained. "Professor Binns hits the highlights, but you need to supply the background. Whom do you like?" She asked Albus.

"Doctor Pwy," Albus said. "They all teach well. . . ."

"Except Binns," Percy muttered.

Henrietta looked around, and saw they were fairly isolated. "Albus," she said quietly, "just give me your best judgement." He was famous in the family for his precocious good sense and abilities.

"Well, except for Professor Binns, the others are good. Professor Nott really knows the subject, but he seems a little impatient with us, especially with some of the Hufflepuffs we're with. Some of the Ravenclaws claim he favors the Slytherins, but I don't know for sure. They might just say that because he's the head of the House."

"Professor Nott has that reputation. Perhaps I should say that he plans on retiring after this year."

The two boys grinned at that news. Then Albus continued, "Professor Wood is really really good; I'd say he's my second favorite professor. He really has shown us a lot more about wand-work than Professor Nott. Professor Hubble also has a hard time teaching us the basics, but he deals with it better than Professor Nott does."

"Professor Williamson and Professor Fleming aren't as patient as Professor Wood, either, but they're even more patient than Professor Hubble. Mister Dinsdale is probably even more patient than Professor Wood is."

Albus suddenly smiled. "But Professor Pwy is. . .different. He seems to treat us. . . ."

"More like adults," Percy broke in.

"Exactly," Albus agreed. "I guess it's because what we're learning just requires. . .us to listen and understand."

"I can't wait until tomorrow afternoon!" Percy said, almost bouncing in his chair.

"What's happening tomorrow?"

"You didn't hear?" Albus asked. "The Seventh years are all going to be dueling Doctor Pwy. The School is invited to watch."

"Oh, dear," Miss Evans said, sadly shaking her head. "Those poor boys."

Albus and Percy looked at each other, confused. While they were certain their teacher could handle any one of the Seventh years, facing them successively should prove a challenge.

It didn't. Hogwarts' senior student wizards certainly understood the principles of dueling. In practice, however, they dueled with leisurely and practiced nonchalance. Pwy went through the 24 wizards three times in less than an hour and a half.

At that point, Pwy let them all know what he thought of their skills. "Dueling is not an exercise of good manners! I've seen games of gob stones taken with more seriousness! The way you all dueled was either at best mediocre, or useful only as practice." He looked at the faculty, daring them. Wood, Margate (the young Slytherin Potions Master) and Marx (the Arithmancy teacher from Durmstrang) all stood up.

The first duel was between Wood and Pwy. The students were shocked to see the speed of true duelists. It took Pwy ten minutes before he disarmed Wood, while both Margate and Marx lasted about twelve minutes.

"Those were three excellent duelists, in good form. All three could easily compete on a national level." Pwy bowed to each in turn. "Even if you don't achieve their level, you will take what you know, for you each have a good grounding in the basics, and really learn to apply it."

Albus and Percy were walking behind the Headmaster and Binns as the crowd cleared.

"Headmaster, I understand now why you wanted this man here."

Chapter 04

Thursday, September 9, 1915

"Come in, Mister Dumbledore."

"Doctor Pwy." Albus sat before the instructor's desk, and looked at his favorite teacher with expectation.

"As I'm sure you know by now, each sixth year wizard will be interviewed this month, and then again at the end of this year and once next year, in order for us to have a good idea of what you may want to do when you leave the School. Then, we hope, we can suggest ways to help you achieve your goals." Pwy leaned back. "Normally, at least one head of House would be here, but as you no doubt also know, they and the Headmaster are still discussing what to do about Professor Binns, since his ghost insists on continuing teaching since his death on Monday. So, Mister Dumbledore, what do you want to do when you grow up?"

Dumbledore smiled at the question. "Well, Quidditch is fun, but I don't think I'm good enough to play professionally, do you?"

"I'm no judge of Quidditch," Pwy admitted, "but no -- you're a good flyer, but not good enough. Your cousin Percy may have a shot, but few Quidditch players play past the age of thirty, and fewer make enough to last more than a few years into their retirement."

"I don't really need to make much money, thank goodness. My family has enough."

"Enough for a good settlement for your older sister, I understand, but what about your brother?" Pwy pointed out.

Albus gave a sigh. "Aberforth. . . ."

"I hate to say it, but while your brother. . . has a sweet disposition. . . ."

"He barely has a brain in his head," Albus nearly snapped.

"He's not as unintelligent as you think, Mister Dumbledore" Pwy corrected. "He actually does have a very good mind. . . ." Dumbledore snorted a little at that. "He does, but he's a dreamer. He'll make it through Hogwarts with some nice O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. As for a career, however. . . ."

"He'll never have a job, and is unlikely to ever afford to marry, unless some sweet woman with money of her own loves him. Still, I have no idea what I would like to do, either. I have no interest in a Ministry position." He thought a moment. "I might enjoy research, or even some teaching."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"Really?" That puzzled the young man for a moment.

"If you continue at your current rate of performance, would you be interested in training at the Old Believers' Sefydliad?"

"Really! The Institute!" The very idea excited young Dumbledore.

"Sefydliad," Pwy corrected. "You would need to learn at least standard Welsh, if not our particular dialect. They offer various Master of Magic programs. You should specialize in transfiguration at the least, with one minor area in charms, and perhaps a second area as well. I can arrange it, if you want to go, and if you keep working at your current level."

"I'd like that very much, sir."

"You can't tell anyone here at Hogwarts that I'm helping you. Few non-Old Believers are accepted, especially from outside North America, but if it became known I sponsored you, I would be

deluged with requests. Still, I would be happy to sponsor you. You're far and away the best student I've seen at Hogwarts, and better than anyone I saw at the Ysgol, except perhaps myself."

"Thank you, sir," Albus said, blushing.

"It would be a three year program, so you'd be finished at the same time your brother is finished here."

"Yes, sir. So, I guess I'd better take Welsh as my next magical language."

"Yes, and old British, if you haven't learned that yet. You have your O.W.Ls. in Transfiguration, Charms, Defense, Runes, which is what you would need. And you have all those others, which increase your chances of being accepted. We can talk to your parents and start the paperwork. If you get your N.E.W.T. in those four subjects and any three others, you should be allowed to go."

"Thank you, sir!"

24 December, 1917

Dear Professor Pwy

Forgive me for writing in English -- the only time I get to use it is while writing letters. First of all, I apologise for not writing again sooner; it has been a very busy two months. I do thank you for bringing me to America in such an amazing way. I had no idea magic corridors could still be created. Thank you for allowing me the use of your cottage; I certainly enjoyed the two months I had to get used to the Settlement before the term started, and living in the cottage made my acceptance in the community easier than we had anticipated. I am very glad you warned me of the various taboos against 'new products' here at Weston, though. I miss potatoes a bit, but can live without the maize and tobacco. Living without sweets is the hardest.

The training is intense, as you no doubt know. As I told you in the other letter, I have decided to get three certificates, in Transfiguration, Alchemy, and Charms. They did insist I have two minor areas of study and have stuck with my decision to do Potions and Runes (or rather 'magical symbols and languages'; I was rather teased when I mis-called the subject 'runes!'), since Defense is not offered as such. I have been partnered with a research fellow from back home as my Alchemy sponsor: Nicholas Flamel, a name I thought consigned to the history books! He did tell me that he met you once at a conference at the Ysgol. He is back for his third fellowship in three hundred and fifty years. I will be researching the uses of dragon's blood -- there must be more than four major types! I hope to be finished in a total of six years or less.

I will try to write more often.

your pupil

Albus Dumbledore

14 October, 1922

Dear Titus:

Thank you for the preserved boiled potatoes and chocolate frogs; they were very welcome by myself and my fellow ex-patriots from the various outside communities (perhaps the potatoes earned me the invitation to visit a community of Irish wizards over the Yule holidays). I must admit with a little shame that I gave away the Every-Flavoured Beans; I somehow always manage to choose the wrong ones. I am glad that your battle to allow young Flitwick to enroll has already been proven justified to the faculty. He sounds like an amazing student.

I believe I have you to thank for my appointment as a sorcerer, rather than as a sorcerer's apprentice and my Order of Merlin (3rd Class). Yes, my paper on the twelve types of uses for

dragon's blood is of great theoretical importance, but that much? I am sure you were consulted about my being offered the title of warlock, as well. I have considered the implications, and have decided to accept the title. I will fight for what's right, for the power of Light. I will always consider you my greatest mentor. I hope we can speak in person this summer.

Yes, I will be finishing my studies in June. As I entered the States in such an unusual manner, I will be leaving through Canada. What I'll do then, I'm not certain. Any suggestions?

*your pupil
Albus*

***From the Desk of Armando Dippet
Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry
Order of Merlin (Second Class), Sorcerer,
Minor Pooh-bah International Confederation of Wizards***

31/01/1923

Dear Mister Dumbledore:

We at Hogwarts are very proud of your many accomplishments. It is in regards to those accomplishments that I am writing. Professor Morris Jasper, whom you no doubt remember replaced Professor Nott, has decided to leave at the end of this year due to an unfortunate encounter with a hippogriff which strayed from the Creatures class. Professor Johnson has also decided to take early retirement for the same reason; if you should know of any person eligible for Professor Johnson's Care of Magical Creatures position, please feel free to nominate him.

In regards to Professor Jasper's position, we are pleased to offer the position of Transfiguration Professor to you, starting 1 September, 1923.

*yours
Armando Dippet*

Albus Dumbledore rolled his eyes skyward. "Somehow, I think I got my Yule present from Titus either slightly late or extraordinarily early this year!"

Thursday, July 5, 1923

"Thank you for picking me up, Titus."

"Not a problem. And you don't have to be so tentative about using my name. You've been calling me Titus for over four years in your letters."

"True. I'm glad I could stay for another Fourth of July."

Titus smiled. "The Fourth and Christmas are the only two days the Old Believers join this millennium."

"Ah, hot dogs, potato salad, and beer -- and lots of chocolate cake!"

"That's right; no Prohibition nonsense around here. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Arch." A door appeared in the wall of the room that Albus had called home for over five years. They exited to a corridor, and then out another door into a slightly (but only slightly) more modern room.

"Here we are, from morning to afternoon."

"The Leaky Cauldron?"

"Yes; let's go down and let whichever Tom serving there know you're here. Then, into Diagon Alley."

"Why?" Albus looked confused.

"I'm ordering you three full sets of faculty robes, of course. I'm sure you're going to make some great contributions to the British community in general and Hogwarts in particular, and you should look the part."

After being measured, Titus took Albus for coffee and tea respectively at the canteen inside the Ministry, which was open until 6:00.

"Except for those few streaks of white, you've hardly changed since I saw you my first day of class."

"Yes, I age pretty well, don't I?"

Dumbledore gave his mentor a penetrating look. "Somehow, I think I'm part of a plan of yours."

"A plan, yes; mine?" Titus shrugged. "I don't think so. Still, I can't stay in Britain forever. I see some nasty trends in Europe, but I don't think I'll be the one to stop them here."

"What sort of trends?" Dumbledore hid his excitement; perhaps he would finally find out what Fate, or at least his mentor, had planned for him.

"Muggle trends haven't been moving back towards real social progress since their Great War. They're going towards chaos, from Eastern Europe, where the Soviet experiment has already dived deep into authoritarianism and fanaticism of the worst sort to Germany and Italy, where I see signs of fanatical nationalism and calls for pure blood. In our community, I see trends similar to those in Central Europe. There are a number of power-hungry wizards who may turn to the Dark Arts for power."

"And if one arises, we will fight him," Dumbledore said with satisfaction.

"No, I rather think you will."

Albus Dumbledore sat back in shock.

"I cannot protect or run the entire world, any more than you can. I already had to go to America last summer and take care of a Dark Wizard who was trying to tie together Muggle organized crime to his own criminal network. Someone else needs to take over here as a guardian, and that person is you. You may be the one who fights, or you may be the one who encourages others to fight. You have the ability to do both, the former nearly as well as I, the latter to a much higher degree than I ever could. What I need to do is work to place you in a position of authority at Hogwarts; head of House, if not Deputy Headmaster. That will put you in the circles that matter, where you can encourage what needs to be done, if nothing else."

"When are you leaving?"

Titus smiled warmly. "All this will take between twelve and twenty years, Albus. It may not be 'my project' as you called it, but it seems to be my responsibility; we'll have to wait and see how it works out."

Sunday, August 28, 1938

"Somehow, Titus, I suspect you have some alternative motives for inviting me for tea this time."

"I do, and congratulations on being named head of Gryffindor."

"Thank you. Why the invitation?"

"This will be my last year at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore merely sat in shock.

"The Muggle world is heading into chaos. China is at war, both a Civil War and with Japan, Africa and India have great unrest. The European Muggles will be at war within two years, maybe in less than a month; the Nazis are definitely under the influence of Grindelwald. I don't know if Hitler is, but most of the higher officials of his SS are even more loyal to Grindelwald via a man named Heydrich than to Hitler. Grindelwald will use the Nazis to disrupt Muggle Europe, and then try and take over. The Soviets are as evil in their own way as the Nazis, and the magical communities there are in chaos, and are turning to Grindelwald for protection."

After Dumbledore nodded his understanding, Pwy went on, "In America, he has two sets of agents, really working against each other to a degree in their domestic agendas. One is trying to stir up the already bad race relations affecting the country, the other stirring up class warfare. Both are isolationist. I will go back and deal with them, allowing the United States to deal with the Nazis if Britain can't."

"And when Grindelwald attacks Britain?"

"You have nearly as much raw power as I do, Albus, perhaps as much, and that puts you a fair step about anyone else I've heard of for the last sixty years or more. And you're smart, in many ways even more than I am. It has to be this way."

"I know you're right, Titus; I just wished. . . ."

Pwy gave a wan smile. "Even if our power could mesh together, we wouldn't have enough power to make wishes come true."

"Will you be back?"

"I doubt it. I have my own agenda once we have a little peace."

"Peace for how long?"

Titus shrugged. "We both know more about history than Binns ever did. A new Dark Wizard seems to come along every twenty to fifty years. Let's just hope it's fifty."

Albus smiled and raised his tea cup. "I'll drink to that!"

Monday, July 10, 1939

Albus Dumbledore looked up at his mentor and friend. "I'll never hear from you again, will I?"

"See? No. Hear? You might, at least up until we can defeat Grindelwald, his Fire Troopers, and his Muggle minions."

"Any last words of advice?"

"You want advice?" Titus' voice seemed doubtful.

"Well, you're my mentor, aren't you?" Albus teased.

"Personal advice? No. Use the pensieve I gave you and think. You really are better at that than anyone I've ever met. Take care of Fawkes; he seems to have left me for you this past year. Professional advice? Send Moody to the Auror Academy in Texas. Defense is more important than Quidditch, and he's not likely to make a professional seeker anyway. Send young Miss McGonagall to the Sefydliad. Dippet should be finally retiring within a decade, and she'd make a good replacement for you."

"A woman teacher at Hogwarts?"

"It's going to happen sooner rather than later. Keep an eye on that Slytherin Second year, Riddle. He's clever, almost as clever as you, but I don't trust him. To bad he doesn't take after his mother."

"Anyone else?"

"That half-giant boy coming in next year."

"Hagrid, Rubeus Hagrid."

"Keep an eye on the boy. His father and uncle are sweet men."

"Anything else?" Albus asked again, now teasing.

"When you become Headmaster, try and get rid of Binns and Peeves."

"I'll try, but you might have to come back to force Binns out. Peeves, well, he's a bother, but he's good for keeping us on our toes."

Titus stuck out his hand. The two men shook, and Titus left.

Chapter 05

Tuesday, June 27, 1995

Dumbledore questioned Titus Pwy for two hours. At the end of that time, Dumbledore still looked both a little doubtful and a little confused; neither of which were feelings he was very used to any more.

"Well, old friend, since you've run out of things to ask for the moment, let's try some other ways to persuade you." Titus stood and said, "Arch."

Dumbledore stood, a little shakily.

"We can visit my Muggle place, or my valley, or the cottage near the Sefydliad. Choose."

Dumbledore gave a little shrug. "What would each prove? I was just fooled for ten months by the polyjuice potion. How can I trust your just showing up now, after all these years, after thirty-five years of total silence?"

"The first would show you how I spent the last thirty years; the second should remind you how difficult it would be for anyone other than myself to enter my valley and fool the house elves and wyverns; the third would be to meet some instructors at the Sefydliad and members of the Council who have been in contact with me all these years. I would think that those, added to my memories, not my mannerisms, but my memories and the fact that the doors recognized me as faculty -- remember, I took an extended leave of absence, I didn't quit or retire -- might help convince you. Not to mention Fawkes!"

"I have not forgotten any of that. Very well, let us go to the Sefydliad. That might help after all."

Four other people were trying to either think through the problem Pwy posed to them that afternoon, or think how to avoid the problem. Flitwick and McGonagall kept pushing the question out their minds, believing Dumbledore would take care of things. Still, the fact that they had all be fooled by the faux Moody kept bringing the problem back. McGonagall hadn't really known Pwy well, so that problem of his return was mostly that, a problem. Flitwick had a full seven years of training under Pwy, plus special coaching in dueling and charms both while he was a student and afterwards. Pwy had even sponsored him to the Sefydliad, and he and Dumbledore had helped him procure his current position. After all these decades, Pwy remained one of Flitwick's favorite colleagues. Flitwick hoped with all his might that this was indeed the Titus Pwy he had studied under and admired -- they were in need of him.

Draco Malfoy was still angry about the encounter, but could think of nothing to do except become more angry. There wasn't much he could do, except seethe, however; the other Slytherins had become adept over the years in defending themselves from him when Malfoy was in a bad mood. While he would have liked to have written to his father, even in his current emotional state he knew he should wait.

Severus Snape, who was as clever as Draco Malfoy thought himself, did the intelligent thing -- he went to the library. Twenty minutes with the staff photos in the archives showed him that, except for the increase in gray hair, Titus Pwy had really only aged a few years at most in the 29 years he'd spent at Hogwarts. His defeat of at least three Dark Wizards and his dueling championships were noted as well. None of the reference books listed his death. Why did he leave in 1939?

Something clicked in his memory. Pwy was connected with the Old Believers, a large and powerful, somewhat mysterious group descended from the Druids and others in late European and Mediterranean antiquity, who had mostly separated from the wizarding world in the 300s & 400s,

and then left for the New World between the 1520s and 1540s. An agent of the Old Believers, simply called the 'Llofrudd,' had hunted down and destroyed the Dark Lord's agents and Death Eaters in North America. Had Grindelwald sent agents to North America, and had Pwy been one or the other Llofrudd who had hunted them down?

'Damn Binns,' Snape thought, 'he's never taught anything useful.' Finally, Snape found it -- a Llofrudd had caught or killed Grindelwald's agents as well. If this was the same man, as unlikely as it seemed. . . . 'Well, I hope I can discuss this with Dumbledore before I have to meet with the Dark Lord next Sunday.'

Snape shivered at the thought of that up-coming interview. Then he remembered something else; Tom Riddle had attended Hogwarts from 1937 through 1944, and had served Grindelwald for nearly two years. 'This is getting too interesting.'

Titus listened to Dumbledore tell the tale of Harry Potter all Tuesday night, Wednesday morning, and into early Wednesday afternoon, asking questions that drove Dumbledore into more and more details. Then, he thought.

Wednesday night, he asked Dumbledore to arrange for him to meet with Hermione Granger. He needed a little more information, and Titus thought she was the most likely to be able to provide it, and was unlikely to say anything to anyone.

"Miss Granger, this is Doctor Titus Pwy. He needs to talk with you about Harry. I assure you he has my highest confidence." Dumbledore bowed, and left them alone in a small sitting room Hermione had never been near before. She couldn't know it, but it was in fact part of Pwy's suite of rooms, as he'd left it in 1939.

It looked, she decided, a bit time-worn; more like a well-kept museum exhibit than a real room. Many fifteen year old girls, put alone into the presence of a good-looking, macho, over-whelming (apparently) 28 year old male, might be shy or intimidated. Hermione Granger was neither; after her infatuation with Professor Lockhart her second year, she was not to be put off by such things. Having appraised the room, she merely looked at Titus, waiting.

"Ms Granger, I need to ask you some questions. If you prefer not to answer some of them, I will understand. However, I must ask you to be totally honest with me. If you have information you are not going to give me, please inform me that you are giving me incomplete information. I will not hold it against you."

This was an unusual approach; one that Hermione appreciated. "All right."

"Has Mister Potter told you the details of what happened last Saturday night?"

"No."

"What has he told you?"

"Specifically, nothing. He knows we know that Pettigrew . . . you know who. . . ?" Hermione trailed off a little.

"Yes, I know about him, including the story of Scabbers."

"We know that Pettigrew took blood from Harry, and that somehow it was used to reanimate He-Who-Must, well, Voldemort." Hermione was not about to beat around the facts in this situation. She noticed the man didn't flinch at the name.

"Go on."

"Either Pettigrew or Voldemort or some other supporter killed Cedric Diggory. Harry somehow escaped, bringing Cedric's body back with him."

"Go on."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip for a few seconds in thought before answering. "Well, how did Cedric and Harry get transported back and forth? Obviously, the Tri-Wizard Cup was a port-key, planted by. . . ."

She was still testing him, Pwy realized. "Barty Crouch the Younger, impersonating Alastor Moody. Go on."

"But for both of them to be port-keyed, they must have reached it as a tie, which I can't believe, unless. . . unless they agreed to a tie."

"Very good. Go on."

"Which would be one reason Harry feels so guilty."

"Anything else?" Pwy was surprised.

"No, not really."

"How would your friend feel if I told you the complete story?"

Hermione sighed. "He wouldn't like it. So, I guess that means you shouldn't tell me."

Pwy nodded. "I won't, then; at least not at the moment. Now, you leave for home Friday for just over two months. Tell me, what does your friend need over that period?"

"Support, friendship, affection, and love." Hermione paused, then blurted out, "None of which he's going to get where he's going!"

"All four from you, then?"

Hermione blushed. "I thought about it a little earlier this year, but no. Support and friendship, yes. Unconditionally. Affection and love? Of a sort, but probably not the kinds he needs."

Pwy was a little astonished at the girl's intense feelings. Harry Potter certainly had inspired at least one very loyal friend. "Does he love someone?"

Hermione shook her mass of hair. "Love? No. He is fond of his godfather, and he feels at home with the Weasleys, though."

"I know all about his godfather. Does someone love him?" Hermione blushed again. "Who?"

"Ginny Weasley." Hermione's eyes widened; she couldn't believe she'd said that.

"Would she be good for him?"

Hermione could only nod.

"Does he at least like her as a person?"

Hermione nodded again.

"You don't think much of your friend's guardians, do you?"

Hermione sneered in such a way that would have shocked most people who knew her. "No; they are the epitome of mundane nastiness."

Titus gave a snort of laughter. "I like that."

"Why does he have to stay with them? The Weasleys would have him." Hermione was almost pleading.

Pwy stayed impassive, professorial in fact. "I'm sure it's still Fifth year material, but do you know what the strongest type of natural magical protection is?"

"Blood ties," Hermione said reluctantly.

"Very good. Well, there's your answer, at least in general. Now, I must ask you not to reveal this conversation to anyone, except the Headmaster, should he ask the contents. Mister Potter must go to the Dursleys, in order to invoke the power, for their sakes as well as his. However, I am thinking of alternatives for later this summer. I cannot promise you anything, but if we pursue any of them, you and Ron Weasley will be informed."

"Thank you. May I ask you something?"

"Certainly." It was only fair, after all.

"Are you related to the Titus Pwy who wrote the basic Defense curriculum we're using?"

Pwy was surprised, and it showed. "You may say so, Ms Granger. I look forward to talking with you in the future, if events allow."

Hermione Granger tried to shake an unimaginable idea out of her intelligent and attractive head as she left the room, but it refused to be dislodged. After all, she'd come across far odder things these last few years. She went straight to the library and unknowingly replicated the same research Professor Snape had done Tuesday afternoon, although in only three-quarters the time. She came to similar conclusions.

For her, it was a slight ray of hope rather than concern.

She also managed to convince Madam Pince to let her check out three more books for the summer. She left just before Professor Snape returned to do more research.

01/07/95

Dear Ron:

I was surprised to get see Pig last night. I mean, it was just a few hours since we saw each other off at the Station.

Look, Ron, lay off Viktor. I mean it! I thought yesterday morning settled that. I am not going to Bulgaria. With 'You-know-who' back and Harry still feeling the affects of the last trial, I would have to be madly in love with Viktor to want to go. I don't love Viktor. Harry needs us. Please send him a note once you get this back. I wish I had an owl; I love Crookshanks, but we both need to be in contact with Harry, as well as each other, now more than ever. Those awful people certainly won't do him any good (please don't refer to them as 'awful Muggles' again -- they are awful and they are Muggles, but the two terms shouldn't go together; they're just awful people).

Please seal the attached with your letter to Harry; I'll just add the parchment, so you and Ginny can add to it if you want before sealing it.

love, your friend

Hermione

'I must be nearly hysterical to write such a badly-written note,' Hermione thought to herself. 'Maybe it will get through to Ron that way,' she added, smiling.

01/07/95

Dear Harry

I hope things are not too awful for you. I did some research on protection spells, and thought you should know about my conclusions. It seems that some very old and powerful protection spells can be cast over families where a child is in direct danger, even if the child is in danger from another blood relative. However, the protection works both ways. In short, being at the Dursleys protects you from Voldemort (despite his use of your blood), but it also protects the Dursleys as well! The

reason you have to go back every year is to regenerate the power. I know you have no reason to like them, but I also know you don't want anything bad to happen to them.

If they were normal people, they'd be grateful to you, but somehow, I think they'd just hold this against you, too. Still, I thought you should know.

*love from
Hermione*

Harry -- I hope you're ok. Fred and George are a bit manic, they seem to be about to explode with some secret but they haven't told (or exploded) yet. Hermione said in her letter to me that she wasn't going to Bulgaria! Hope to see you later this summer. I'll start bugging Mum and Dad to start asking Dumbledore for permission to have you over in a week or so.

Ron

Harry, I'll start asking Mum and Dad, too. Have a good summer; please write Hermione and Ron so we'll know you're ok, ok? I hope we'll see you soon. yours Ginny.

July 4, 1995
1:45 am

Voldemort removed the curse he'd only used on his victim for a few seconds, despite his anger. He wanted this to last. "So, my professor finally returns. And over a week late. Tell me, why shouldn't I kill you now?"

"I come with information, my Lord."

"Do you? How interesting. Why were you not with me when I summoned you?"

"I could not get away without attracting attention, my Lord. That was your command to me before. . . ." Severus Snape trailed off, uncertain how to end that statement.

"And what of Karkaroff?"

"We were both standing next to Ministry officials, my Lord."

"And is he as loyal as you, my dear professor?"

Snape had to think quickly and clearly, and made a choice he hated having to make -- but he made it. "I know he was arrested and imprisoned as a Death Eater. I've been told he informed against me, but I don't know if that's true. Since there was no other evidence they had to release me."

"I see. What is this information, which you hope may spare your life?"

"Do you remember Doctor Titus Pwy, my Lord?"

"Of course. He was an extraordinarily powerful, if mis-guided, professor." Voldemort put a real sting in the last word.

"He may have returned."

Voldemort didn't see the point of that information. "So what? He must be a hundred and five or ten by now."

"A hundred and twenty three, but he doesn't look it."

"Really? I grant you, it surprises me a little that he is fifteen years older than I thought, but how old does he look now?" Voldemort was willing to play along for the moment, to tease his victim into thinking more punishment wasn't coming.

"Twenty-eight to thirty."

"What are you babbling about?" Voldemort asked sharply.

Snape was allowed to show Voldemort copies of three photographs, one showing Pwy in 1911, one in 1939, and one the previous Tuesday (Snape was grateful that the photographer who had captured Malfoy pinned to the wall had been a Slytherin Sixth year, not the pesky Gryffindor Third year). He also explained his theory that Pwy was the agent who hunted down Grindelwald's and Voldemort's agents in North America.

"How?" Voldemort whispered finally. "How can it be him?"

Snape had thought about that as well. He'd found the information just after Hermione had left the library. "In the spring of Eighteen-ninety, fifteen senior Alchemy students at the Ysgol were doing their senior project. They apparently were not well-supervised, since they were trying to make a sorcerer's stone."

"Ah. I see."

Avery stepped forward. "My Lord?"

"Yes, little bird?"

"May. . .may we know, Lord? We are not well-versed in that sort of magic."

"Explain, Professor."

"I doubt if more than three or four wizards in these Islands have any good idea of how to even start to make a Stone. I certainly don't. What I do know is that at any stage the material can maim or kill those trying to create it. Well, there was an explosion that killed fourteen of the fifteen; all except Pwy. If that happened towards the last stages, he might have absorbed part of the Stone's power."

"Sounds rather iffy," Avery snarled.

"It is. It may all be a trick by Dumbledore. But, if it is Pwy, he defeated two or three powerful Dark Wizards and won international dueling competitions over ninety years ago and may have taken out some excellent agents, including your uncle and older brother! And he may be a hundred and twenty-three, but I assure you he still has the reflexes and build of a twenty-five year old athlete! As for power, McGonagall and Flitwick both claim he's more powerful than Dumbledore. He affixed young Malfoy to a wall for mindlessly insulting him with wandless magic so powerful I couldn't abolish the hex, and you should know, Avery," he finished with a sneer he hoped would not be his last, "that I'm much more powerful than you."

"Silence! Lucius told me a slightly different version, with no names, but I admit I do not see the old man allowing casual visitors assault students, even the heir of Malfoy, for no good reason."

Voldemort halted for a moment, then continued in a softer voice. "I control the essential power of magic as we now know it, but that magic is young. We have only hints of the Old Magic. Even the magic of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China only came close to the powers of the Old Ones when they were in Europe, or the practitioners of the Old Arts in North America and Australia today. No Dark Wizard has ever succeeded in making a dent in either strong hold -- the Old Believers are our greatest dangers in the long run. If this is Pwy or not, he may have both the power of our magic and of the Old Magic. And if it is the Doctor, he has had over a century to perfect it." That though made Voldemort hesitate for a second. "Power increases slowly with age, but the infirmities of age sap other powers even as mastery increases with practice. The old man is old in body as well as power, which at best balances him. More likely, he is decreasing. Power is not consistent until the twenties; the boy has huge abilities, but no mastery, just like his father. Pwy adds a complication I had not foreseen."

No one dared even breath loudly.

Finally, Voldemort said, "Avery, Malfoy, you each have two weeks to submit your plans to me in writing. Think of every detail, every contingency. Plan well, or else. Ignore Pwy; I shall consider him when I decide which direction I want to go in."

He turned to Snape. "I should kill you anyway, for helping to deny me the only known Sorcerer's Stone. You should have realized by the end it was me and stayed out of my way! But I will spare you until Christmas. Kill Dumbledore or Potter or both! I don't care how you do it. Kill or be killed. If you can kill Pwy, do that, too, but don't concentrate on him. He is still an unknown. Understand?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Hold out your left arm."

Snape did so, then screamed as Voldemort's wand touched it. "You will receive no more summons to me. When you have succeeded, you may cast the Dark Mark against where my Mark appeared on you, and you will find me. Now, go or die!"

Snape went.

In a small suburb in Surrey, Harry Potter woke up, and quickly wrote down his vision.

Chapter 06

Concluding Paragraphs From Four Letters Written

July 4, 1995

(the opening paragraphs all covered Harry's vision)

To Albus Dumbledore (received July 4)

I'm certain you either have heard or will hear at least some of this directly from Professor Snape. I know you've told me you trust Professor Snape, and that I should, too. If he tells you about being ordered to kill both of us, then I guess you've been right. If not, please be careful.

Can you tell me anything about this Doctor Powa (Poweh?) and the Old Believers? I don't remember anything about them being covered in History.

yours

Harry Potter

To Remus Lupin (received July 6)

Can you tell me anything about the Old Believers? I'm sure we haven't covered them in History, and I don't see anything about them in that awful text Binns uses. I hope Snape tells Dumbledore about the orders to kill us; I hope that if Snape doesn't tell him, Dumbledore will act on it and not continue to trust him. I can almost believe Snape would tell Dumbledore about the order to poison him and not me, just so he can kill me, even if he really is working for Dumbledore.

If Snuffles is still with you, let him know that I miss both of you. I may be his godson, but I sometimes think of both of you as my uncles.

I hope you're both well.

your 'nephew'

Prongs Junior

To Ron and Ginny Weasley (received July 5)

Ron, I know you trust Snape even less than I do, which is one reason why I wrote out the details of the vision for Remus, you two, and Hermione as well as Dumbledore. Just in case. Take care, and send the enclosed on to Hermione. And don't forget to show this to Ginny; I hope you told her about Snuffles by now.

The second letter is about the night of the Third Task. Don't let anyone see it, except Ginny. I'm glad Hermione gave me this copy quill, so I only had to write these once. Ron, Ginny, please never mention what happened to anyone except yourselves, Dumbledore, Hermione, Snuffles, and Remus. I thought you should know, but I don't want to talk about it.

Harry

To Hermione Granger (received July 6)

You probably already know all about this Doctor or at least the Old Believers. I looked through my History text, and they aren't in there. I don't remember them from the lectures, either. They ought to call it "Progression of Goblin Rebellions Written and Discussed in the Most Boring Manner" or something other than History (I've been reading Dudley's Muggle school text, and its more interesting than ours). Can you give me a one paragraph description?

When you read the second letter, just read it. I thought you should know what happened, but I do not want to talk about it. I sent a copy to Ron and Ginny. Dumbledore and Snuffles already knew, and I'm sure Snuffles told Remus.

Harry

6 July

Dear Harry:

I understand why you have your reservations, but I must ask you again to rest assured that I do (and did in this case as well) receive full reports from this agent. This does not mean that I do not appreciate such a well-written report. I am glad for your view point, even when I have an independent version, and of course that I rarely have.

As for your questions about the Old Believers, I believe Mister Lupin and Miss Granger will give you good precis of them.

I hope this finds you well.

sincerely

A. Dumbledore

06/07

Dear Harry:

Snuffles was here until late last night. There will be a Ministry visit later this morning (Werewolf Registry), so I'm rushing to get this done.

First, try to trust Dumbledore's judgement. I know it's difficult to do so on this matter, but if I can do it, I'm sure you can as well (even if you have even more reasons than myself to dislike the person in question, try not to distrust him as well).

I have heard of a Doctor Pwy, who used to teach at Hogwarts. That may be the 'Powa' they were talking about but I do not remember any details. 'Old Believers' can have two meanings. The first means any old pre-agrarian magic. In modern terms, this means the native Australians and the few remaining native shamans. The second means a group descended from groups like the Celtic Druids, and perhaps even earlier peoples from western and central Europe (they are said to have a true tradition that takes them at least back to a group that built Stonehenge as we know it more than 3200 years ago; other claims go back to before the introduction of agriculture in Western Europe, which would be at least some 6 to 8 thousand years ago).

The Old Believers removed themselves from Western Europe's magical community by the mid-300's to early 400's, and then went to North America in the early 1500's. They started what is now the most famous school of magic outside of Europe, the Ysgol. They also run and dominate the Sefydliad, the most famous institute for advanced magic.

The Old Believers are split into a number of groups, some in contact with the general magical world, and even the Muggle world to a certain extent, others are very secret. All the groups are ruled together by what is commonly called the Council of Druids (seven wizards and witches) and the Tuatha (always two wizards and a witch selected by the Council and serving for life). The Old Believers are an independent, and major, power in the magical world, in many ways equal to the International Confederation, and in some ways superior. If Pwy is still a Llofrudd (it means killer in modern Welsh, but it's also an Old Believer title for a wizard empowered to execute Dark Wizards, sort of a combination of our Aurors, Hit Wizards, and the Muggle James Bond's 'license to kill,' if you know those stories or movies), and that would mean he's very dangerous on every

level.

As for your suspect person's opinion on how Pwy might still be alive, well, magic of that sort can be very unpredictable, so it's possible. It's also possible Pwy will live only a very long life (120-150 is about as common for us a living to a 100 is for Muggles) while seeming to age slowly.

I hope all this helps you, Harry. And thank you; I am as proud to be your uncle as I am to be your friend.

Remus

07/07/95

Dear Harry

Progression of Goblin Rebellions Written and Discussed in the Most Boring Manner? Were you inspired, or have you been saving that one up? Either way, you should use it on Ron; he'll like it. I do agree that Professor Binns and that terrible text book he uses leave a lot of important things out.

Like the Old Believers. Our magic is partially based on different types of Old Magic (Egyptian and Mesopotamian for example) from around the Mediterranean. But there were even older magics. Those traditions are seen in many different cultures, but were most highly developed in Australia and Celtic Western Europe (the Druids).

The Druids were persecuted by the Romans starting with the reign of Augustus (30 bce -- 14 ce), and then later by the growing power of the Christian Church. The Druids had already separated from the Muggles by the middle of the 1st century because the Romans were attacking them. They then started to separate from the rest of the ancient magical communities as well, most ending up in the mountains of Wales and Scotland (they apparently abandoned the area around Hogwarts in the 800s -- Hogwarts was founded on one of their old sites), with some in the Pyrenees and Ireland. Some of their magic passed on to us (they seem to have been one of the four independent inventors of apparition), but other parts are still hidden, especially powers over nature and spirits. Someone trained in both Druidic and modern magic can often do powerful wandless magic as well as anything we can do.

After the discovery of the New World (they may have even known about it sooner than the Muggles), the remaining Old Believer communities conferenced, and left to what later became Maine and Quebec a hundred years before Muggles settled in the same areas. They established a school called the Ysgol, which may be the most prestigious school of magic after Hogwarts; certainly the best in the Americas.

Most Old Believers left eastern North America and moved deep into the western mountains, well over a hundred years ahead of Muggle settlement (in some cases as early as 1590!). They also started the Sefydliad (Institute) the most prestigious center of higher magical learning in the world, in 1758, in the Rockies, somewhere near the American-Canadian border. Unlike the Ysgol, which is open to all (most Old Believer children are believed to be educated at secret schools these days), over half the Sefydliad is closed to non-Old Believers, and the other half is difficult to enter -- you don't just need talent and intelligence, but sponsors of your moral character (they don't seem to care if you're Muggle-born or not though). Dumbledore attended in the early 1920s, and I bet Dr. Pwy (Welsh; good phonetic attempt, though) sponsored him. Dr. Pwy created the basis of our modern Defense Against the Dark Arts curriculum (it was all dark creatures and dueling before that, and apparently not very rigorous), taught at Hogwarts from 1910-1939 and had already defeated at least two powerful Dark Wizards and won major dueling championships. Professors Dumbledore and Flitwick both would be his proteges (Flitwick and McGonagall also attended the Sefydliad, and in an interview I read when he won his last dueling championship in 1935, Flitwick listed Pwy as his mentor). They were the first three Hogwarts alumni to attend since the early 1700s!

Sorry that was more than one paragraph. Now that I've answered the first letter, I'll read the second.

*love
from your friend
Hermione*

PS Harry, I won't say anything about what you went through except to say thank you for coming back to us. I'm also glad you're including Ginny. I hope you meant you were sending her separate letters; Ron might be difficult otherwise.

7 July

Harry

Ron's not writing because he says he still has a headache -- I had to box the idiot's ears yesterday because he was teasing me and then Fred and George started slapping him on the back of the head on general principle and then Mum had them all de-gnome the garden. So he says he has a headache still, but really he's sulking. Really, as if laying in that bright orange room would help anyone with a headache!

He won't tell me the story about 'Snuffles' because he says it's none of my business and he wouldn't show me the letters, even though I could see you had written to both of us. Which is when I whacked him and took the letter even though Ron grabbed it back and still has it. Prat. that's when Fred and George whacked him. But thank you, Harry, for trying to include me. Ron won't tell me anything, he says if you want me to know, you can tell me.

Harry, I understand if you don't want to have to write me about whatever this was again; it must be hard for you. But I do want to know; Hermione is my best friend, Ron is my closest brother, and, well, you know I'd like to at least think of you as my friend, too. What I thought was, if you don't mind, you could write Hermione and ask her to tell me. Whatever it was you wrote, it really affected Ron, so maybe he's not just sulking. Maybe if I knew, I could help him, as well as you and Hermione.

*love from your friend
Ginny*

Harry looked up from the letters. Why did he want Ginny to know these awful things anyway?

'You know why,' a little voice inside his head said. This voice rarely spoke to him at Hogwarts, but here, where there was no one else to talk to, it often spoke. 'You're as big a coward as Ron. He won't tell Hermione how he feels, and you won't tell Ginny how you feel.'

'Ginny's just Ron's sister,' Harry argued with the voice.

Ginny, in her Yule Ball gown, popped into Harry's mind. As soon as Ron had said he should take Ginny to the Ball, Harry had realized he was right, and Harry had finally admitted that to himself over the last few days. But back in December Ginny had already accepted Neville's invitation, and Harry was still dealing with his crush on Cho. Cho's dating Cedric had diminished his crush, and by the time of the last Task, he was over it. Instead, Ginny had started filling his mind in the few moments he hadn't been worried about the Third Task and the other problems he'd been dealing with at the time.

Not the 'Ginny with a crush' but Ginny, the one girl other than Hermione who really had some idea about who Harry Potter was. But Harry knew she didn't know enough; he was a dangerous boy to know. Harry made a decision. If Ginny knew everything, and still was interested, then maybe he could find the courage to admit he was interested in her. And if she wasn't, Harry knew she would

still be his friend.

Harry sighed. He looked at the clock: 12:03 am. Harry decided to write now; Hedwig should be back from hunting soon.

08/07/95

Ginny

Sorry Ron is being, well, Ron. Hedwig will drop this off and then fly on to Hermione. I checked, the quill can't copy old letters without a spell. Since I think I'm about the only wizard around here, I get blamed for any stray spell. Remind me to tell you about Dobby, if Hermione didn't give you the whole story last year.

Harry thought a moment, then wrote

love from your friend

Harry

Harry thought few minutes more, but decided to leave the signature as it was.

08/07/95

Hermione, Ron is being himself (as you sort of predicted -- sure you don't want to rejoin Divination? at least to take the OWL?) and I need your help. I think you know how hard it was for me to write those letters, especially the second one. I thought, since Ginny is your good friend and my best friend after you and Ron, she should know, too, and know about Snuffles. Ron won't tell her about Snuffles or show her the letters I wrote, even though it was to both of them. I don't know if he's being protective of Ginny or being jealous or just being a pain in the a-- well, a pain.

Anyway, could you please, if it's not too much trouble, copy the letters or take yours and send them to Ginny via Hedwig? That way Pig won't go straight to Ron. You'd best not tell her about Snuffles in a letter, though.

Thanks!

your friend

Harry

08/07/95

Dear Ginny

Here are copies of the letters Harry sent to me, and the one I sent to Harry. I presume they're pretty much the same as the ones Harry sent to Ron and you. If Harry had just read the instructions that came with the quill first, he would know how to copy letters without getting in trouble.

I'm sorry Ron's being a prat, but I'm glad (startled? surprised? thankful?) Harry is including you. When you read the letters, do it in your room. With the door locked. Do NOT write to Harry for at least a day after you've read them. Do NOT 'go mushy' on him; as I've told you before, you need to nurture his feelings, not over-whelm him. We both know how closed Harry is about his feelings; he's equally guarded about his privacy. You're the first person he's really reached out to on his own. Ron and I were his friends first, and shared many trials together, and he still didn't tell us a quarter of what happened until the letters. Snuffles and Remus Lupin were very close friends of Harry's parents (that's all I can say in a letter about Snuffles).

Take care, and good luck

love

Hermione

08/07/95

Dear Harry

I've sent the letters to Ginny, including my information about the Old Believers. I think it was a good idea for you to include her.

I think you're right on both counts, Ron is being protective of Ginny, and more importantly, he's a little jealous that you're including someone else. He'll get over both. I guess we should be glad he's not jealous of us!

love from your friend

Hermione

08/07/95

(but sent a day later via Pig)

Dear Ron:

Ron, calm down! There is no need to panic!

I've sent copies of Harry's letters to Ginny, as Harry asked. Try not to be over-protective of your sister; and try not to be jealous -- Harry needs all the close friends he can get. Please Ron, for Harry, tell Ginny about Snuffles sometime soon. Don't make him tell; you know how hard it is for him to talk about things like this. He must have suffered a lot to compel himself to write those letters.

love

Hermione

9 July

Hermione, I don't know what to say or write. I knew Harry had things bad, but not that bad. How can he stand it? I also wonder if Harry is using this to test me; can I stand being close to him? You and Ron help him, but in the end, it's always Harry that seems to be in the final confrontation.

Would it be harder knowing what's happening? You know how I feel about him; if he does feel the same about me, would it strengthen Harry or weaken him? would it be too much for me to bear? I know you can't answer the last question, but would I be a danger or hindrance to Harry?

love, Ginny

09/07

Hermione

Thanks for your help. I hope I haven't put you in between Ron and me again. And I'm glad he's not jealous of us, too. Of course, there's no reason for him to be. I hope I'm saying this right, but sometimes I think of you as much as my sister as I do my friend. I know Ron doesn't think of you as a sister. Considering how he treats Ginny sometimes, that's a good thing!

love back at you

Harry

09/07/95

Dear Ginny:

If you really love Harry, you will only strengthen him. I say that because I can't believe your love would be selfish. Let's face it, Harry is a hero (even if he hates it). He seems destined to face dangers the rest of us won't. If you try and distract him or prevent him from doing what he feels he has to do, you will weaken him. If you can send the man you love into danger, saying 'If you're sure you have to do this, go; I love you and I'll be here when you come back,' you'll empower him. You can't ever say 'If you love me, you won't go,' or especially 'Don't go, let someone else do it.' Harry will still go, but he'll go conflicted and weak. I hate to see him go into danger; I love him like you love all your brothers. But I've learned that I can't tell him, 'Don't go.' The most we can say is, 'Are you certain that you're the one that has to go this time?' That will make him stop and think, but if his answer is 'yes,' we have to let him go with our love.

Best of luck. I hope Percy isn't mad that you sent Hermes and that he's waited for a reply.

love

Hermione

09/07/95

Dear Harry:

We're both the only children in our families, and you're even more alone than I. Let me just say, 'I love you, too, brother.'

Has the prat written, or is he still sulking?

love from

Hermione

(to Hermione) 10/07

Still sulking, sis. Sorry, v. tired; painting the whole ruddy house (well, trim, windows, front and back doors, garage doors, etc). It's a semi-detached; so the Fisks (neighbors) have paid me £20 'under the table' so that uncle Vernon won't take it from me.

love

Harry

9 July

Harry, I got Hermione's copies. There are a lot of things I could say to you after reading them, but won't. Ron also told me about Snuffles. Harry, I'm not saying this because I once had a silly crush on you (but I swear, Harry, Fred sent that stupid valentine, I wrote better poetry than that at 8) or because you're Ron's best friend or the Boy Who Lived or any of that nonsense. I'm very proud of you Harry. It must be really hard to live with these memories.

I still have nightmares from my first year, if you need someone who understands surviving Riddle's evil touch, I'll talk with you about it. Thank you for saving me from a worse nightmare or death. And above all, thank you for trusting me.

love

Ginny

(received July 10)

Harry

I asked Mum to start bugging Dumbledore about your visit last night, but she said something like 'don't worry, wheels are in motion.' Not certain what that means, but at least there's hope. I told Ginny about Snuffles.

Harry, tell me straight, do you fancy Ginny?

Ron

11/07

Ron

I think I feel for Ginny what you feel for Hermione.

God, we're cowards, aren't we?

Please, don't let this become an argument between us.

Harry

11/07

Dear Ginny

I'm sorry you're having nightmares, too. Yes, I have nightmares. I haven't slept well for more than a week at a time since the end of my first year; haven't slept more than 6 hours any night since the night after the third trial. I didn't sleep more than about 4 hours a night that last week at Hogwarts, but the relatives have me doing so much work I'm pretty tired every night. I stay up reading and writing until about 1 and wake up at 7 (course if I tried to sleep past 7:30, I'd be woken up and told to get to work).

I'm sorry I was so stupid last December. I wish I had just realized what was in front of me before Ron pointed it out to me. Then we both would have had a better time at the Yule Ball and your feet wouldn't still hurt.

I hope I can visit soon.

love,

your friend

Harry

Harry thought a moment, took a deep breath, and then erased the 'your friend.'

(received July 11)

What do you mean how I feel about Hermione!

12/07

Ron, I think I like your sister, but don't know how things might work out. You fancy Hermione, and for some reason she feels the same towards you. That's what I meant. And no, Hermione hasn't told me she likes you, but everyone in Gryffindor knows it except you two. She's not as obvious about it as you are about her, but it's still plain.

Please don't be mad with me. You should know me well enough to know I would never hurt your

sister. And if you dare say she's too young, don't let her hear you! And face it, some day soon a guy other than Neville is going to date your sister. Would you rather it be Seamus or Dean? You've heard them talk about every non-ugly girl (and some of the uglier ones -- remember what they claimed they would like to do with Bulstrode? I still shudder at the memories) at Hogwarts except Hermione and Ginny. Do you want Justin to drawl aristocratically about his family in one ear while Neville whispers about pollination in the other? How about if Malfoy remembers that Ginny is as pure-blooded as Pansy-the-pug? "Poor little Weasel, let me buy your heart." How about Lee offering to show your sister his latest bug? Or Crabbe or Goyle saying 'Uh, you girl, me boy?'

And, since I'm at least as big a coward as you, I probably won't say anything anyway.

Harry

'Harry Potter,' the little voice said, 'you can be as evil as Gred and Forge.'

Harry thought about that, and smiled.

12 July

Hermione! Ron is in his room, banging his head on the wall (and I mean that! we told Mum the ghoul is active in the mornings again). Thank God I got this letter before Fred or George saw it, since Ron dropped it in front of his door after he read it. I know, it's wrong to read other people's mail. I don't care, and for once don't care either -- read the copy! Harry likes me! I suspected that; he wrote me a wonderful note (I copied that out for you, too), but I wasn't sure. I have to admit, though, I never realized Harry could be so well, whatever the word is! I can just hear some of them saying things like that! I do wonder what Dean and Seamus say about girls. Probably best we don't know.

After Ron is done hitting his head, I'm going to hit it some more. He won't let me use Pig to write Harry. thank goodness I can send this with Hermes for his daily trip to Penelope, since you're on the way.

your future sister-in-law (maybe)

Ginny

13/07/95

Ginny Weasley! Shame on you! (and thanks). I can hear them (especially Crabbe and Goyle; Malfoy would no doubt be even more odious). And Harry does have a subtle sense of humour, although I sometimes don't get what he says until I see someone else laughing and then think about it.

Please don't tease Ron; not for his sake, but mine! Please!

love

Hermione

Chapter 07

Friday, July 14

Harry Potter was just finishing painting the window trim on the back of #6 Privet Drive. He was finished at last. All together, he thought he'd done a decent job of it, and in less time than he thought it would take, considering all the rain they'd had. The Fisks and Uncle Vernon were still at work, Dudley was out wasting money or worse, and Aunt Petunia was watching television. Despite the work, Harry felt free.

Just as Harry put the paint brush down for the last time, a deep voice called, "All finished, Mister Potter?"

Harry nearly fell from the ladder. When he managed to look around, he saw it was the man from the photographs Snape had shown Voldemort -- Dr. Pwy. He was larger than Harry had thought. In fact, he was larger than anyone Harry had ever seen, except Hagrid and Madam Maxine. He was also dressed like a Muggle, if all in denim and a dai cap. He looked rather like a Muggle American or maybe some eccentric Oxbridge college professor -- few people wore that much denim in the UK.

"If you are totally finished, Mister Potter, come on down. I need to talk with you. I am Doctor Titus Pwy -- Albus Dumbledore informed me that you would know who I am."

Harry came down the ladder, bringing his supplies with him. To his embarrassed surprise, Pwy shook his hand and then put the ladder away while Harry took care of the paint can and brush.

"From what Albus has told me, your guardians won't be thrilled to meet me."

'Meet them?' Harry thought as he cleaned the brush. "Err, no, I, I doubt it."

"When will your uncle be home?"

"About six."

"So, we have just over an hour." Pwy sat on the grass and leaned against the garden wall. Harry sat on the grass near him. "Mister Potter, you know most of the implications of what happened three weeks ago at the Riddle grave. Albus had hoped this moment wouldn't come for at least three more years, if ever, but it has. You need some fast, extensive training. I'm going to give it to you, unless you want to try and walk away. Do you?"

Harry looked up at the man, feeling very small and weak in comparison, even if they were both sitting. "To tell the truth, I'd like to walk away, but I can't. I won't."

"I understand, Mister Potter."

"You can call me Harry."

"Thank you, Harry. The next question is where that training will take place. May I assume you wouldn't mind going to the Weasleys' or to Lupin's for a few days, while I get things organized?"

"I'd like either." 'Any place is better than here,' he thought. 'Of course the Weasleys would mean Ginny and Ron.'

"Well, I can't promise either, but we'll try. The other question I have is, would you want Ron Weasley, Virginia Weasley, or Hermione Granger to train with you?"

"Just one?"

Titus gave a slight laugh. "No, any or all of them."

"All, if they want to come," Harry answered eagerly.

"Now, how are you feeling?"

"Fine," Harry said flatly.

"Sleeping well? No bad dreams?"

Harry sighed. "Some."

"The obvious ones, I take it?"

Harry's intense green eyes searched Titus' deep blue ones. "Do you know everything that happened at the Third Task?" he finally asked.

"I know what you told Albus."

Harry felt compelled to speak. "Then you know why I feel. . .like I should have just taken the damn Cup!"

"Because once you both landed, Cedric's life was of no value to Voldemort, and there was nothing you could have done to save him, and nothing he could have done to save himself, at that point. Correct?"

"Yes." Harry almost snapped the word.

"Was there any way you could have persuaded Cedric to take the Cup without a tie?"

That puzzled Harry. "Why would I want that?"

The big man shrugged. "Without you, Voldemort may have used Cedric's blood. He wouldn't be as strong; you would have had greater protection and he might have placed Cedric under the Imperius curse. Could you have persuaded him to have taken it?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Had you known the Cup was a port-key, had you even suspected that it was a trap of any sort, would you have taken the Cup by yourself?"

"If it was a choice between me and anybody, yes. Otherwise, no."

"Did you deserve to win the Cup?"

Harry was shocked. "No! Cedric deserved it; maybe Krum would have won it if Crouch hadn't hexed him. Maybe even Fleur deserved it more than me. No, I didn't deserve to win."

"Then I know you are guiltless, Harry Potter. Feel as angry or as sad as you wish, but do not feel guilty." He smiled. "I bet you even gave the winnings to a worthy cause, or at least thought about it."

"Well. . .they were worthy, I don't know about their cause."

Pwy heard, for the first time, a hint of amusement in the boy's voice. He was starting to sound natural. "Really? May I know what it is? I swear, I'll keep it a secret."

Harry usually had a good feel for who could be trusted. Only the fake 'Mad-Eye Moody' had ever really fooled him. Harry decided Pwy could probably be trusted. "I gave it to Fred and George Weasley. They're twins, two years older than Ron and me."

He looked at Harry. "They already have a cause?"

"They want to open a joke shop. I thought. . .we could use a few laughs."

Pwy stopped and stared at Harry, who started to blush. Suddenly, Pwy laughed for nearly two minutes, joined by Harry.

"Who are you?" Aunt Petunia's shrill voice demanded, breaking in on the laughter.

"I am Doctor Titus Pwy." He stood, looming over the small Muggle woman. "You are Petunia

Evans Dursley."

Her eyes went wide. "You're one of them! Get out of here before I call the. . . ." Aunt Petunia was cut off. She stood there, in mid-sentence, as if petrified.

Titus stood and picked the frozen Petunia up, setting her just inside the back door. "Come on, Harry. You might as well pack. I do need a word with your uncle."

"How did you do that?"

"I'm sure you know 'Petrificus Totalus.' Against someone like her, I don't even need to say it or use a wand. Let's go get you packed."

"I expect there'll be a letter about my mis-use of magic," Harry said simply. "I get blamed for any stray spells."

"If so, I'll take care of it."

Titus insisted on examining Harry's clothes, much to Harry's embarrassment (since only his trainers and underwear fit properly). Titus merely magically refitted all Harry's clothes. Harry, figuring either he was already in trouble or he wasn't, said nothing.

Sure enough, around 5:20, an owl came from the Ministry, reprimanding Harry. Less than five minutes later, an investigator showed up at the front door to see what all the magic was about.

Harry sighed and opened the door. "What's going on here! What do you think you're doing, young man!" the investigator demanded.

"What incompetent boob are you?" Titus growled, gently moving Harry out of the doorway. He loomed over the tall but slightly-built wizard.

"Percy!" Harry managed to exclaim before being lifted aside.

"You know this boy, Harry?"

"I am Percy Weasley, temporarily attached to the Misuse of Magic Department," Percy said with great dignity. 'Boy' indeed!

"And I am Titus Pwy, agent for the Council of Druids and the International Confederation of Wizards. I did all magic here. Take this notice back with you, and begone!"

Percy had not been in Gryffindor for nothing. "You have no authority to order me around!"

"Boy, I have the authority to kill you if I need to." Percy blinked at that, because there was no doubt that this huge wizard, no, warlock, meant what he'd just said.

"So is this another of Ron and Ginny's brothers?" he asked, turning to Harry.

"One of them. Ron has five older brothers."

Pwy turned on Percy, who managed to hold his ground. "Potter needs to be taught some things, and I'm here to do it. If your minister wants me to tell him why, inform him I'll be at your parents' sometime after Six fifteen tonight. Anyone else, I'll show the point of my wand. Now, take this notice back and expunge Mister Potter's record. NOW!"

Percy took another look at Harry, who looked unafraid of the man. Percy shrugged and walked down the street to disapparate. They had barely made it up the stairs when Harry heard the Dursley's car pull in a little early.

Vernon Dursley was more than a little surprised to see a six and a half foot, 306 pound man standing next to the cupboard under the stairs.

"In," the man growled at him, jerking his thumb towards the living room.

"Who are you, what do you. . . . You're one of them!"

The huge man pulled his wand out and pointed it at Dursley's heart. "I am. And I have a much nastier temper than the others you've dealt with. Now, go in and sit down, or I'll turn you into a newt and lock you in Harry's cupboard." Harry rolled his eyes, wondering how Pwy knew that movie.

Dursley swallowed nervously as he sat, but still asked, "Where's my wife and son?"

Pwy summonsed the still-petrified Petunia. Dursley started to get up, swearing.

"Sit down or I'll petrify you, too! She's fine; she can even hear what we're saying. Your son is still out vandalizing the neighborhood. Perhaps you'll be getting another call from the police. Or, considering that fact that your treatment of Harry his first thirteen years here constituted abuse under both British and British magical law to such an extent that you and your wife are both facing prison, perhaps you'd better worry about the police visiting you as well. Of course, there is also the fact that you and your friends have cheated the company stockholders of almost half the profits over at least the last twelve years by cooking the books -- your share over the last four years was what, some thirty-nine thousand pounds? Another long stretch in jail." Dursley was seated now, and starting to sweat.

"Now, on to why I'm here. There are some evil wizards out looking for Harry's family -- if they find you, they'll kill you, Dursley, and your son. They'd use your wife for bait, hoping he'd care enough for the woman that fed him table scraps like a dog to come rescue her." Harry started to redden.

"Well, I can't help you if the British police come after you for embezzlement, or if they arrest your son. Harry's living with you has protected both you and him from the Dark wizards. He'll come back for at least two weeks for the next two summers, if you treat him well. That will extend the magical protection, unless you don't want it. But, you would need to treat him. . . ."

"Get him out of here! Leave us alone!"

Pwy sat down heavily on the sofa and stared for a moment. "Are you certain you want to give up. . . ." Despite the stories he'd heard from Albus and Arabella Figg, he hadn't expected this reaction.

"Get him out! We want nothing to do with you!"

Pwy shrugged, a surprised look on his face. "Fine. You will have the protection for about a year to perhaps a year and a half, before it totally wears off, as long as your wife lives at this location. You were sent three boxes of effects for Harry just after he arrived. Where are they?"

"In the attic, near the chimney. Damn things; wouldn't open for us and kept popping back every time we tried to throw them out!"

"They weren't yours, where they?" Pwy snapped, his patience nearing its end. "Harry, get your trunk and those boxes and bring them here. If you have anything else, please make certain it's boxed or bagged. Send your owl to the Weasleys'. Go on."

Harry had been stunned. This was a dream come true. At Pwy's order, he ran up the stairs. Since they had just finished packing when Percy arrived, it only took Harry a few minutes to bring his own things down, although it took him about fifteen minutes to haul the three boxes down from the attic.

Pwy placed small silver disks on each item, then turned to Dursley. "You are a foolish, greedy man. Here." Pwy tossed something onto the coffee table. "Three thousand pounds. That's more than you spent on Harry in nearly fourteen years, even adding compound interest. Harry owes you nothing, understand?" He turned to Harry. "Anything you want to say, Harry?"

"No, sir. I just want to leave. Forever."

Pwy gave the Dursleys a truly evil grin. "A parting thought, my dear Muggles. There is no such thing as a truly Muggle-born witch or wizard. Both your wife's great great grandfather, a Thomas Evans, and his wife Rose, were fully Magical. Three of their five children who survived childhood had very weak powers, including your wife's great grandfather, who therefore decided to live as a Muggle. No doubt there were other Magical ancestors in your wife's paternal family; there had to be at least one on her mother's side as well, probably more. If your son marries anyone with a dormant magical past, especially on her father's side, any children will have at least a one in three chance of having powers. Think about having witches for grandchildren, and then remember that Harry will be their hero."

Pwy handed Harry a disk, and then touched his wand to it. Harry and his possessions disappeared. Pwy released Petunia and disappeared as well.

Harry reappeared just outside the small gate leading up to the Burrow. Pwy apparated next to him a few seconds later.

"Good trip, Harry?"

"Better than floo powder, sir, but I really don't like port keys anymore."

Titus winced a little inside, although his face didn't show it. "Understandable. But since you might not be going back, and since you had these extra boxes anyway, it was the best way to travel."

Pwy looked at the teen. Decades of teaching helped him sum up what the major problem likely was. "Questions, Harry?"

Harry thought a few seconds, trying to decide what to ask first. "Do you know where I might be staying in the summers from now on? Are they really in danger, now that I don't live with them? I won't be going back, right?"

Pwy looked down at Harry, who was still looking rather confused. "You probably won't be going back, ever. You, and possibly your friends, will likely be staying either with me, or with my people." He sighed. "As for the Dursleys, hopefully by next summer Voldemort won't be worried about finding your Muggle relations. It was their choice to refuse your protection; we just have to hope they won't suffer for it. If they do, remember it was their choice for forego protection."

Harry thought about that, and decided to leave that problem alone for the time being. "Sir, what are in the boxes?"

"I'm afraid, Harry, that will have to wait until I talk with a stubborn idiot even greater than your uncle."

Harry saw that Pwy was looking over his shoulder, so Harry turned to face the same direction. Minister Fudge was practically stomping down the path, much as Dudley had when they were small and Dudley was angry.

"Who do you think you are, sir!"

"Mister Fudge! Use that little mind of yours and tell me my name!"

Fudge looked, and then paled. "Impossible!"

"Unlikely, but not impossible. I'm glad to see you haven't forgotten me." Titus turned to Harry.

"Fudge was in the same year as Tom Riddle, although a Hufflepuff, and so spent two years in my classes. I believe you ran into Voldemort under his real name?"

"Yes, sir. I've met both Riddle and Voldemort."

"Now wait a minute!"

Pwy rounded back on Fudge. "Is your Aunt Livia still alive?"

"What? Uh, well, yes. Why?"

"Out of respect for her, since she was the one member of your family with brains and guts, I'll simply remind you of the facts of life. The Council of Druids overrides any local ministry on issues of security when they feel the Old Believers are in danger. Whether you like it or not, Voldemort was reanimated last month. Unless you're in the pay of Lucius Malfoy or one of Voldemort's other minions, you'd best start preparing for His slow build-up of terror."

"I won't believe it! Not about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or Lucius! I don't care who you are or claim you are!"

"Fine. I shall report your support for Voldemort to the Council and to the International Confederation. Your name will go into the 'possible supporter' category. Malfoy is already in the 'certain' category. If you go to 'probable' you lose your job. The lists will be on your desk on Monday. If you sign off on them, so they can be watched, fine. If you don't, we won't be able to stop Voldemort before he gets started. Innocent people will die, and it will be partially your fault. It will also mean that anyone on the 'certain' list will be killed outside of Britain rather than placed under house arrest; anyone on 'probable' will be arrested. And, under the authority I have, if I see anyone making a move I don't like, even if you're standing next to them, they're dead. Do you understand?"

Fudge nodded his head. He was too frightened and angry to speak. Harry was amazed; he'd never seen a wizard with this much personal authority in his actions, except perhaps Dumbledore.

"Don't think you can stand in my way. Voldemort can kill innocents out of anger if he wants, but he can't move on with his plans until he kills Dumbledore, Harry, and now myself. Therefore, I will be at Hogwarts. Cause any trouble, and those lists, with your name added, will be released to the international press. Understand?"

Fudge was half-way between anger and hysterical tears. "Give me more evidence! Not just your belief in Harry! Give me proof, and I'll sign off on the lists. Not before."

Pwy thought a moment. "Harry, will you trust me?"

"If it will help, yes, sir." Titus was impressed by the young man's courage, for it was apparent that it was courage that allowed him to say yes.

Titus took his wand out and touched Harry's temples, whispering a spell. He turned to Fudge. "He can only tell the truth for ten to twelve minutes. Shall we ask, or would you demand truth serum?"

"No, I remember that spell. Wish others could do it." Fudge sighed and took out his watch and then set his wand to record. "Harry, briefly tell me what happened after you and Diggory touched the Cup."

Harry did. Part of his mind was detached during all this, however. He could hear his statement and the questions, but it was more like he was listening to it rather than participating.

"Some quick questions, Harry," Pwy asked suddenly. "Who was your parents' secret keeper?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes."

"Is he an animagus?"

"Yes, a rat called Wormtail."

"And is that the same Wormtail that killed Cedric Diggory and then took your blood and sacrificed his hand?"

"Yes."

"That's probably time," a shaken Fudge said. "I'm glad Pettigrew's mother died a few weeks ago. I'd hate to see her suffer on top of everything else."

"I understand, Minister."

Fudge sighed. He had hoped so much that Dumbledore had been wrong; part of him still thought it possible that Harry was wrong. But with the Old Believers backing Harry's story as well as Dumbledore, it was politically impossible not to act. "I'll sign off on the lists. We'll still need more evidence to try them and to formally free Black, but I'll lower Black's wanted status."

Pwy placed a powerful hand on Fudge's shoulder, and the Minister seemed to gain strength from the contact. "If you really accept that He's back and these people are working for Him, then there's no reason to force your hand. There must be supporters in the Ministry other than Macnair. Work on finding out who you can trust and who you can't, no use tipping our hand before that. And put the Auror budget back up where it belongs."

"I suppose." He sighed again. "I'll need a new personal assistant; Macnair's nephew can't be trusted at the moment."

"How about Percy Weasley?" a now-recovered Harry asked. "He's been torn between supporting you and supporting, well. . . ."

Fudge gave Harry a wan smile. "Ah, poor 'Weatherby.' Good idea. I need to talk with Arthur anyway, and if Percy's here, I'll talk with him, too." Fudge staggered away towards the Burrow, recovering from the shocks he'd just gone through.

"Are you alright, Doctor Pwy?" Harry asked when Fudge was out of earshot. The man suddenly looked very tired.

"That went better than I expected. I would have hated to think he was a traitor as well as barely competent. But even though I look like I'm under thirty, and physically and mentally I still have the reflexes and strength of someone that age, I am a hundred and twenty three, Harry. Dealing with idiots doesn't get easier over time." He frowned. "Weatherby?"

"Crouch called Percy that by accident once. I understand it's a joke at the Ministry as well as here."

"Ah. Well, Harry, let's get your things up to the house. Then, we will all talk."

It was a rather subdued group of Weasleys that ate dinner that night. Percy was especially quiet -- he was happy about his promotion, but he and his family had been feuding since the Third Task. The fact that he had been wrong did not make it easy to apologize. Harry was just hungry. He came down from a quick shower and sat between Dr. Pwy and Ginny. Ron and Ginny were still confused about what to make of Harry's feelings for Ginny. The twins were a bit too over-awed by Pwy's presence to try any jokes at the table.

After dinner, the twins were sent to clean up while Percy got ready to leave to visit his girlfriend Penny and her family for the weekend. The Weasley parents, Ron, Ginny, Harry, and Dr. Pwy, went into the sitting room.

"You're really the Doctor Pwy that taught my father?" Mr. Weasley finally blurted out, after they had sat for a few minutes. Arthur remembered the stories his relatives had told about their teachers, especially Pwy and Dumbledore.

"Your father, an aunt, several uncles, a number of cousins, a great uncle, your grandfather, and that's just on your father's side. Yes, I am Titus Pwy. I expect I'll have to say that often over the next few months or even years."

Titus got more serious. "Albus had hoped that Voldemort would never be able to regain his physical form. He also hoped, if Voldemort did regain his body, it would be after Harry graduated and

before Albus himself got too elderly to be an effective part of the struggle. Well, he got part of his wish."

Titus turned towards Harry. "Albus didn't know I was still. . . youthful. You were his best hope to defeat Voldemort, which you did, although not in any final sense."

"Only because my Mum gave her life for me. . . ."

"Not then Harry." Pwy said gently. "Listen to me! I mean last month."

"Cedric's dead!" Tears threatened in Harry's eyes, and he curled slightly into the couch, as if to hide. Ginny, sitting next to Harry on the small sofa, took hold of Harry's left hand. They quickly, if unconsciously, hid their hands between the two cushions.

"Yes, he is dead, and that's a tragedy. I do not deny that, Harry. But that tragedy does not negate the fact that you threw off Voldemort's Imperious curse, and then dueled and beat him."

"That was the images that came out of his wand!"

"And why were they called out? Because YOU BEAT VOLDEMORT! YOUR MAGIC WAS STRONGER!" Harry scrunched down in his seat even more, and Ginny held his hand even more firmly. Harry hung on to it, drawing strength. "Now, as I was saying, we have the best chance to beat Voldemort in a one-on-one battle. Voldemort needs to kill you and Dumbledore by himself to establish his power over his followers and expand it. Right now, I'd most likely wind up fighting a firefight against him and his Death Eaters, rather than a duel, and in a firefight, anything can happen."

Pwy gave an even bigger sigh. "Anyway, Harry, you need some special training. Dumbledore didn't want to give it to you at Hogwarts before this, because that would have smacked of favoritism at a time when no one believed we were still at war. He couldn't give it to you during the previous summers, because it wouldn't help you much to know the theory when you couldn't practice it. I can take you -- and Ron and Ginny and Hermione -- to a safe place to teach you. I will do so for six weeks this summer, and I hope for at least this winter and next summer as well. I have your godfather's, and Dumbledore's, permission. I hope to win your permission," he said, looking at Arthur and Molly, "and your interest," he finished, looking at Ron and then Ginny. Ginny and Harry seemed to realize they were holding hands, and let go, blushing, although they were still sitting much closer than they needed to on the sofa as Harry slowly uncurled.

"Why Ron and Ginny?" Molly asked.

"They're likely to be near Harry, no matter what happens."

There was a moment of silence. Then, "When would they leave?" Molly asked.

"I'll be talking with the Grangers tomorrow morning. We would go shopping in Diagon Alley for some things Monday morning. We'd leave Monday evening."

Molly thought a moment. "Where are they going?"

"I'm the only person who knows the exact location, although Ms Granger will no doubt come close to figuring it out while we're there. It's safe, I assure you, just as Dumbledore already has."

"Ron, do you want to go?" Arthur asked his son.

"Yes, sir," Ron said simply.

"Fine. Show Doctor Pwy to Bill's room, and show him the lay-out of the house," Molly ordered.

Ron looked at his parents oddly, but complied.

"Come on," Pwy told him. "Let's look at your wand, broom, and other equipment." They stood and left the room.

"Harry. . . ." Arthur started, but then he seemed not to be able to find anything else to say.

"Ginny, do you want to go?" Molly asked softly.

"I do, Mum, very much," Ginny answered, her eyes lowered.

"Let's go show the Doctor your equipment, too, then," Molly told her daughter, standing up. She shepherded Ginny out of the room and shut the door.

"Harry," Arthur started again, "I've known you some four years now, haven't I?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered, very nervously.

"Now, I won't say you haven't caused us some trouble: the incidents with the car; losing your wand at the World Cup; going into the Forbidden Forest and wandering about Hogwarts after hours; things like that. Trouble seems to follow you, which certainly isn't usually your fault. Especially when Fred leaves candies about. On the other hand, you've been a better friend to Ron than any of the other friends his brothers have brought home. And, of course, above all, you saved Ginny. We . . . cared for you before then, but that brought us even closer, I think."

Harry just looked at Arthur, looking worried.

"Ginny's always liked you. I take it you return her feelings?"

"Yes, sir," he managed to say softly.

"Be careful, Harry. She cares for you a great deal. No offense, but you don't have . . . experience, even at seeing good relationships. Take things slow. Alright?"

"Yes, sir."

Arthur stood up. "Cheer up, Harry."

Harry started to follow Mr. Weasley out, and found Ginny standing at the bottom of the stairs. Arthur looked at her, then at Harry. "I'll be sitting with your mother in the kitchen, if you need anything Ginny."

"Thanks, Dad."

Harry stepped back into the sitting room, took a deep breath, and simply held his hand out to Ginny. Ginny looked around, and saw no one was watching. She walked through the threshold, and took Harry's hand. She tried to kick the door shut, and then looked up into Harry's eyes. Both were breathing very hard.

Harry looked tired; extremely tired. He was both a little more muscular and a little thinner than Ginny remembered from just two weeks before. From his letter describing the end of the Tournament, Ginny had an idea of how emotionally distressed Harry must be. From clues she'd picked up over the years, she could guess how horrible the time spent with the Dursley's must have been. Ginny wondered how Harry managed to cope with it; why he wasn't in a deep depression, if not worse. He was distressed, and had never reached out for help to anyone -- until this moment. Ginny took his other hand, and they kept looking at each other.

Harry swallowed, and leaned forward and awkwardly embraced Ginny. Ginny moved into the hug, pleased but slightly surprised. "I'm . . . home," Harry whispered. He said it as if he were surprised, pleased, and questioning all at the same time.

"Yes," Ginny replied, "you're home." She hugged back, and felt Harry's tension start to melt as she lightly rubbed his shoulders and neck. The Dursleys were where Harry had to live, but if Harry had a home, it was here or Hogwarts. "You're safe, you're cared for, you're . . . loved," she whispered. "We all care for you, Harry, and . . . I love you. You're safe, Harry; I promise, you'll always be safe with me."

Harry hugged Ginny more tightly and started to cry; softly but steadily. They were tears of relief; the stress of the previous three weeks, from the tensions even before the Third Task to Cedric's

death and the duel, to then living with the Dursleys, all finally finding an outlet. Harry had been forced to have his guard up for as long as he could remember, even against himself. Being held by Ginny, he suddenly felt all his defenses collapse, but to his surprise he still felt safe in her arms.

Ginny Weasley was no fool. She had a good idea why Harry was crying; she also knew that he not only would try not to cry in front of anyone else, he never had as far as anyone knew. She remembered that morning, when Ron had allowed her to question him about several events, he had told her how Harry had nearly cried in their mother's arms, but that he had managed to restrain himself. "Harry will never cry or anything like that," Ron had said. Ron had been angry, and finally exploded. "He can't ever let himself go. Those bastards that torture him every summer trained him never to let himself show real feelings. The only strong emotion I've ever really seen him show is anger, Ginny. That's what allows Snape and Malfoy to get to him, because he can't express anything else. Harry thinks he likes you -- don't deny you read that letter -- well, when Harry is able to show some real feeling for someone other than anger on the outside, then I'll believe he's ready for a girlfriend. If he can't show it, he'll hurt you as well as hurt himself."

Harry and Ginny had swayed a little in their embrace, so it was Ginny who saw the door open. George and Ron stepped in, and both nearly said something. Then they realized that Harry wasn't just hugging their baby sister, he was crying quietly in her arms. They backed out without saying anything, this time shutting the door tightly.

"What's that all about?" George whispered, shocked. A crying Harry was stranger to his eyes than a laughing Snape would be.

Ron sighed. "I think it's a good thing, but I'd better tell you and Fred together. Good thing Percy's spending the weekend in town."

"Sorry, Ginny," Harry said, pulling back nearly a minute later.

Ginny was glad that she had a handkerchief. "Here. Don't be sorry. Harry, am I at least your friend?"

Harry stopped making some revolting sounds in her handkerchief. "Yes, Gin." He paused and said, "Hopefully more."

"I hope so, too. But in either case, never feel like you have to hide your feelings from me. I know, living with those relatives of yours, why you grew up not being able to show anything they might think meant weakness. And I understand why you can't show it to your friends at school, not even Ron. But you can show me, Harry. I'll know it's not weakness. I couldn't . . . like someone who could never show emotions. How could I really know how they felt towards me?"

"Thanks. I guess I needed to do that, after . . . Cedric. The Dursleys, well. . . ."

"I know. I've heard. No, please keep that. I don't know if I could ever use it again even after it's washed," Ginny teased.

Harry grinned. "I'm glad you . . . like me, because I really do like you, Ginny."

"I'm glad, too. Now, throw that in the laundry upstairs, wash your face, and find Ron. I think we all deserve some hot chocolate."

Harry squeezed her hand, and did as he was told.

He peeked into Ron's room, seeing it was still encrusted with vibrant orange Chudley Cannon posters. Ron was sitting on his bed, waiting for him, looking serious. "You okay, Harry?" he asked as Harry came in and shut the door.

"Sure, why . . . you saw, didn't you?" Harry, in a panic, turned and ran into the door, since he forgot

he'd shut it. "Shit," he muttered, holding his nose, which he'd banged into the door.

Ron jumped off the bed. "Harry, calm down! Just tell me, are you okay?"

"Except for my nose, I guess." He eyed Ron warily.

"Harry, don't be an idiot. George and I . . . noticed you and Ginny. I hope you won't be mad, but I showed Fred and George your letters this afternoon. They know what you went through; they understand what you went through, and they won't tease you about tonight." Ron paused. "Of course, next time we see you hugging her, all bets are off."

"Are you . . . angry?"

"No . . . can't say I really want to see it, though." He sighed. "Better you than some other bloke, I guess. You were right about Seamus and Dean; I'd have to kill either of them if either of them got their hands on Ginny let alone if both tried with her what they said about. . . . Never mind, I don't want those images. At least I know you won't deliberately hurt her or use her. Try and spare me the details, okay?"

"So, you going to tell Hermione how you feel?"

Ron turned bright red.

Harry decided to change the subject. "Ginny suggested we come down for hot chocolate." He also remembered there were three boxes from his parents to open.

Dr. Pwy levitated the three boxes, each one a little less than half the size of a school trunk, up to Ron's room. Ginny, Ron, and Harry followed him, carrying their cocoa. The boxes were very beat-up, no doubt from the Dursleys trying to dispose of them.

"Touch your wand to the center lock and simply say your name, Harry," Pwy instructed.

Harry picked a box at random and did just that. It unlocked immediately. There was a top tray, filled with papers. "What are these?" Harry wondered. "They look like legal documents."

"Let's see, if you don't mind?" Pwy asked.

"No, go ahead."

Pwy sorted through the documents for about five minutes. "Well, this is a copy of your parents will, with a court order attached. Since your godfather was barred from taking custody, and your aunt and uncle disliked the magical world, a trust was established for you. That vault you've been taking a few score galleons from each year was your parents' cash reserve; no money has been added to it since your parents' death. As you may or may not know, Gringotts was put together just over seven hundred years ago, combining a number of older wizard banks. Goblins run it, and take a nice chunk of money in wages and bonuses, but wizards own it. There are fifty thousand shares. No single wizard may own more than twenty-five shares. No institution may own more than fifty. Granted, a few wealthy families have found ways around those limits, but not many. Your friends the Malfoys, for example, have a family trust that owns twenty-four shares. Lucius owns six more. The Potter Family trust owns eighteen shares -- the difference is there are some two dozen Malfoys who currently have a claim on their trust, and you are the last member of your extended family to have a claim. In addition, you own three personal shares. You control nine more. Six belonged to Sirius Black. Three belong to Remus Lupin -- as a werewolf, he's not allowed to control shares. Your father and Sirius were his trustees."

"Can I give them the money?" Harry broke in.

"Once you turn seventeen you can, assuming Sirius is pardoned by then. You can only use the money in the ready cash vault until you're seventeen. Of course, from what I understand from Professor Dumbledore, that's well over a hundred thousand galleons. May I suggest you transfer no

more than a thousand galleons to Lupin up front? I can show you how to do that Monday morning. I doubt if he'd take more than that until you're seventeen anyway."

"All right."

"The rest of these are copies of deeds. You, or actually the trust, own a fair amount of property. We should put these in your vault, even though the trust officers should have the originals."

"Alright." Harry lifted the tray out. There were envelopes and albums of photos.

"We'll have lots of time to look through those over the summer, Harry," Pwy told him.

The second box's tray held various financial records. Harry moved those to the bottom of the first box. The bottom of the box had letters. Harry set those aside to read later as well, transferring the photos to the second box.

The third box's tray had his parents' personal affects: their wands and wedding rings; his father's wallet; and three small jewel cases filled with his mother's jewelry. The rest of the box had more photos.

"We should put the jewelry in the vault, too, Harry." Harry just nodded.

Pwy, then Ron, clasped Harry on the shoulder and left him alone. When Ginny started to do the same, Harry stopped her. She sat as Harry opened and looked through the jewelry cases.

"I hate to say it, but I never noticed. Do you have pierced ears, Ginny?"

Ginny lifted her long tresses away from her ears, revealing the small, tarnished silver balls in her ears. Harry smiled, fished around in the boxes, and then put his hand out. Ginny hesitated, but then held out her hand. Harry dropped six pairs of ear rings in her hand. Three pair were simple gold studs, but there were also a pair of tiny emerald earrings, a pair of small pearls, and a pair of odd-looking blue metal ones.

"Are you sure, Harry?"

"I'm sure. Unless you want me to ask your mother?"

"That might be best. Let's put all this away, first."

Chapter 08

Late Saturday afternoon, Pwy and the four teens sat outside to talk and get acquainted. Pwy had asked permission to call them by their first names, and told them simply to call him "Doc" -- which would be easier for them once they got to Hogwarts than if they were used to calling him Titus.

"Let me be clear about the things we'll be doing over the next few weeks," Pwy told them. "Part of what we'll be doing will be hexes and counter-hexes, curses and defense. All four of you have done brilliantly in Defense, and all do from well to brilliant in charms, so that part will be work, but work you should enjoy. Part of what we'll be doing is physical conditioning, which probably none of you will be crazy about, but it's work you need and work you'll need to keep up. We'll be doing some flying, and there'll be chances for potions, research, and lots of other sorts of learning and information, and time for fun, too, I promise." He looked at them. "Still interested?"

Pwy noticed that all three teens looked at Harry, although Harry didn't notice. "I'm going," Harry said simply. Ginny took his hand and simply smiled.

"If Harry's going," Ron said.

"We're going," Hermione finished. "Flying?" she added, in a not-too-pleased voice.

"Do heights bother you?"

"No, but I wasn't very good at it," Hermione admitted.

"You weren't bad, Hermione," Harry told her. "You'll never play competitive Quidditch, but you should have kept up your flying."

"Okay," Pwy broke in, "here's the rough plan for Monday. We'll floo into the Leaky Cauldron before Nine thirty; earlier if we can get around by then. We have some shopping to do in Muggle London, so wear Muggle clothing. Back to eat a little after Eleven. Unless anyone wants to visit Ollivander's with me, I'll leave you off getting fitted at Malkins."

"I wouldn't mind learning more about wands," Harry said.

"I'd like to as well," Ginny added.

"We really won't be doing much of that at the shop, but if you're really interested, we'll do some wand-making work starting next week." Both Harry and Ginny eagerly agreed.

"You three each need good brooms, so that will be somewhere on the list. We also have to visit Gringotts. Albus gave me your school lists, so we'll finish with that. We might change the order of the agenda, but that's what we'll be doing, alright?"

"Sounds good," Ron said.

"All right, off you go!"

Harry, Ginny, and Ron ran off to join Fred and George in playing flying tag. Hermione stayed behind.

"Question, Hermione? Or should I say 'questions'?"

"Harry wrote about his vision where Professor Snape informed Voldemort. Do you know about that report?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, was his hypotheses about your longevity correct, was there some other reason, or is this an elaborate ruse to fool Voldemort away from Harry?"

"This isn't a ruse. I really am the same Titus Pwy that was born a hundred and twenty three years

ago. I spent a few years after the fall of Grindelwald helping to clean up the mess, then spent about a decade doing research. Some of it was archival, some of it was field work with Australian shamans and Hindu and Buddhist mystics. Then I arranged for a Muggle identity and decided to lead a Muggle working lifetime. Even though I age slowly, I still do age, so this was my one chance to live a normal lifetime. I went back to college and did a BA in Classics in two years -- quite easy since I'd gone all the way through a PhD just after the turn of the century -- and then did an MA and PhD in Egyptology, with a minor in Mesopotamian studies. I spent the last thirty years teaching at a Muggle university, appearing to age, if age very well, using glamours. I had planned to teach another seven to ten years and then have that Muggle persona die."

"Why live as a Muggle?"

"Well, to outward appearance I lived as a Muggle, even if I still practiced magic of all kinds. I met and married a witch just over twenty-five years ago. Fortunately, the children are old enough to understand. The man I was for over thirty years is now legally dead."

Hermione gasped.

"Hermione, barring sudden death, I may live another thousand years, although more likely around seven or eight hundred. I may love a lot more women. And, with my old persona dead, if we do. . . have difficulties, there is no way to trace me to who I was. If we win, then at least I'll have a place in their lives."

"Will we win?"

"Can Voldemort really take over the world? No, of course not. There are just over twenty thousand of us in Britain right now; Voldemort may have the allegiance of sixty individuals, with another few hundred possible sympathizers, for all of Western Europe. But he can really do some major damage. A true Dark Wizard, as opposed to an evil one, by definition is always powerful; probably Albus, myself, and Harry are the only three in Western Europe at this moment who are significantly more powerful than Voldemort, and none of his followers, not even Lucius Malfoy, is strong enough to be called a true Dark Wizard. And there is a small number of others around the world strong enough to challenge Voldemort if we fail. If Voldemort took over the UK, or even by some miracle Western Europe, that would simply mobilize other parts of the world. But while this is a small-scale terror campaign, the rest of the world can't really help. It's a local problem. Granted, Fudge could ask for and get help from the International, and from other governments, which would make things easier, but in the long run we'll still win no matter what."

"But it won't be easy."

"It won't be easy," Titus agreed. "Why don't you go watch Ron fly?"

"Because they play tag with apples, and have no qualms about hitting bystanders. Especially Fred."

"Good reason."

"You still didn't say exactly why you lived as a Muggle professor."

"Hadn't I? I wanted to live at least one normal lifetime. If I live openly in our world, on a day-by-day basis, I'd become some kind of patriarch. I don't want that. I don't want real power, power over people's every day lives. I don't want people to bow and scrape and kiss my butt. But I already look too old to go through the college life again, and I do love to teach. I grant you, it'll be hard to teach students your age again, but working with you four this summer should help me get back into the teen-mold again."

"No using the thumbscrews and manacles," Hermione teased. "Even though Filch still keeps them polished and on display."

"Who's Filch?"

"He's the Caretaker."

Titus smiled a little. "Those manacles haven't been used on students since the fifteen hundreds, and the thumbscrews never were. I think Caretakers have been claiming readiness to go back to them ever since. I know Goyle and Jackson, those were the two who held the job when I was at Hogwarts, claimed the same."

"Goyle?" Hermione asked, with obvious distaste. "One of the Death Eaters is a Goyle. His hulking idiot son is one of Malfoy's stooges."

"Sounds about right. Max would have been your generation's great great great uncle, although he was nicer than the other members of his family that I've met." Titus gave Hermione a penetrating look. "I'm surprised you thought that degree of corporal punishment was still enforced at Hogwarts recently. We still used caning and transfiguration as punishments when I arrived, although we abolished the first after World War One and Albus abolished the second about ten years ago. You should read a book I helped start; it's still in print, although with other editors keeping it up-dated."

"Really? What book is that?"

"Hogwarts: A History."

"I've read it a few times. I . . . must have thought the corporal punishment they abolished included the manacles." Hermione was blushing. 'Thank God Ron didn't hear this,' she thought. 'I'd never hear then end of it!'

Monday morning dawned cloudy and cool. Arthur had invited them to go to Diagon Alley via the Ministry floo when he went in at 8:50. They were discharged in a long, well-guarded basement with a row of tall narrow fireplaces. This is where Harry should have ended up the first time he flooed. The row of fireplaces was one of the few perks allowed Ministry officials.

They made a quick stop at Gringotts, to deposit the box of deeds and jewelry. Harry made out a transfer form to Lupin and picked up a bag of sickles and one of galleons. Titus made a withdrawal as well, and then led them to Ollivanders; since they were early all the teens wanted to accompany him.

"My goodness," Ollivander said, "I'm not used to a crowd of repeat customers this early in the day. May I help you, sir?"

He watched Titus set a soft bundle on the counter. "You do know, sir," Ollivander said, "we only sell wands, we do not buy."

"Not even Pwy Wyvern Wands?" Titus untied the packet and revealed the two dozen wands.

Ollivander looked both the wands and at Pwy, a little shocked and more than a little interested. "I haven't seen. . . ."

"You haven't seen me since I sold you and your father a set on August fifteenth, Nineteen thirty eight. An even dozen, wyvern feather cores in three oak wands, six elder, and a rosewood, a mistletoe, and a holly."

"I see. Welcome back, Doctor Pwy. Two galleons, three sickles each?"

"Two galleons each, plus give the wands of these three a good inspection. Ginny, your great-aunt's old almond and unicorn hair wand doesn't really suit you as much as I'd like a wand to. We need to get you another."

"Two galleons and inspections? And a good price on Miss Weasley's? Agreed." He gathered the three wands and looked at them and tested them for about five minutes each. "Mister Potter's wand is in excellent working order, although he should clean it a bit more often. Mister Weasley's oak is in similar shape, although much newer. Really, boys! Miss Granger's hazel is in perfect condition. Now, I wonder what we should try for Miss Weasley. . . ."

"I was thinking about starting with some ivy with unicorn, or perhaps dragon heartstring," Titus suggested.

"That was a rhetorical question," Ollivander said with a smile. "You're about the only person I'd take advice from, Doctor." He turned to the back. "Sean!"

A young man in his twenties came out. "Yes, Grandfather?"

"This is the man that made your wand. Why don't you catalogue these while I fit young Miss Weasley here?" The young man's eyes widened, but he made no comment.

Ginny reacted to the third wand, an ivy and dragon heart-string combination. Ollivander sold it to Pwy for 5 galleon 3 sickles.

The quintet took their leave and went into Madam Malkin's. She measured them and also translated their measurements into standard British Muggle sizes. Pwy ordered them and himself three sets of Hogwarts robes, a set of dress robes, and three sets of casual robes each. They'd pick up the casual robes that afternoon.

It was a little before 10:30 am when they made it to a Muggle department store. Titus had them buy two pair of trainers and a pair of sturdy hiking boots, more socks and underwear than they thought they'd ever need (all four teens blushed when he made the girls buy athletic jogging bras), three pairs of jeans, bathing suits ("Unless you want to swim in the pond and river naked," he teased, making them blush again), three pairs of shorts, six American-style t-shirts, five more casual shirts, light jackets (they all opted for denim, copying Pwy), and sports caps.

They lugged all that back to a small parlor in the Leaky Cauldron. Titus produced a small box which he enlarged. This proved to be much larger inside than out, and all their purchases of the day would fit into it easily. After lunch, they went back to Madam Malkin's, and packed their robes into the box as well.

The brooms took less time than the robes, but everyone except Hermione showed more interest. Titus first bought them all special shrinking brooms. These could be reduced in size on command to fit into a small case some three inches long. They weren't the greatest brooms, but they would be handy to have.

Hermione was finally bought a Clean-sweep All Weathers; it wasn't fast but it was steady in all conditions. Ron selected a Nimbus Pro-1830, 'Designed for the Quidditch Keeper,' since he hoped to try-out for the Gryffindor keeper slot. Ginny selected the Nimbus 2001 Pro-Seeker, as she hoped to make the reserve team the remaining House players had agreed they'd create the year before. They'd hoped to select the reserves and choose the keeper the last week of school, but Cedric's death had canceled those plans.

They made quick stops for potion ingredients, writing supplies, and pet treats before going into Flourish & Blotts for books. In addition to their school purchases, Titus bought each copies of the new edition of 'Defending Yourself: A Guide to Fighting those Who Fight Dirty without Soiling Yourself.' They laughed when Hermione pointed out that while the current editor was an American named Lee Fu, the original author was Titus himself, and the first editor was Flitwick. Titus also bought the three Fifth years 'Surviving the O.W.L.s while still getting more than Five Hours Sleep a Night and Leaving Your Week-Ends (Somewhat) Free.' Again, this was a new edition of an older work -- the original author was McGonagall.

"Well," Titus asked as he packed away their books, "any place else to go before ice cream?"

"How about Knockturn Alley?" Ron asked.

"Ron!" Hermione and Ginny exclaimed.

Titus looked at them "There's only one store I know of I'd let you into, and that's Hare's. That's mostly a bookstore, with some curios. You don't touch ANYTHING but the books without my

permission, and you don't buy anything on your own without my permission. In fact, if there's anything appropriate, I'll buy it."

Even Hermione admitted she was interested. Pwy had them pull out their new everyday robes. Their Muggle dress was certain wrong for Knockturn Alley.

"Everett's Ever-Losing Gob-Stones'? Why would you want those? Or more accurately, to whom are you going to give them?" Pwy asked Ron with amusement in his voice. The gob stones would ensure that whomever touched them would roll badly. And, no matter whomever the stones were given to, any person that touched them earlier would lose to someone who'd touched them later on and the stones would also bring bad luck at the game to the first player that touched them.

"Fred is the . . . House gob stones champion; he claims he can't be beat," Ron answered.

"Fine, go ahead," Pwy told him, rolling his eyes a little. Edmund Hare, the store owner, had been shocked to see his first Defense instructor enter his store, looking quite young. He had been almost as shocked to realize that the teens under his supervision included Harry Potter and two Weasleys. He was glad to be rid of those stones; not many customers would pay 3 galleons on a hexed children's game.

"What does a ward-detector do exactly?" Ginny asked, looking up from a display case.

"It will do just that. That's an older model, they came in in the Sixties; that's a good model from the early Seventies. Dark Wizards use them to find weak spots and in preference to detecting spells, since those can sometimes trigger very sensitive wards. Aurors use them for the same reason. We'll use them in Defense class to test the ward spells during the practical N.E.W.T.s." He examined and tested it. "That's in nice condition; the Muggle displays make it easy to use. These aren't supposed to be in general circulation."

"May I?"

"Of course." Hare smiled, another 3 galleons 12 sickles.

"What are you looking at, Harry?" Pwy called towards the back of the store where the rows of books concealed Hermione and Harry.

"I can't decide between these books," Harry admitted.

Pwy walked towards the voice. "Let's see . . . 'Controlling Ghosts and Poltergeists,' that's a good one; feel free to use it on Peeves if you get that! Just don't use it on Binns or the other resident ghosts; they're registered and protected. Poltergeists can't be. 'Fighting Darkness without Losing your Soul'. . . no, that's as likely as to hurt you as your opponent. It's badly researched and written. 'Hex Scars'. . . this is an old book in excellent condition. It won't help with yours, but would be good background if you still want it. 'Wands that go Bad: Warning Signs,' that's good. How about if we leave the 'Fighting Darkness' and get the others -- the other two can be part of your birthday present."

"Thanks, Doc!"

"Doctor Pwy!" Hermione called from even deeper in the back of the book shelves.

"Coming!"

A few minutes later, as they watched Hare wrap their presents, the trio in front heard a very disliked drawl. "Well, Father, look who we have here; Scarhead and two Weasels."

"Yes, I see. My, my; what are three proper young Gryffindors doing here," Lucius Malfoy said sarcastically.

Harry turned and sneered at them. "Nice to see you, too, Mister Malfoy. It's been almost a month

since I saw you kissing your Master's filthy robe."

Malfoy drew his wand, but then both Malfoys froze. Dr. Pwy walked into the front of the shop, followed by Hermione and a pile of books. Harry had seen him approaching all along. "Mister Hare, could you wrap the young lady's purchases, please?" Hare merely nodded and complied.

Pwy looked at the elder Malfoy. "Attempting to hex a witness protected by the International, Mister Malfoy? You are already classed as a certain supporter of the returned Dark Wizard Voldemort." Hare dropped Hermione's books at that. "Still, Mister Fudge is still protecting you to the extent that we can't execute you while you stay in Britain -- for the moment. Step outside the borders, though, and we'll try you and convict you and execute you. For now, however, you have been caught in a major infraction." He slipped Malfoy's wand from his hand, and snapped it. "You are banned from using a wand for three years. If you're caught with one, that's a year in the Old Believers' Sorrowful Halls. If you'd like wand use restored, that's three months in our prison instead. You may arrange that through your friend, Minister Fudge. I hope you can borrow some floo powder to get home."

Pwy turned to Draco. "I see that while you might have been reaching for your wand, you didn't actually touch it. So, no punishment; being slow on the draw has worked to your advantage for once. We'll have to work on that in the fall, if you return to Hogwarts."

Pwy looked into the elder Malfoy's eyes. "Take care, Mister Malfoy. You chose the losing side. If your great aunt Jane, uncle Gaius, or uncle Draco are still alive, ask them about me." He looked at Hare. "Wait at least ten minutes before you release them." He flashed three fingers to Hare, and Hare acknowledged with a nod that he could release them in three minutes instead. That would no doubt lessen any chance of Hare's getting in the way of their wrath.

Titus quickly led the teen quartet back to the Ministry, where he filed a report on Malfoy. Malfoy himself came storming in some five minutes later. However, there was nothing the Ministry could do with someone with Titus Pwy's status. The three year ban would no doubt be successfully appealed, but that alone could take months.

Titus watched the younger quartet floo out before he went and got them some ice cream to go. Only then did he follow them.

Once back at the Burrow, the students set to packing their new purchases in their new trunks, which had been delivered that morning. These were magical trunks, each with six compartments (each turn of the key set a new interior). At 5:00, they all said goodbye to Mrs. Weasley. Titus opened the entrance to a magical corridor, and he led them through to his permanent home.

"I didn't know these could still be created," Hermione said in surprise.

"Links that can be activated are doable for many powerful wizards," the Doctor answered leading them down the plain corridor. It had a door on each end and five doors on each side. They had come out of the door on one end and were heading to the one at the other end. "You can make them permanent with runes. Corridors like this, however, can really only be done by about six wizards alive today, and two of them are older than I am, without my. . .condition." He led them through the door.

They walked into a dark room. Titus flipped a light switch, and fluorescent lights flickered on overhead. Ginny and Ron were startled.

"Just electric light," Hermione muttered.

"It's not incredibly hard to get into this room, but it is hard to get out, unless you're me." Titus simply opened the door.

"Master is home!" A small House elf grabbed Titus around his knees. Hermione was pleased to see that, despite the 'Master!' the elf had clothes.

Titus introduced Arwinni and the teens, before describing the house. "Now, the main house has three floors plus this basement. The second storey had my suite and two large bedrooms and three baths. The top storey has six bedrooms and three baths. You can pair off for the second floor or take four bedrooms up on top. I do have one guest, who will be back in a few hours. He's up on the top floor."

"Second floor?" Hermione asked.

"Are you asking Ginny or Ron?" Harry teased.

"Harry!"

"That's also up to you, too," Titus teased in turn.

"Doctor Pwy!" they all cried.

"Come on, Ginny!" Harry said, holding out his hand.

"Harry!" Ron objected in turn.

"What?" Ginny asked innocently.

"Take their things up to the second floor, Arwinni," Titus said. "I need to show them the house."

The size of the basement showed that this was a very large house. There was a large library in the basement, which took up less than half the area. There was also a large wine cellar, weight room (with Jacuzzi), a utility/wash room, a pantry, a billiard room, and an entrance to a corridor that led out of the basement to the rest of the manor.

The main floor had a huge living room/library taking up half the floor. The other half had a large kitchen, a dining area, and part of an enclosed porch that then extended off on the north side of the house. To the south of the stairs and kitchen exit was a set of green houses (including a drying shed), where herbs and vegetables were growing. Connected to the green houses was a potions lab, followed by a wood shop.

"This is where I turn wands. I store them in the lofts, along with wyvern feathers for the cores. I'll show you how to match them later this week or next week."

Next was a large wood shed, with several cords of wood for the fireplaces and other woods aging for wands. Finally, there was a garage large enough for four cars, although there wasn't one. There was a large collection of brooms, many of them vintage. In all, it was about 120 meters from the north porch to the end of the garage. There was a family of house elves living off the corridor under the area from the greenhouses to the garage.

Titus opened one of the garage doors. He took a rope with a stick tied to one end. He led them out, and they saw the manor complex was set on a low hill in the middle of a mountain valley, some 24 miles long and 9 miles wide. The mountains were high; they made the mountains around Hogwarts look like hills. Hermione knew they were somewhere in the Rockies complex.

Titus started twirling the stick around his head, making a whizzing sound that rose and fell in tone. Three of the teens looked confused.

"It's called a 'bull-roarer,'" Hermione told them, rolling her eyes. "Aboriginal peoples use it to signal each others. . . Doctor Pwy, are you calling someone?"

"Someone? No."

"Something?" Ginny jumped in.

"Take a look."

The four teenagers stepped further outside and looked around at the scenery in some small amazement. "Look!" Harry called out.

Something was flying towards them. "A dragon?" Ron hazarded.

"Almost," Titus told them.

"A griffin? No, wait, you make wands with wyvern feathers."

"Very good, Hermione."

Less than a minute later, a red and blue wyvern landed near them. "This is Fafner, the leader of the flock that guards the valley." Titus held his right fist out, and the wyvern, looking like a small, stocky feathered dragon, nearly six feet from snout to the start of its three foot spotted tail, and nearly three feet high at the shoulder, came to have his head petted. "Friends, Fafner. Tell the flock." Each student held their fist out in turn for the wyvern to sniff.

"I'm not certain how they communicate to the rest of the flock, but it works," Titus admitted. "Wyverns are much smarter than dragons. They were native to western Europe, but were pretty well hunted out by wizards and dragons by the early Fifteen-hundreds. We saved the remaining ones. They aren't quite wild and they're not quite tame, either. This flock lives in a set of caves on the tallest mountain to the west. Males leave when they're adolescents." He knelt and started stroking the wyvern's back. "The females decide when the leader leaves, and which new head male comes in. There are a few old males and adolescents in north end of the valley to our north-west. They don't violate the flock's territory, which is this valley and the valleys to our east, south, and of course west. It's safe for me to go there, but any other human would likely be attacked."

Four more wyverns landed. "The elegant green and red one is a female I call Velma; although she's not the oldest, she's really the alpha female. The black and blue one is Betty. The two small ones are yearlings; well, just over a year, actually, they usually hatch out in late May or early June. Wait until Fafner signals them."

Fafner made a noise, not quite a roar and not quite a bark. The four females came forward. Each of the teens petted them.

Arwenni appeared, with a wooden crate. "Oh, I thought it unusual for these four to pop up so quickly. How many do we have?"

"Six, Master."

Titus had the students stand back in the garage while he took the crate outside, about fifteen meters. He opened the crate, and six chickens flew out. The wyverns took off, the females each snatching one in their claws, Fafner taking one in his teeth and the remaining one in his claws.

"We feed them a few live chickens a couple of times a week. Helps keep the local fauna intact." He strolled out to the end of the hill, his students following. It was quite a large valley; some six miles across and at least twelve long. About half of it was forested; there were also fields of corn, wheat, potatoes, and medicinal plants. Two small creeks flowed down the sides, before joining to form a small river at the exit of the valley.

"There's a smaller valley off to the south east. A colony of free elves live and farm there, and work the fields here as well. Between the wyverns and the elves, this is a very secure place."

"How long have you owned it?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, I acquired rights to this valley a long time ago, and my family claimed it for the wyverns hundreds of years ago. A direct ancestor of mine mapped out much of western North America in the Fifteen Fifties, long before the European Muggles came along. There weren't even any of the American Indians in this part of the west. Ah, I see my other guest."

It was Harry who recognized the small black dot emerging from the forest first. "Sirius!"

Chapter 09

It was a happy lunch/dinner that the six enjoyed a little after noon, local time.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked his godfather.

"That idiot Fudge. If I'm found and killed before I can be acquitted, I'm less of a political embarrassment."

The four young people stared in amazement. Sirius just shrugged, so Pwy picked up the story. "Fudge got to be minister because of a series of errors made by the six wizards ahead of him; Crouch being the most famous. Everyone knows Fudge is an idiot. If Harry's knowledge of Voldemort and Sirius are proven true, Fudge is afraid he might be retired. He's not evil, as such, despite his association with Malfoy, but he's determined to hold on his position as long as he can. If Voldemort is acknowledged to be back, Fudge is probably out sooner rather than later." Titus sighed. "I talked with my connections with the Council and the International. They're putting strong pressure on the Ministry to get Sirius acquitted -- that has to be done on the national level. Don't think Fudge is trying to have Sirius killed by anyone other than Voldemort's people. Fudge just isn't pushing as hard as he should be."

"This is confusing," Ron said.

"I agree," Titus told them. "Fudge is confused and is lashing out in all directions, some good and some bad. So, I thought it best to have Sirius here, out of the way. I brought him here last Thursday evening. He'll help with your training."

"Is Remus here, too?" Harry asked eagerly.

"No, but he's very safe," Sirius answered. "He's helping Dumbledore at Hogwarts."

The four went up to their rooms (boys and girls, to Ron's mixed relief and disappointment) after lunch. They were amazed by the size, each bedroom on the middle floor was some fifteen by twenty five feet, and each had two large beds and two desks. They unpacked some and then laid down after taking a little potion. After a 30 minute nap, they woke up adjusted to local time.

At 1:50, the four were downstairs in shorts, trainers, and t-shirts. Titus showed them how to wear a wand holster and then wrapped light running weights around their wrists and ankles. "Let's see how good of shape we're all in," he told them, and led them out on the porch. "We're jogging as long as possible, not running fast. When you can't run any more, walk."

Hermione gave up running in less than 10 minutes. Ginny was next at 12. Ron gave out at 15, while Harry did at 18, with Sirius giving up a few seconds after Harry. "Alright, you three, back to jogging! Harry, Sirius, jog when you can."

At 2:30, Titus called a halt. "By the time you leave, you'll be alternating jogging and running for two forty-five minute sessions, along with an hour of hard flying. We'll also be doing some real hex work-outs. Let's see what you three know, and then we'll work to help Ginny catch up."

That indeed was the daily schedule until Harry's birthday. Every morning, they ran from 6:45 - 7:30. From 9:00 - 9:45 they practiced hexes and from 10:00 - 11:00 they flew. It wasn't Quidditch, it was flying obstacle courses or flying and dueling at the same time. From 1:15 - 2:00 was hex practice again, followed by jogging 2:00 - 2:45 and then weight training 2:45 - 3:30. From 4:00 - 5:00, they worked on their summer essays. It was hard training, but it wasn't so intense as to do anything but buoy their enthusiasm. Harry and Ron even re-did their divination homework properly.

Ron and Harry usually flew another half hour after the morning flying practice. Ginny sometimes joined, and sometimes watched them, sketching away on notepads. Hermione would go through part of Titus' 30,000 volume library. Most evenings saw Harry and Ginny either in Titus' wand shop or listening with Ron and Hermione to Sirius' tales of the Marauders.

One evening, however, Titus pulled out his albums of Hogwarts photos. They all enjoyed watching Dumbledore grow up, and seeing their ancestors, although that part did leave Hermione feeling a tad left out.

Harry and Ginny found some time to be just together, as did Ron and Hermione, although they weren't yet quite as comfortable with each other as a couple as Harry and Ginny. They were both still afraid they might start arguing again.

Both couples enjoyed watching the stars come out each night. They would go out together after their showers, but Harry and Ginny would sit watching the sunset to the west, while Ron and Hermione sat on the east-side of the house, watching the first stars come out.

A few days before Harry's birthday found Ron and Sirius playing some cut-throat chess early that evening, while Ginny and Hermione had announced that "We have things to talk about" and were locked away in their room until sunset.

"Harry, I think it's time you and I had a talk," Pwy said as they turned some wands in the wood shop.

"You're going to tell me why Voldemort is after me?"

"If you want to know, I can tell you part of it, anyway." They brushed up the saw dust and walked out through the garage, where they sat in two of the lawn chairs that Pwy had set around a picnic table and barbeque pit.

"Care to make a guess at the primary reason?"

"Well, I'm powerful. It seems like I'm discovering new abilities every year." Harry frowned a little. "Of course, could anyone be certain of that when I was an infant?"

"Certain? No. But your father was immensely powerful, but his power was still a little erratic. Your mother was also powerful, but not on the same level as your father. Some of us have a nice even progression of power; many powerful wizards have a difficult time keeping a steady amount of controllable power until they're in their mid-twenties. Both your parents were like that. So, all other considerations aside, you were a potential threat, especially once Voldemort killed your father. Your father was a very brilliant auror in the few years he was active in the fight. Even if Voldemort had left you and your mother alive, you would have wanted revenge."

"So those are reasons, but not the main reason?"

"Correct. Think about what you know of Tom Riddle; what, if we'd known it at the time, might have enabled the staff at Hogwarts to clear up some major problems while he was at school?"

"That he's the Heir of Slytherin."

"He's AN heir of Slytherin. In magical families, heirs are counted in several different ways. The first is by magical blood and gender. The magical son of a powerful wizard in a primary heir, a daughter is a secondary heir. If it's a powerful witch, then the opposite is true. Both are magical heirs. If a squib is born to a witch and wizard, but then has magical descendants, that's a general heir. It turns out that, as far as we can tell, Riddle is the last magical heir. There are, no doubt, many general heirs in the world."

"Am I an heir of Gryffindor?"

"You're the last primary heir of Gryffindor. The heir of the seventh son of his seventh son."

"That explains a lot." He paused. "Why couldn't Dumbledore just tell me that at the end of my first year?"

"Because that responsibility is a little over-whelming to a twelve year old. He'd always planned on telling you last Christmas, since he knew you'd probably stay there."

"True." Harry had to admit that was almost a certainty.

"However, he felt that, with the pressure of the Twi-Wizard, you didn't need one more thing to think about."

"True again," Harry said in a complaining manner.

"If the Tournament hadn't ended in such a disaster, he would have told you then."

"And all this means what?"

"There are lots of reasons why it works out this way, but in a nutshell, it means that your magic will trump Voldemort's, given any kind of chance. If your father had met Him in a real fight, instead of being surprised by Him when he thought he was safe, Voldemort would have been destroyed that night. Voldemort can't win against you in an open fight if you keep your head -- you proved that last month. He has sent the magical world out of balance, and you have the power to counter him. Not to counter everyone, but specifically him -- you're very powerful, but could more easily lose to another very powerful wizard who wasn't a descendent of Slytherin." Pwy put his arm on the boy's shoulder. "That doesn't mean you're just a tool or a pawn, Harry, although it's understandable that you might feel that way at times."

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

"No, but tell Hermione when Ron's there." He grinned. "And, if possible, when I'm there."

That puzzled Harry. "Why?"

"Because the name of the seventh son of the seventh son is in her favorite book."

Harry didn't have to ask the name of that book. Ron had been teasing Hermione about bringing her copy of it just the night before. "What was his name?"

"Last names hadn't been invented yet in England, but his descendants took the name of his profession, which they followed for several generations."

"Which was?"

"Why, he was known as Harold the Potterer."

Harry stared at Pwy, and then collapsed laughing.

Harry's birthday dawned stormily -- they had had fairly clear weather until then. "I wonder what he'll have us do today," Harry muttered.

"Put us on that treadmill he has in the cellar," Ron speculated in a very unhappy tone.

"Probably," Harry agreed unhappily.

"You think Hermione is speaking to us yet?" She hadn't since Harry had dropped the bombshell.

"I hope so. Unless you mention that book again." One teasing comment from Ron the previous morning had certainly caused a set-back.

"I won't!" Harry gave Ron a dirty look. "I'll try not to," Ron amended. That Harry could believe.

Fifteen minutes later, all four walked down the stairs to the kitchen. They expected Arwinni and Titus to be there -- they were there waiting every morning. Titus went to bed early and got up early enough to spend two hours back at Hogwarts or London. Sirius usually just made it down to start

the run on time.

Today, Sirius was waiting for them, along with two other people. "Remus!" Harry greeted enthusiastically. Then Hermione saw, "Professor Dumbledore!"

"Just as well it's raining," Titus said. "We weren't going to get much done today, anyway."

"Is there a problem?" Harry asked Dumbledore. "Or news?"

"A problem?" Dumbledore asked, and everyone could see he looked tired. "No, not as such. News? Well, for good news, Miss Granger has been named a prefect, along with Miss Bones, Mister Zabini, and Mister Boot. I have also decided to name special security prefects from the fifth year -- Miss Nott, Miss Perks, Miss Turpin, and you two. For the probably not good, while there have not been any successful attacks, there was one major attack that failed and three Death Eaters were later killed by the killing curse. We don't know for certain why; they obviously had failed their master."

"Who was killed?" Harry asked after he and Ron had congratulated Hermione -- that seemed to earn her forgiveness. Harry hoped Snape wasn't one of those killed. He didn't like the Potions master, but didn't want him dead.

"Avery, Crabbe, and Goyle," Dumbledore answered. "Whatever plan Avery was in charge of was obviously rejected; or perhaps he was in charge of the botched attack."

"What about their sons?" Harry asked.

"They were not harmed. We shall have to see how those dynamics may change." Dumbledore turned to Hermione. "Now, Miss Granger, the failed attack was on your parents."

Hermione was struck speechless for once.

"Please remember, I said it failed. They do not even know it took place. While the Death Eaters involved were not caught, one was positively identified as Peter Pettigrew by two aurors that knew him at Hogwarts. With luck, Sirius, we may have your name cleared soon."

"But not yet?"

"Not yet. However, we did not come to tell you upsetting news, but to celebrate a birthday." Dumbledore turned to Pwy. "You promised us cake, Titus."

"So I did! Accio lento Harry's cake!" A large American-style sheet cake flew slowly to Titus' hands. "I hope chocolate and chocolate is alright with you, Harry."

"Presents!" Sirius proclaimed, and materialized them as well.

"All this, and presents too!" Harry looked sternly at his friends. "If you three bought me anything, be warned, I'll start buying you presents as well!"

"Ew, now there's a threat," Ginny teased.

Harry cut the cake, but Titus went ahead and served it, along with milk, coffee, and tea. Harry was put to work opening his presents. Dobby had sent another hand-made pair of mis-matched socks, while Hagrid had sent a rather mysterious-looking sweet.

"That's lambda," Titus told them. "It's a candy made by the giants for their young children, from honey and herbs."

Fred and George had sent a package, which they all decided was best opened last -- and out doors if possible. Remus, Sirius, Hermione, Ginny, and Ron had clubbed together to get Harry a practice snitch, and of course he had his books from Doctor Pwy, plus three other books on wand making.

After the breakfast was over, they trooped down to the garage to open Fred and George's package. It didn't explode, which encouraged Harry to finish opening the package.

It was a plain white t-shirt, a little large for Harry. Harry read a note and smiled widely. He put it

on, and whispered, "Activate."

Fire works started exploding across the t-shirt. The note had reminded Harry that he was a 1/3 owner and that he would be entitled to part of any future profits, but also asked him for further suggestions for novelties.

After Harry turned off the t-shirt (which actually did de-activate, to everyone's relief), Titus showed off some of the wands they had made. Turning the wands on a lathe had been simple to teach. Collecting the wyvern feathers was easy, as the wyverns themselves often brought their discarded feathers to the house. The difficulty in wand making wasn't even the spells that combined the two ingredients. Granted, any wand core could be added to any wand. A few went together better than others, and it took a very well-trained and sensitive wizard to accomplish that magic. Titus knew enough to make excellent guesses. There was, however, another way to combine feathers and wands.

In the loft that ran from the wood working shop to over the garage, there was room for thousands of wands, all laid out, about six inches apart, along one side of the loft. Feathers were laid out on the other side. A spell would make the feathers become attracted to the wands themselves. This was a process that could take months or even years. Unprocessed wyvern feathers often became too brittle to use after five or six years, so quite often a feather would never be used.

Trees struck by lightning worked best, followed by branches harvested from living trees. Titus had taught them the basic wand-wright lore, and the combining spells. All four teens had combined at least one wand, and now knew how to make themselves temporary wands in an emergency.

Dumbledore and Pwy went to consult with each other in the study connected to the master suite, Hermione took an eager Remus on a tour of the libraries, while Ron and Sirius set themselves a chess challenge (playing six games simultaneously).

"Well!" Harry said to Ginny, "since it looks like Ron and Hermione are making up, and everyone is busy, it looks like we've been deserted for once."

"Awful to be left alone together," Ginny agreed. She couldn't contain herself any more, and burst into a wide grin. "Marvelous, isn't it?" She grabbed Harry in a tight embrace.

While Ron and Hermione had barely progressed past the hand-holding/light kissing stage, Harry and Ginny were hesitating just short of petting -- but only because they both knew once they started it would be difficult to stop. They had had several deep discussions about the future; with Voldemort after Harry, they would have been irresponsible not to talk about it. Ginny was willing to run the slightly greater risks of being with Harry than to spend one moment more than necessary away from him. It was convincing Harry that had been difficult, if not very time-consuming.

Ginny had turned out in many ways to be the most adept of the four in learning magical combat. Harry had the most skill and power, but his scar pains would no doubt be a drag on him in actual combat. Hermione learned the spells even faster than Harry, although without as much power, but she often over-thought actual situations, which could over-whelm her. She often reminded herself of how she was unable to deal with the Devil's Snare at the end of her First year. Ron tended to dive into situations too fast, and while he was usually then able to think his way out, it was a tendency that could get him killed.

Ginny was the most single-minded in those simulations. Her focus was always the same: protect Harry; protect the others; destroy the enemy. Titus and Sirius saw that in actual combat, she would happily die defending Harry and she would kill defending Harry. If the threat was against Harry, she probably wouldn't even feel much remorse. It did not make Harry feel less concerned for her safety, however.

Combat was the furthest thing from either of Harry's or Ginny's mind at the moment, however. The rain was now a downpour, but it was also fairly warm. "Let's get into our suits and run in the rain!" Ginny suggested.

Harry thought about it and agreed. They left a note on the small table in the kitchen after changing. They brought robes and towels with them to the garage, and wore only their old trainers and bathing suits.

They ran for nearly 20 minutes in the downpour, which found them near the woods to the far south. Ginny's intentions for them didn't materialize once they realized, after some five minutes of heavy petting where Ginny's top 'somehow' came off, that laying in the rain was much colder than running in the rain.

Ginny reluctantly put her top back on, and they ran back to the garage. Harry did drying spells on them, and they spent what was left of the morning kissing gently in the Jacuzzi next to the weight room.

Everyone reassembled at noon for lunch, although this was more of a feast. Granted, there was always plenty of food at Titus' -- hearty English breakfasts; stews or chili for lunch; and five course dinners (light soup; salad; entree, starch, and two veggies; cheese; dessert -- with Titus teaching them a little about good wines and food). None of the meals compared to this lunch. To their surprise, Titus always did a lot of the cooking.

As they were eating smaller slices of the birthday cake, Harry turned to business. "Do I need to go back with you, Professor?"

The rest of the table sat in stunned silence.

"Why, Harry?" Dumbledore finally asked.

"If I had been there, perhaps we'd know why Avery was killed. My scar hasn't really bothered me at all here. I'm too far away to help."

"There's some truth to that," Dumbledore admitted. "However, at least three other men associated with the Death Eaters were killed before you left. Your scar is not an infallible link, Harry. The skills you are learning here are more important than almost anything you are likely to learn from your link. Your dueling technique, I'm told, is now equal to what it would have been by the end of this year. By the time you leave, it will almost be equal to any Hogwarts alumni."

Pwy couldn't let that pass by without comment. He knew that, except for the number of hexes they had yet to learn, they were already the equal of most Hogwarts graduates. "If you are forced to duel with Voldemort again," Titus told Harry, "you will truly defeat him."

"If my scar allows me to think," Harry muttered.

"You will overcome that," Titus said. "We're only going to be flying every other day from now on. The day after tomorrow, we start meditation practice. When we're through, you may even be able to shake off a Cruciatus."

"Why aren't more people trained to do that?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione, very few people are willing to go through even what you've gone through the last two weeks. I wasn't sure how well you could be trained until we tried. What you're going through is a light version of Auror training. I'm adding some skills I learned in India, Nepal, and Australia."

"So, we're an experiment," Hermione commented.

"Exactly. After two weeks of meditation, if you succeed, we'll end the flying totally and practice some wandless magical techniques."

"Any other changes?" Ron asked, suspiciously.

"Yes, in fact. Two friends of mine are coming to start a little martial arts training. In four weeks, you won't learn much, but it will help a little. If you learn enough, perhaps we can continue the training on Sundays at Hogwarts. I hope you'll be willing to keep running every morning."

"Does this mean you'll be at Hogwarts?" Ginny asked eagerly.

"It does," Dumbledore answered. "We will have a new instructor, and two returning ones."

"Doc is a returning one, right?" Ron asked.

"Err, yes," Dumbledore said. "Your brother will be the new Runes teacher. . . ."

"Bill!" Ginny squealed.

"Yes. He has accepted a four year appointment, although I hope he stays longer. Titus must also take credit for opening the final position."

"I've been trying to make Binns retire since I first heard him teach in Nineteen-ten," Titus growled.

"Really!" Ron exclaimed. "Whoever you get can't be as boring as. . . ." Ron reddened.

"I understand," Dumbledore said. "I hope you will find his replacement acceptable."

"Who is it?" Harry asked.

"I am," Lupin answered. That brought the celebratory mood back to the group.

The next day, after the morning run, Titus sent the quartet upstairs to shower and ordered them to dress in the everyday robes and boots he'd bought them.

Coming down stairs, they thought they might be saying goodbye to Dumbledore and Lupin, but it turned out they'd been gone some time.

"Where're we going?" Ginny asked as they ate a light breakfast.

"Or is someone else coming here?" Hermione asked.

"We're going on a visit," Titus informed them. "The town has several names, many of them secret, or at least supposedly secret. It's most common name is simply Weston."

"Really!" Hermione nearly squeaked in excitement. Ron and Harry rolled their eyes.

"When the Old Believers moved to what is now Maine and Quebec, the common English name for the main settlement was 'the New Town', now simply Newton. So, when they moved west. . . ."

"'The West Town'," Harry said. "Weston."

"Exactly. Now, remember, nearly all of the population are Old Believers; it's their town. You're the strange ones."

"So don't gawk or ask stupid questions," Hermione told them.

All three now rolled their eyes.

"Seriously, some every day items are forbidden. So don't ask for anything; you're going to be seen as odd enough as it is."

Titus led them into the corridor and out a different exit. This was a simpler, more rustic cellar. The only lighting was a magical torch, that burned without scorching the ceiling or wall, much like the ones at Hogwarts.

The stairs led up to the kitchen of a nice-sized cottage. The furnishings made the Burrow seem like a very modern house in comparison.

"Come along, and pretend you can all behave," Titus teased.

The town was much larger than Hogsmeade. Titus had told them that, not including those living at the Sefydliad (which was on the northern edge of town, and which housed around 300 scholars and resident teachers), the town had some 3,000 human residents. The mountain valley it was located in was slightly larger than Titus', and the mountains surrounding it to the east and west even higher.

Titus' cottage was on the southern edge of the settlement. Walking the paved streets (there were no sidewalks), even Ron and Ginny were somewhat surprised by the riot of magical and medicinal flowers and plants in the gardens. All four were slightly unnerved by the stares they got from the few adults working in their yards -- some gardening, others doing light crafts (wood carving and painting, although a group of young women were spinning thread). Nearly all were dressed in much older styles than the robes the quintet were wearing. Ron, Harry, and Ginny made mental notes to ask about the style later, although Harry vaguely recognized it from a Bronze Age 'living museum' his Muggle school had visited once.

They had walked three blocks to hit a main road, and after a mile, the street came to the small commercial section of town. Titus walked them through part of it quickly, saying they'd be back for lunch. Instead, they walked another mile north, where a group of stone buildings quickly came into view. "The Sefydliad," Titus said simply.

Once on the campus, Titus gave them a quick tour. He introduced them to a number of scholars. It seemed that, although Titus had kept himself aloof from the general magical community for over thirty-five years, he'd kept his ties here.

All the scholars he introduced them to, who varied in age from looking almost their age to those who made Dumbledore seem young, were interested in meeting Harry. Harry was polite to all of them. A few expressed hope that Harry might come and study Charms. Titus explained that 'Defense,' as taught at Hogwarts, was part of Charms and Magical Creatures at the Sefydliad. A few of the faculty expressed hope that Hermione might come and study Transfiguration, Arithmancy, or Ancient Symbols and Languages ('Runes' at Hogwarts).

Titus finally turned Harry and Hermione over to two of the permanent scholars. Titus took Ron and Ginny to the top of a massive stone building, which afforded them a panoramic view of the valley.

"It's beautiful," Ginny said simply and sincerely.

Ron was more worried about the implications of the visit. "If Hermione came here to study. . . ."

"What would you do?" Titus completed the idea for him. Ron just nodded.

"If you're a couple, you'd be allowed to come along. I intend to teach you our version of Welsh before we leave in August. . . ."

"We can learn a language in a few weeks?"

Ginny laughed. "Ron, we can learn the basics of a language in a weekend. Don't you ever listen to what Hermione and I tell you about Runes?" Ginny was taking Runes and Muggle Studies as her extra courses.

"Oh, yeah. Forgot. . . ." Ron mumbled.

"As for what you might do, that might present a problem. Weston is the chess center of our world. There are a number of players in a competitive league, but that wouldn't occupy much of your time. The problem is, most of your skills wouldn't be much in demand here, except one."

"And what's that?"

"Do you have the capacity to be bored and to take orders?"

"Him?"

"I can to both, for a good reason, but I need to know the reason."

"See that stone circle to our east?"

They both nodded.

"Weston is a minor religious site. It's also one of the two known Old Believer locations. It's also the location of a major resource for Light Magic, this Sefydliad."

"So?"

"So it needs to be protected!" Ginny told her brother.

"Oh!"

"The valley is well protected. Spouses of scholars are sometimes allowed to join the Sersiants, or guards, although never more than about a tenth of the force is ever Outsiders. Obviously, they are never allowed the more detailed passwords and other classified information."

"How long does a program last?" Ginny asked.

"Two or three years."

Ron figured two years was about the limit he could stand being a border guard. "What would Ginny do, if she and Harry came?" Ron asked. Ginny blushed.

"If she can pick up her Runes grade from a Ninety and get the O.W.L. and the N.E.W.T., plus two O.W.L.s in Charms, Defense, or Transfiguration, they might let her study Runes if she was here with Harry."

"Ah." Ron suddenly realized that no one had suggested that Hermione study Charms here. While she was usually able to pick up a charm quicker than Harry or anyone else, she wasn't able to reach his level once he learned it. If Hermione wasn't good enough to study a subject here, he certainly wasn't. She stood first in their year in every written area, and in the top three of every practical area. Ron was happy to be in the top ten in any thing.

"Cheer up, Ron," Titus said, putting a hand on the young man's shoulder. "You've said you want to be an auror. You wouldn't just be guarding the borders and escorting unapproved visitors and VIPs. They would also be giving you some excellent defensive training. Spend two years here as a sersiant, and it would cut your auror training from a year to two months and the apprenticeship from three years to one. And it would give you two years pay seniority."

"Really?" He frowned. "If Harry came here and went through his 'program,' and then became an auror, what would he get?" Ginny frowned.

"He'd probably also go through the same training as you. If he did, he'd also have the two month training, have a two year apprenticeship instead of your one, and so not have the pay-scale seniority."

"Oh." Ron decided he could live with that.

"Are all the homes as . . .old fashioned as yours?" Ginny asked.

"No, most are more so. I have a variance to have fairly modern plumbing. If any of you were accepted here, I'd let you use my cottage. There are three bedrooms and the bath on the top floor, and a nice study in the attic."

Harry and Hermione came up to the roof, accompanied by a very stout wizard in early middle age and an older, nearly bald wizard, who was very tall and thin. Despite the disparities in size (average height and obese vs. tall and very muscular) the stout wizard and Titus looked somewhat alike.

"Cefnder!" they both exclaimed, and hugged each other.

"Cousin," Hermione whispered.

"Quite right, Hermione. This is my cousin, Tudor Pwy. He's a history, runes, language, and religion specialist here. Tudor, this is Ginny and Ron Weasley. This is Athro Mercher Myrddin, the head of the Sefydliad."

Myrddin merely inclined his head. Tudor was more expansive. "Pleased to meet you both. So, what do you think of our little pentref?"

"Village," Titus corrected, "and the town and the Sefydliad hardly make up just a village, even in a

valley this size."

"Cwm," Tudor teased. "Somehow, when I'm here in this beautiful cwm, I have a hard time expressing myself in Saesneg."

"English!" Titus shot back, also teasing.

Myrddin broke in. "Friends, please!" He turned to Harry. "While I realize you may wish to wait until this nasty cnaf Riddle is disposed of, Athro Potter, we would be pleased to have you come here to study Charms whenever you wish. No matter if your future lies with law enforcement or teaching, you and we would benefit. We hope to teach you as much as you wish, about anything we know." He turned to Hermione. "You would also be welcomed here to study Transfiguration, Arithmancy, or what you call Runes, if you make your N.E.W.T. in the subject. Give my regards to McGonagall."

He bowed slightly to all four. He then looked Titus in the eye and said something in their Welsh dialect, and left.

"Glad the old boy is so gracious," Tudor muttered.

Titus smiled. "He hasn't liked me since I publicly pointed out the errors in his first book."

"That was Nineteen forty-six!"

"I know, he was almost pleasant today, for him." The four students often forgot how old Titus really was.

"Anyway," Tudor said happily. "From the look of the sun, it will be noon by the time we get to the bwyty."

"The what?" Ron asked, getting him a dirty look from the other three students. "What? Oh, right, sorry."

"It's sort of a cross between a pub, an inn, and a restaurant," Titus explained as they left the roof. "Which one are we going to?"

"The Broga, of course!"

"We have nine pubs in the valley. Two are for Old Believers only -- I don't know if they'd even let me in, if I were alone!"

"Probably, but some wouldn't like it," Tudor muttered.

"Four are neighborhood places. None of those six have plumbing." All four looked surprised.

"We live much like our ancestors did two thousand years ago, or at least five hundred years ago," Tudor explained.

"Of the three others, all fairly up-to-date, one is here for the use of the scholars of the Sefydliad if they tire of the dining hall, the largest one is across from Gringotts, and the Broga, or the Frog, serves scholars and intellectuals. It would be more like a coffee house in some respects. . . ."

"If we allowed coffee," Tudor said.

"What!" Ron exclaimed.

Tudor started listing. "No coffee and only herbal tea, no sugar, no potatoes, no maize except for cattle feed, no butterbeer, no chocolate or distilled alcohol except in medicines and potions, no bananas or pineapples, no peppers or tomatoes. . . ."

"Actually, those things aren't allowed to be bought, sold, or traded" Titus interrupted. "If it wasn't found in Wales five hundred years ago, it's probably banned from public consumption, although there are a few exceptions."

"Like what?" Tudor demanded.

"We don't allow pumpkin juice, but we do grow pumpkins, and love pumpkin pie, bread, and cake (we use honey instead of sugar), and make jack-o-lanterns. We're tobacco addicts -- you might know that the most harmful aspects of tobacco, other than nicotine addiction, only affect Muggles. We have hot dogs and potato salad on the Fourth of July, and drink butter beer then and on New Years Day. . . ."

"Alright, we're as imperfect as every society."

"Better than most," Titus allowed. "Since they might be coming to study, we should take them to the Evil Shop."

Tudor snorted.

"Evil shop?" Hermione asked.

"The Muggle and Magical Shop," Titus explained. "Then you might see what little we allow, and have a feel for living here."

"True, Myrddin was quite taken with you two. You might study here, after all."

"Was he really a Myrddin?" Hermione asked Titus.

"He is." He looked at the other students. "That means he's a direct male descendent of Merlin. In fact, that makes the first use of a surname, as such, in our culture."

"Cool!" Ron said.

"What do you mean, 'taken'?" Hermione was curious.

"If you get your N.E.W.T., you may come," Tudor told her. "You've been conditionally admitted. Mister Potter, well, I'm amazed. . . ."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"First, he called you 'Athro Potter,' which is a huge sign of respect -- I've never heard him use it to anyone less than a senior Druid since he was made the Athro, or master, of the Sefydliad fifteen years ago," Tudor said, still in amazement. "And you may come and study at any time, even without a N.E.W.T. in your field."

"Damn," Harry whispered angrily, surprising Tudor.

"Harry, I can assure you he isn't accepting you because of your reputation," Titus told him. "You've seen how much power you really have already. It's hard for you to tap into at times, but it's getting easier. With the training you can get here, you'll be able to use it, and use it well."

Harry shrugged. "If you say so."

By now, they had come across the small inn. It was dark and cool inside. There were only a few customers, but they had seen a few more people heading their way just before they went in. Tudor had reserved a small parlor for them.

Tudor and Titus conversed with a server in the local dialect for a few moments. He was back almost immediately, with four large trays (which he served the men) and two slightly smaller ones (which he served Ginny and Hermione). He was back almost immediately with platters of fresh and dried fruit, bread, cheeses, and then delivered a pitcher of beer and goblets.

"What is this?" Ron asked, once the man had left them. They each had a pewter tray covered with a thin loaf of bread. The bread was covered with a thick stew.

"Well, this is the standard lunch," Tudor explained with the air of a true expert. "They serve it in four sizes here; the ladies have mediums and we have large, although perhaps we should have gotten Mister Weasley 'the Hungry Plowman,'" he teased. "Today, it's" (he again studied the stew like an expert) "mostly mutton with some chicken and duck, three types of mushrooms, string beans, carrots, peas, turnips, and parsnips. It's over a hard bread that you'd call a trencher in English."

We eat the stew, along with the cheeses and some of the soft bread. After you finish eating and scraping the stew, you might eat the trencher with some of the fruit and more cheese, or you might take it home. Some eat it with their dinner. Nearly everyone has crups or dogs, and they love these. A few of the country people have griffins, wyverns, hippogriffs and such, and they like them almost as much. If you don't eat it or take it, they'll feed them to the pigs."

"They also make it easier to clean the trays," Titus teased.

The students shrugged and dug in.

After lunch, Tudor went back to the Sefydliad. Titus took the students to the small Gringotts branch, where he opened the four of them a joint vault. Harry established his identity. If they were students at the Sefydliad, or if they had to take refuge in Weston (Titus had also gotten them approval for that as well), they would have access to some money plus Harry's money in London.

Their last stop was the Muggle and Magical Shop, owned by Titus and some of his family members, and run by a great nephew, Cadfael Pwy. There was a strange array of products. An entirely separate, but connected, shop was a wine and spirit store (obviously one area where they welcomed Muggle products from all over the world). There weren't many other Muggle products. There were Muggle books and magazines on chess, science, and astronomy, and an assortment of glassware. There were also a few standard magical products, mostly books and periodicals. On those few occasions where non-traditional food items and such were permitted, the items came from the store.

Hermione was excited by the prospect studying at the Sefydliad, especially when she remembered that Dumbledore, Flitwick, and McGonagall all had Master Certificates from there. (McGonagall, Titus told them, had even been one of Myrddin's first students.) The other three weren't as excited, but soon decided that, if Hermione went, they'd likely come, too.

The next four weeks passed quickly, especially for Harry. He took to the meditation and martial arts practice like a true natural. After some initial difficulties, Hermione started feeling natural during meditation as well, although she made less progress in the martial arts practice than the other three. Ron and Ginny were the inverse of Hermione; they made good progress in the martial arts, but made slow progress in meditation. The witch and wizard who were teaching them both (they never revealed their names) had allowed that they were slightly impressed with Harry, and not overly disappointed with the other three.

Harry had made great stride in wandless magic. The other three at least could summons their wands. Harry also was now completely immune to the Imperius curse. The other three had progressed to the point that only Voldemort was likely to be able to hold them, and even he probably couldn't really command them to do any real harm.

Sirius wasn't looking forward to the students leaving, especially Harry. On the positive side, he had grown closer to his godson than he'd ever thought possible. He had also healed a great deal, especially physically. Pettigrew had been spotted by two more independent witnesses in another failed attack, and Sirius was now officially pardoned.

Sirius wished he could have taken a job at Hogwarts, but Remus' reappointment would cause enough of a stir. At least he was being paid now for his part in the fight against Voldemort -- Titus had pulled some strings with the International and Old Believers.

Sirius watched Harry as he levitated Ginny's trunk down the stairs. That was something else Sirius was glad to see -- there was no way to tell if Harry and Ginny, or Ron and Hermione, would last as a couple. But it was normal; Harry had lived anything other than a normal life. It was good to see.

"Are we ready?" Titus asked the group.

"We're ready," Harry answered after he surveyed the group. The group dynamics had also subtly

changed over the previous seven weeks. Harry was even more the leader than he had been, and he accepted the role now. Hermione provided the information and advice he needed; Ron the strategy; Ginny the emotional stability for the entire group; Harry the decision-making. Whatever trouble they were facing, they were well-prepared.

Chapter 10

All four teens decided it was strange to return to the normalcy of the Burrow. For one thing, they weren't allowed to do magic for four days. They were quite happy to do an hour run each morning and then perform their meditations, however.

Harry was rather surprised to get a note from Professor McGonagall, stating he would be the Quidditch captain that year. He had hoped he might get it, but had been doubtful. Harry had some plans, which he had discussed with his friends and Doctor Pwy, and this dovetailed into them. He sent a note off to McGonagall accepting the captaincy and outlining his plans.

Molly was quite surprised to see the children. For one thing, they were all over half an inch taller than when they'd left. Ginny and Hermione had each lost half an inch off their fairly trim waists and added five pounds of muscle to their frames. Ron had lost the same, and added nearly ten. Harry couldn't have lost any weight after the way his relatives had treated him. He had, however, added even slightly more muscle to his shorter frame than Ron.

Sunday evening, Ron and Hermione stayed with Hermione's parents, who were overjoyed to see their daughter, and anxious to spend time meeting Ron. Monday morning, Sirius took all four shopping in Muggle London (Mrs. Granger dropped Hermione and Ron off) for new clothes. They especially needed two new pairs of trainers each; they had run through the other pairs.

After lunch in the Leaky Cauldron and a visit to Harry's vault, Harry and Hermione led the group to Eelops. Errol was now ancient, and they purchased a new owl for the Weasleys as a thank you for everything they'd done over the years for them (Harry paid, but Hermione promised to pay him back in Muggle money for her half).

Harry then took the group to a jeweler he'd noticed two doors from Ollivanders just before his Third year (since he'd spent two weeks at the Leaky Cauldron, he knew every shop in Diagon Alley and Ministry Row). Mr. Mott, the jeweler, quickly sized the promise rings (Harry had written a note and had Remus owl it for him weeks before) for Hermione and Ginny, while Harry paid (Ron had promised to keep both his own part of their dorm room clean as well as Harry's for the entire year as payment). Ginny and Hermione were stunned when they saw how much Harry was paying for them. Sirius was already stunned from the time he'd entered the shop, since he'd come here with James for the same errand at about the same point in their Hogwarts' career.

"Harry, these aren't silver, are they?" Hermione asked. "I mean, at that price. . . ."

"Of course not," Harry answered. "I'm not buying anything that's made out of mostly silver; for Remus' sake, you know."

"Then these are?"

"Eighty-five percent platinum, ten percent gold, five percent nickel, as per Mister Potter's instructions," Mott told them. "An excellent idea, by the way Mister Potter. Silver absorbs magical resonances too easily, while platinum and nickel resist transfigurations to some degree. This combination is perfect, if a bit difficult to work with. I believe I shall offer an entire line based on this alloy. If I may use your name, Mister Potter, the rings will be free, along with equal purchases for the four of you?"

"Use my name how? I don't. . . ."

"I understand completely, Mister Potter. How about I merely state that the alloy was designed by Harry Potter?"

"Mister Potter is underage," Sirius said, speaking up. "Why don't we work out the details, while

they look around?"

"Certainly. And you are?"

"Sirius Black, Harry's guardian." Mott blanched.

Sirius worked out a good deal, one which wouldn't have Harry's name flashed around too much. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny refused any more jewelry, and made Harry get a heavy-duty magically reinforced Muggle wristwatch that would work underwater and withstand a lot of knocking about and a magical pocket watch, which would give him a large amount of information once he programmed it. Everyone left satisfied.

Sirius said his goodbyes that night at the Burrow. Voldemort was still out there, waiting, and Sirius was now part of the group trying to plan the fight against Him.

Titus and Remus showed up the afternoon of the 31st. They escorted the Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione to a Muggle hotel near the train station via Titus' corridors. Fred and George were thoroughly cowed by Titus and Remus into agreeing to behave. Having never really seen Muggle television, the twins sat in front of the tube until it was time to leave the next morning -- Titus made certain they got room service for dinner and breakfast. Titus and Remus took rooms on either side of the twins, to make certain of their behavior.

Ron and Hermione quietly took one room, while Harry and Ginny took the other.

They made an odd little procession the next morning as they arrived early for the train. Titus and Remus called the prefects, Head Boy and Girl, and new security prefects together.

Remus addressed them. "Sixth year prefects, take the Fifth year prefects to the front compartments and brief them as usual. After half an hour, please patrol the first two cars, while the Seventh years patrol the entire train. Head Girl will be in the third car, Head Boy fifth car. This is Professor. . . ."

"Doctor," Pwy growled.

". . . Doctor Pwy. He and I will be in the last car. Keep an eye on the cars between you, patrol them every half hour or so. Nott and Zabini will be in the second car, Miss Turpin in the fourth, Miss Perks will be in the sixth, Miss Weasley, who is working with us today, in the seventh and final student car. Mister Weasley and Mister Potter will also be moving throughout the train; feel free to use them to carry any messages. We must insure there are no problems."

The quartet of young wizards guided their possessions up and into the Hogwarts Express. Considering that there were several hundred other students trying to do the same thing at the same time, making for quite a crowd, this wasn't a particularly easy thing to do. All four were in some ways now more skillful than many adult wizards, however, and not only were they able to get their possessions into a compartment (Hermione would go to the prefects' compartment later), they managed to help quite a few nervous first-years along the way.

"What a helpful, thoughtful group you are," drawled an aristocratic voice in passing as they arranged their belongings in the compartment.

"Yes, we are, aren't we," Ginny Weasley said with a smile. "Everything you're incapable of."

Draco Malfoy's face darkened, and his hand moved slightly towards the pocket in his jacket where his wand was. "You really want to try, Malfoy?" Harry Potter said softly.

"You know he won't," Ron Weasley said. "He doesn't have us outnumbered four to one."

Malfoy glared. "Enjoy your last few days of peace, Potter and company," he snarled and then marched away.

Ron made the first trip from the final car; Harry waited fifteen minutes, kissed Ginny, and made the same route. They met soon after Harry had left.

"How's Hermione?"

"She's having fun," Ron said. "She likes all this stuff."

"Did you see Crabbe and Goyle with Bulstrode and two little kids back there?"

"Yeah. I asked Nott; she said that the ugly little boy is Goyle's brother and the uglier girl is Bulstrode's sister."

"Strange to imagine anyone breeding more than either one of those two!"

"Stranger to see them without Malfoy."

Harry had to agree with that. "Where is the little ferret?"

"He and Pansy are alone up in the second car, although Nott and Zabini parked their trunks there."

"How does he look?"

Ron shrugged. "I didn't want to stare. He's being quiet for now, so why stir up trouble?"

Harry didn't stare either, and for once Malfoy stayed in his compartment. Harry also thought Malfoy looked confused; his sneer earlier must have been mostly reflexive. It was harder to tell with Crabbe and Goyle, as they always looked rather dull-witted and confused.

The trip to the castle, the sorting, the speeches, the song -- all went normally. Every table had applauded wildly for Remus Lupin's return except the Slytherins, and even there they managed some more-than-polite clapping. The Gryffindors had of course also applauded wildly for Bill Weasley. Harry and Hermione had asked the others to cheer for Pwy, so despite the confusion over who he was, they cheered him well, too.

Since September 1 was on a Friday, the students had two days to settle in. Rather than throwing the First years off the deep end come Monday, Hermione organized tours for them on Saturday afternoon. Saturday morning, however, was given over to athletics.

Harry had asked for, and received, permission to start a running club. It was open to all Houses, Fourth year and above, plus any member or reserve member of a House Quidditch team and any faculty member. School days, weather permitting, it would go from 6:35 - 7:15; weekends 7:05 - 8:00. This first day, however, they met at 7:15.

Harry was encouraged to see every eligible member of Gryffindor present, although it had taken some cajoling to get Neville and Lavender to show up. There were also six Ravenclaws (including Cho and Padma), five Hufflepuffs, and two Slytherins (Blaise Zabini and his girlfriend Clarise Nott). Bill Weasley, Remus Lupin, and Titus Pwy would be joining them on Monday.

Harry explained the concept and the type of running shoes they should have. He didn't mention it, but he and Doctor Pwy would buy them their first pair of Muggle running shoes. Harry made it clear that this was for exercise, not competition. Those who wanted to sprint could sprint; those who wanted or needed to walk would walk. Harry also gave them all t-shirts ('Hogwarts Jogging Club').

The only ones who really could almost keep up with the quartet were the Patils and the two Slytherins. Each member of the quartet took turns staying behind and encouraging the others. By the Christmas break, not only had none dropped out (although Neville still walked most of the time), twenty-one more had joined from the other three Houses, including three more from Slytherin.

At 9:30, the Gryffindors gathered at the Quidditch field to select their new keeper. Harry also had permission to choose a complete reserve team, if possible. Gryffindor's chasers and beaters had

played together so much, they needed little practice as such. Instead, the chasers and reserve beaters and keeper would face the beaters, keeper, and reserve chasers in scrimmages.

Despite the progress Hermione had made in her flying, she refused to try out. David Martin, a Sixth year, and Dean Thomas made the reserves as beaters. Dennis Creevy became the reserve seeker. Ginny, Colin Creevy, and a Third year, Victoria Angel, were the reserve chasers. Another third year, Brian Fudge (the Minister's great nephew) was the reserve keeper. Ron, to no one's surprise, made keeper.

Sunday afternoon, Pwy held a dueling challenge. Four professors took him up on the challenge: Sinistra, Snape, Lupin, and Weasley. Professor Flitwick acted as the referee.

Sinistra drew the shortest straw, and went out to the cheers of all the students. Nearly all the students were shocked at the speed of the hexes flying between the competitors. A little before the 10 minute mark, Pwy caught Sinistra with a smoke charm which confused her enough to disarm her.

Bill Weasley went next. His reflexes seemed a little quicker when it came to dodging and blocking, but was a little slower on the attack. He was also disarmed just before the 10 minute mark.

Snape looked a lot less confident and condescending than he had when striding to meet Lockhart nearly three years before. Snape relied more on blocking hexes than the first two challengers. The students could see the power of Pwy's hexes grow as they were deflected. One finally broke through Snape's blocking charm just after the 10 minute mark. Snape was disarmed a few seconds later.

Remus Lupin walked forward, looking rather surprised he was up in front of nearly the entire school. While Pwy had bowed with civility to his first three opponents, he seemed to do so with greater respect to Lupin.

Lupin's quickness was even greater than Bill's. Harry remembered Sirius saying that as brilliant as he and James Potter (and Snape for that matter) had been at dueling, Remus was always a step ahead. As the match progressed, Lupin even managed to graze through Pwy's defenses once. Pwy finally managed to break down Lupin's shields, and caught him with a simple leg-locker curse just after the 15 minute mark.

After Pwy bowed to his four opponents, he turned to the students. "Dueling is a very formalized type of confrontation. Still, it gives you a taste of fighting. Now, I have not lost a duel or a fight since I was fifteen. Three of your four instructors certainly fought at a national competitive level if not higher; Professor Lupin was certainly at the international level. We five, along with Professor Flitwick, who is the only person to fight me to a draw since I was twenty-one, are restarting the dueling club, for Third through Seventh year students. We will be starting next Sunday, from One o'clock through Three-thirty."

Pwy looked around. "Our world is a dangerous place. Learn to deal with that fact. I hope to see many of you next Sunday; I will see you all next week, in class. Come prepared to show me what you know."

The quartet went to sign up immediately. All of the eligible Gryffindors also signed up, although they had to really encourage Neville.

Titus waited until there had been a little minor rearrangement in the seating for his first class. "All set? Please remember where you are sitting for the remainder of the year. As I call your names, please raise your hands."

"Let's see, Slytherin: Bulstrode; Crabbe; Goyle; Malfoy; Nott; Parkinson; Zabini." Three Slytherins had transferred to other schools over the summer.

"Gryffindor: Brown; Finnigan; Granger; Longbottom; Patil; Potter; Thomas; Weasley."

"Now that you are in your Fifth year, you will be studying basic counter-hexes. Some of these are also covered in Charms, just as some the antidotes we'll be discussing will also be mentioned in Potions, but these are important, so a little duplication is good. In your final two years, we'll be practicing more advanced magic, charms and hexes used in dueling as well as more general purpose defenses. Rest assured, you will be learning the principles of dueling, as well as fighting."

A hand shot up. "Yes, Mister Malfoy?"

"Dueling and fighting are nearly the same, aren't they?"

"No, they are similar but not the same. Dueling has very strict rules, fighting has few, or even none. We will be practicing the former, but not the latter. However, you will still be expected to know how to fight."

Titus grinned to himself. 'Why not?' he thought. 'When fate gives you an opening, try and play it out.' "There are two forces constraining the Magical communities of the world. As the Muggle population grows and advances technologically, we are being forced into ever smaller niches. At the same time, the Magical communities are strengthening as communities. Some, Muggle and Magical, opt out of their society, although it's easier for one of us to become a warlock, with no resources other than our knowledge and our wands, than it is for Muggles without significant resources. Others, seeing the growing power of their community, wish to take it over and make it serve their needs, rather than the community as a whole. You need to be able to recognize those wizards, and, if called upon, to fight them. By the time you leave after your Seventh year, you will be able to. Yes, Mister Weasley?"

Weasley gave Malfoy a dirty look. "Couldn't you be teaching future Dark Wizards how to fight as well?" That brought a few grumbles from the Slytherins.

Pwy smiled a little. "Dark Wizards have never had much trouble figuring out how to manipulate others, and how to curse and kill them when necessary. And, when they do, they rarely do so in proper duels. Are there any further questions? Yes, Mister Malfoy."

"Mister Zabini, please allow Mister Malfoy to ask his question."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir, before we start the class, since we are your first class, a number of students were just curious about your background."

Pwy had to give a twisted half-smile at that. Amazing how people stuck to training. "Ah, an interest that used to be common amongst Slytherin students. I thought perhaps you'd changed. So, you wish to conform to your stereotype?"

"Uh, yes, sir?" All the Gryffindors rolled their eyes. Zabini and Nott closed theirs in pain.

"You are from a family which likes to consider itself 'pure blood,' correct, Mister Malfoy?"

"We are pure bloods," he proclaimed, in as aristocratic a sneer as possible.

"Yet the Malfoy family first enters the magical records in the late Eleven-hundreds, during the reign of William the Second. Where were the Malfoys before then?"

"Sir?"

"Well, perhaps you should all take notes on this, as I do not wish to waste time with my other classes going over this again. The parents of that first magical Guillaume de Malfoy, famous as an evil advisor of William the Second, didn't spring from the ground. Who were they?" Titus paused a few seconds. "No answer? Well, they were either Muggles or came from a line of so-called squibs, who were living as Muggles. Either way, that first de Malfoy was not a 'pure blood,' even if his decedents only intermarried with active witches."

"In fact, go back far enough and I know nearly all of us have a few Muggles mixed in our ancestry, and we all at least have some squibs. Actually, no wizard or witch comes from truly Muggle families on both sides. Instead, since most squibs have been driven from the Magical community throughout history, the so-called Muggle-born wizard comes from the inter-marriage of squibs or their descendants who have lost knowledge of the Magical communities, and whose combined genetic code is again strong enough to create a wizard or witch. Before any of you make fun of such people, remember that you all come from such ancestors as well."

"To be specific, Mister Malfoy, you are descended from that Guillaume de Malfoy who was born to an allegedly Muggle but well-off merchant family in London, back in the Eleven-fifties, who gained fame and fortune as an advisor to William the Second, twenty-six generations before you. Miss Bulstrode has the fewest magical generations in direct male descent in this class of Slytherins -- nine. Does that make her worse than Mister Potter, who has more generations in direct male descent than any of you, or better than Miss Brown, who has three? Or even Miss Granger, who is the first in her recent family? No, what really matters is how talented are you? How good a person are you? How good a witch or wizard are you?"

Titus gave them a hard smile. "Despite all that, since I see I haven't convinced most of you, you might think I must be either Muggle-born, or close to it, despite what the Headmaster told you last night. Well, if blood matters, then all of you, except perhaps Mister Potter, are pure trash." There were some soft noises of shock at that.

"I am of nearly-pure Old Believer ancestry. The one Muggle in my recorded past was a sailor who helped some of my ancestors flee to safety. That was in the year Three hundred and ninety three. One of the daughters fell in love with him, and because he was brave, and they were poor if powerful, with other daughters, they allowed the marriage. There are fifty-four generations between him and myself. What are fifty-plus generations compared to your twenty-seven, Mister Malfoy? In direct male descent, I am the hundred and second recorded generation, compared to those twenty-seven. In my paternal mother's family, I am descended from the first recorded Master of what you call Stonehenge, as it existed in its finished form. I am the hundred and fifteenth recorded in that line -- and the oral tradition puts it much further back than that. In my mother's mother's mother's family, I am descended from King Scorpion of Egypt, the first recorded wizard outside Mesopotamia. That makes me the Two-hundred and twenty-sixth generation. So, in this class, blood does not matter." Suddenly, his deep voice sank even deeper, and the teen students really noticed how incredibly large their instructor was. "Talent, intelligence, and character matter. No matter of you're from an old family, like Mister Potter; from a young family, like you, Mister Malfoy; or a family reborn to magic, like Miss Granger, make your families proud of you."

Pwy looked out over the now-silent class. "I first stood in the front of this same classroom eighty-five years ago." Small gasps were heard, which Pwy waved away. "If you haven't gotten the bit of news that I taught here from Nineteen-ten through Nineteen-thirty-nine, apply to Professor Snape, Miss Granger, or perhaps Mister Malfoy after class."

"I am reminded of that first class, which consisted of Gryffindor and Slytherin First years, because we had, almost verbatim, the previous discussion. Mister Malfoy, you're sitting right where your great-grandfather, Wilbur Lestrage sat, and he asked the exact same questions." Neville and Harry gave Malfoy a dirty look at the name of Lestrage. "Your great great aunt, Jane Malfoy, sat over there, next to her best friend, Sally Ann Marvolo, who would become Voldemort's mother sixteen years later." All the students looked shocked at that statement.

"Mister Zabini, you're sitting where Professor Snape's grandfather, Septimus Snape, sat, and took his role. Mister Crabbe is sitting right where his great great uncle Victor Crabbe sat. Mister Goyle is sitting where Miss Bulstrode's great grandfather Maximillian sat. Most of you know the family names of the other Slytherins in the class: Avery, Flint, Macnair, and Lockhart." The Trio and the Slytherins knew all those names, and the Slytherins weren't happy to be reminded that the Lockheart family were traditionally Slytherins.

"Mister Weasley, you are sitting where your great grandfather Percy Weasley sat, and you took his part. Miss Granger is sitting where his future wife, Harry's great great aunt Angela Potter, sat." The class was growing more amazed and confused. "Mister Potter is sitting where Percy's first cousin and best friend, Albus Dumbledore, was sitting." Harry blushed a little.

"Professor Lupin's grandfather, Julius Lupin, would later join Dumbledore and Weasley as a close friend. Miss Brown is sitting where her great grandfather sat, next to his best friend Warren Whisp, who is Mister Finnigan's great grandfather. Professor Hagrid's uncle, a rather shy boy, sat where Mister Longbottom is sitting. Miss Fudge, the Minister's aunt; Miss Phippen, one of Mister Longbottom's great grandmothers; and Miss Pettigrew, another of his great grandmothers; were sitting giggling in the back."

"Is this coincidence or deep magic?" Titus shrugged his shoulders. "Who can tell? Perhaps those of you to take Divination can consult with the Professor some time."

He came out of his reverie. "Last year, you learned how to identify major curses and hexes. This year, you're going to learn how to counter them. Please take out your note books."

Chapter 11

Saturday, October 7, 1995

Harry Potter leaned forward in the large, swirling Jacuzzi, letting Ginny's hands slowly rub his back. Across from him, Hermione was massaging Ron, although Harry tried, with great difficulty, to block that out of his mind -- Hermione wasn't just wearing a two piece bathing suit, like she and Ginny wore the previous summer. Hermione had just started wearing a string thong bikini, mostly, Harry thought, to watch his and Ron's eyes bug out and to watch Ron drool and stutter like an idiot. After all, it seemed to be nearly all string, and thin string at that.

Titus Pwy claimed he had created this luxurious area for his own fun back before World War I, but had given the quartet the password. Ron didn't mind sharing the spa with Ginny and Harry, because that meant they were in their bathing suits and just relaxing. Ron was really afraid that the pair might also be doing what he and Hermione were doing when alone in the area. There were some nice sofas in one of the rooms.

They were, but knew enough not to let Ron know. Hermione had simply asked Pwy to provide her with two large boxes of condoms, and she'd simply given one to Ginny. "Considering how many Weasleys there are," she'd said (there were three Weasley cousins among the First year Gryffindors, plus one in Ravenclaw, with many more coming in the following years) "we're NOT going to rely just on the spells." Especially since the safe potions required signed permissions.

Harry tried to make himself totally relax. So far, school had been the best it ever had been for him. Granted, all his classes were more intense than ever, due to the up-coming O.W.L.s. Granted, he could not longer doze in the History of Magic. Granted, his morning runs and three times a week weight-training, weekly martial arts session, and Quidditch practices left him both tired and well-trained. What little time he had left after work-outs and home work was spent alone with Ginny or with Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, studying. No time for adventures so far this term. Fortunately, the meditation techniques he was still working on helped him focus and helped him relax enough to sleep better than he had since the middle of his third year. His dreams since his birthday tended to focus on Ginny, rather than Voldemort, which also led him to sleeping better.

It also helped that all his classes were really interesting. Even Potions was tolerable. Snape still didn't like him, but apparently felt that, his cover as a Death Eater all but destroyed anyway, there was no reason to torture Harry like he had the first four years. So while he was still nasty to all Gryffindors, he had toned things down a bit. The potions themselves were actually useful and interesting -- household potions that they would likely be using for the rest of their lives. The O.W.L. practical would involve brewing pepper-up or some similar potion.

Herbology and Astronomy had never really held Harry's interest very well in previous years, but he was enjoying learning the theory behind the subjects this year, especially astronomy. A Dursley cousin had subscribed to several scientific magazines for Dudley the year before, obviously under the impression that Aunt Petunia's judgement of Dudley's genius was an accurate assessment. Harry had taken over the stack of magazines, and had then subscribed himself to them (they were sent to a special post service that then re-mailed them to Hogwarts via owl, and his new Gringotts' account included a Muggle checkbook). The astronomy magazines actually had some material that were more in advance of what was in their text books, and Harry became a class stand-out. (After Hermione, of course -- it turned out she'd been subscribing to the same magazines since the age of nine. The few other students in their year interested in Astronomy were Pure-Blooded Slytherins and Ravenclaws.)

Harry had usually been one of the fastest in his year in understanding the material in Charms and Defense, and had always wound up out-doing even Hermione in the Defense practicals in the end of

the year exams. His meditation focusing techniques had greatly improved his transfiguration skills; he now stood third in his year in practical Transfiguration.

History was harder (if finally interesting), but Harry was not about to let Remus Lupin down. Remus' life was also easier than it had been two years before -- Sirius was pardoned, Harry was closer to both men, and Titus was the first wizard Remus had encountered who was both powerful enough and knowledgeable enough to catch the transformation as it started and prevent it (Dumbledore had never had the chance to learn the spell before, but was now, as was Harry). It was painful, but no more so than the actual full transformation was in either direction, and it only happened once every full moon rather than back and forth each time. (And that both meant the wolf wouldn't attack itself when not under the Wolfbane potion, and that Remus wouldn't have to half-poison himself with the Potion.)

Hagrid was back, the giants agreeing to at least temporary neutrality. They saw that Voldemort was unlikely to really be of any long-term benefit to them. So, they weren't going to aid the Dark Lord, but neither were they interested in helping the wizards or Muggles. While Hagrid did have a fire crab that the Third, Fourth, and Sixth years had to deal with, the Fifth and Seventh years were learning how to treat and care for the common magical household pets (puffskeins, kneazles, crups, augurys and, since Hagrid had to have at least some somewhat troublesome animals, fwoopers and ghouls), since that material appeared on the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. Hagrid himself was seeing Madam Maxime -- he had finally been allowed to again own a wand and learn to apparate, which meant the quartet often found their friend was visiting or being visited.

Even Divination was interesting this year. The entire year was devoted to tarot cards. While learning the various spreads and meanings was tedious, at least the interpretations were more straightforward.

Harry felt himself relax under Ginny's massaging fingers. Then, he felt himself moving away from himself; Voldemort was screaming in anger.

"You idiot!" he was screaming at a young man Harry recognized as Marcus Flint. "How can you just bring a box in here, when you can't even tell us who gave it to you! Crucio!"

As Flint screamed in agony, a silvery cloud rose from the small cube. The entire room fell silent, except for the sobbing Flint, as the cloud condensed into a human form.

Harry recognized the form first -- Titus Pwy.

The figure rotated, until it spied Voldemort. "Ah, the so-called Lord Voldemort. Don't blame the idiot I gave this to too much. All your followers are too feeble-minded to resist the simple trick."

"That's one of your problems, Mister Riddle." Pwy sounded just as he did in class, when pointing out something that he thought the class should have easily understood. "You can't have too competent of followers; they'd be as likely to betray you to take over your position as you were, when you betrayed Grindelwald to take over his."

That garnered Voldemort some sideways looks, no doubt by those whose families had followed Grindelwald. Even Malfoy was giving his Master an odd look.

"And what are you going to take over?" Pwy continued, scorn now in his voice. "The world? You've been trying and failing to take over Britain, one tiny part of the world, on and off for the last thirty years. Young Harry Potter beat you directly twice -- not a shadow of you, but you -- once due to his Muggle-born mother's power of protection, and then in June, when his untrained strength over-powered your will and magic. If you can't beat a fourteen year old boy, how can you take over Britain?"

The Death Eaters were trying to destroy the image, without success.

"And if, by some miracle, you took over Britain, would the remaining ninety-nine percent of the world just stand back? I tell you right now, the day after you take over Britain, the Old Believers

will declare war. It won't be Dumbledore and Harry Potter you're fighting, but people like me, people like Dumbledore as he was when he defeated Grindelwald, multiplied by over a hundred. You will never hold power -- you can kill and massacre, but you will never hold power. You're too far behind the times, boy; the world is too interconnected for your kind to take over. And you can no more disperse this image than a Muggle can disperse your Dark Mark with a hand fan."

"As for your other dream, immortality, it's also just a dream. You may extend your life for centuries or even millennia if you give up your dreams of power, but sooner or later the Earth will end, the universe will end. You will cease to exist in this world at some point -- face it like a man, not a coward. In my opinion, you will cease soon."

Pwy smiled. "Good bye, Mister Riddle. I will see you soon; you may not see me." The figure disappeared.

Voldemort looked at Flint. "Avada kedavra!"

Harry slumped forward, and realized he was out of the Jacuzzi, and was in Ginny's lap being hugged while Hermione dried him with a towel.

"Where's Ron?" he muttered.

"He went to get Dumbledore and Doc," Hermione. "Want to get dressed before they show up?"

"Good idea." Harry smiled. "You might want your robe, too. Dumbledore's not that young any more."

Hermione saw where Harry was looking, and that she had fallen out of her top. She blushed.

Dumbledore did not look overly pleased. Pwy smiled at him. "Problem, Headmaster?" The two were sitting in Dumbledore's office, along with Lupin, Snape, Black, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Bill Weasley.

"Why did you send that message?" Dumbledore asked angrily. He was not used to facing an equally powerful ally, as opposed to a subordinate.

Pwy gave a casual shrug. "Voldemort has been too quiet. He's obviously planning something. Why shouldn't we throw him a few curve balls to distract him?"

"A few what?" four voices asked at once.

"Sorry, American Muggle sporting slang. In short, why let Voldemort plan in peace? Why not throw a few apples of discord into the Death Eater ranks? What I said was true, after all -- think of all the Death Eaters we've record of, how many had or have the brains to be much more than nasty, bullying, thugs, like Crabbe, Goyle, or Flint; or refined, hypocritical torturers, like Macnair, Crouch, and the Lestranges; or just plain cowardly sneaks, like Pettigrew? The only one he has now that we know of is Malfoy. Too many smart, ambitious, clever subordinates and one will try and take him out. One he can keep an eye on. But we might as well start some of the dumb ones thinking they can take power; it will make them fight themselves."

"True," McGonagall said.

"And no offense, but Britain isn't the entire wizarding world. Even if you might be right, and it's still the center of that world, it's still only one percent of the total. He can cause great harm, but he can't take over anything."

"True, too," Snape said. "However, none of the current followers I know of would agree, except perhaps for Malfoy, who's in too deep. They are either fanatics or they're followers who would follow any leader who will give them scope for their thuggery. The few whom I thought might see the error of their ways were killed off last June and early July. They didn't have sufficient enthusiasm for His return. If He hadn't hoped there was still some slight chance that I might poison

Potter and the Headmaster, he would have killed me, too, when he had the chance. We'll have to hope your speech affects the newer recruits."

"True," Pwy admitted in turn. "So, I know of some five more minor Death Eaters I can get to and give similar little gifts to. They couldn't act on the suggestion to give it to him unless there's at least two other Death Eaters present."

"Why not slip in a bomb or something?" Bill Weasley asked.

"They aren't doing this totally willingly, Bill. The reason I can enchant them slightly lies with their lack of brain power and true self-identity and will, and in larger part with the fact that I have to honestly be able to say that what I'm giving them will do no direct harm to themselves or to their leader. They have to believe it safe, and I have to be honest with them. I couldn't get any of you, or Malfoy, to bring a second one in, because you have the brains even in the very suggestible state the spell creates to realize that even if it's not harmful in itself, giving it to Voldemort will still harm you. But I could have gotten any one of you to deliver the first one. I could, for example, have Severus serenade Harry on Valentine's Day, or have Sirius give Draco Malfoy a birthday cake." Both men gave Titus and then the other looks of intense disgust. "It's the old spell the Imperius curse was developed from; fortunately, it's legal for me to use like this."

"May I make one request of you?" Titus asked his fellow faculty as the meeting broke up a few minutes later. When he had their attention, he reminded them, "Harry has early morning classes with all of us. There's a good chance he'll have some restless nights over the next two or three weeks. And there's always the chance he'll have a vision in class. We have to keep a sharp lookout."

Indeed, Harry got very little sleep over the next few weeks. Voldemort's wrath was terrible for Harry to experience second-hand, although of course the Death Eaters suffered more dire consequences. 11 Death Eaters were killed, 5 for bringing the cubes, 6 who had tried to desert the cause. 6 other new recruits managed turned themselves in. Voldemort had tried three raids, all of which resulted in his people being killed or captured; although two Aurors were killed, none of the intended victims were even seriously injured.

Shortly after what Harry and his friends knew was the last episode of Pwy's surprises (although of course Voldemort didn't), McGonagall visited the Common Room and ordered the quartet to follow her. Mystified, they followed her to the Infirmary. It had been a quiet Saturday evening.

Dumbledore and a very angry-looking Snape were already there. Snape couldn't contain himself. "Which one of you did it? Or was it all of you!"

"Severus!" Dumbledore snapped.

"Where have you four been since dinner?" McGonagall asked.

"We've been in the common room all night, Professor," Hermione asked. "In fact, no Gryffindor left after they came in after dinner, and everyone was back by Eight-thirty-five." She been on common room duty that night.

"It was done before Eight-thirty-five!" Snape snarled, "more like Seven-thirty."

"We were all in the Common Room by Seven," Hermione asserted.

"What happened?" Harry demanded.

"Mister Malfoy was physically assaulted; he's badly injured," Dumbledore explained. "He did not directly accuse you, but the only thing he has said is, 'kill Potter.'"

"If I had assaulted Malfoy," Harry spat, "I would have dragged him here and then reported whatever act he . . .perpetrated that drove me to assault him. None of us have EVER started a fight with Malfoy and his two . . .followers. In fact, where were they?"

"Mister Crabbe and Mister Goyle. . .haven't been with him as much since the term started," Snape said, trying to hold his temper in check. "That would leave him more open to attack. Don't tell me you haven't noticed!"

"No, we haven't," Ginny said firmly. "We prefer to pay no attention Malfoy and people like him, unless they force us to. He's been keeping his mouth shut for once, and I'm glad of it! So no, we haven't been looking for a chance to gang up on him!"

Snape started to purple, and so missed three figures enter the room.

"Professors?" It was Blaise Zabini. Behind him lurked the very scared-looking Crabbe and Goyle.

"Yes, Mister Zabini?" Dumbledore asked.

Zabini gave his fellow Slytherins a look.

"We did it, sir," Crabbe said.

"We did, we did, we did beat up Malfoy," Goyle agreed.

"He came to us, just like the summer never happened. Just like he didn't tell us to f. . . ."

"To buzz off this term. He said we had to help him kill Potter."

Crabbe nodded. "Otherwise, he said, we couldn't redeem our family names."

"That he said were dirtied by our fathers last summer."

"So we beat the sh. . .err. . . ."

"We beat him up."

"Together."

"We don't like Scar. . .Potter any more than he does," Goyle said, looking at Harry.

"But we're not killin' anyone."

"Especially not on his orders."

"We're not following his orders no more."

"Did he say why he wanted to kill Mister Potter?" Dumbledore asked.

"He said he had orders, orders from. . . ."

"You-Know-Who," Crabbe whispered.

Goyle shrugged. "Maybe he did, maybe he just thought it would make him look big."

"He said if we didn't, he'd do to us what his father did to our fathers."

"So, I hit 'im."

"Then we both hit him," Crabbe said.

"Our fathers followed his father."

"Our grandfathers followed his grandfather."

"Got 'im all killed."

"Not following another Malfoy."

"I caught them trying to figure out what to do next," Zabini said. "I thought this was best, and they agreed. They were to kill Potter using these."

Zabini held out a silk bag. Dumbledore looked inside and showed it to Snape. He went paler than usual.

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"Never mind," Dumbledore answered. "Let it suffice that mere possession of what's in this bag will send Malfoy to Azkaban for a few years. Mister Goyle, Mister Crabbe, you are both suspended as beaters, banned from the dueling club, and barred from visiting Hogsmeade for the rest of this year. You both lose. . .thirty points for using excessive, err, for beating Malfoy far beyond what he deserved. On the other hand, you both did right by refusing to follow his orders, so you are not being expelled, suspended, or given any detentions. Mister Zabini, you are awarded twenty five points. Please take your classmates back to your common room."

"Sir, if there's to be action against Malfoy, I really think that Professor Snape should check his possessions before Malfoy exits the Infirmary," Zabini suggested.

"Severus, we shall look into that now. Minerva, please contact the Ministry. We have no alternative that I can see, considering the nature of these," Dumbledore held up the sack. "Have an auror here in the morning."

"You four, back to your common room," McGonagall stated, rather kindly for her. The four just looked at Snape.

"What?" he demanded.

Harry turned and signaled the others to follow.

"What was that all about?"

"I would imagine, considering your tone with them, they rather expected an apology," Dumbledore said. "Come along, let us see what else Mister Malfoy may be hiding."

Snape flushed in what might have been shame, but followed.

They quickly found a disturbing amount of Dark material hidden in Malfoy's magically expanded trunk. There was enough poison to kill the entire school. There were enslavement potions. There were spy devices (fortunately, only three had been installed -- in the Third year's Slytherin boy's and girls' dorms and the girls' main shower room). He had also started constructing devices which would have allowed Voldemort to port-key in attackers.

When Malfoy awoke in the middle of the night, he realized he had been caught. His signet ring also served as a port-key, and he disappeared from the infirmary before the aurors showed up to arrest him.

Monday, October 23, 1995

Ron woke up a little before 6:00 am. As he looked out of his curtains to check the time, he also saw Harry's were open, and both he and his running clothes were already gone. "Aw, hell," Ron said softly.

He dressed in his own running clothes, and went down to the Common Room. Harry was just sitting in front of the fireplace, staring at it. "Another dream, Harry?" Ron asked softly.

Harry nodded, then asked, "You know how many people I have seen tortured or killed?"

"Too many," Ron said, "especially the innocent ones."

"And how have I felt each time I saw someone hurt or killed?" Harry asked, still in a very soft, very emotionless voice.

"If they were innocent, you felt horrible and guilty; if they were His followers, you still felt horrible."

"I saw two people tortured less than an hour ago, under Cruciatius. It took some time."

Ron wished Hermione or Ginny, or even Lupin, was here. "And how did you feel?"

"I felt. . .well, I laughed. Then after I woke up, I went and puked."

Ron thought about that. The vomiting he understood -- Harry was still obviously appalled at himself. How could Harry, of all people, laugh at seeing two people tortured?

'Tortured, not killed,' Ron realized. 'Followers rather than victims, then.' "Was it the Malfoys?" Ron asked gently.

Harry nodded. "I laughed, well, because I could tell Voldemort was angry, of course, before anything else. Then Malfoy, Draco that is, came strutting in, like he was expecting to be, I don't know, acknowledged as the Crown Prince of Evil or something. The look on his face when he got cursed! He finally got a real taste of what he's supporting, and he pissed himself. Lucius must have flinched or something, because then he got a small dose. Voldemort didn't yell at either Malfoy, He just laughed at Draco for soiling himself in fact; and then when He put the Dark Mark on Draco, and Draco shit himself from the agony, He laughed at him again. That's when I woke up."

"As long as you don't make a habit of laughing at it, Harry, I don't think any less of you."

"Neither do we," Hermione said, emerging from the stairs, where she'd been listening. Ginny just came over and hugged Harry.

Harry asked to see Dumbledore and Snape right after breakfast. Snape sneered at Harry, but Dumbledore insisted he join them. Then Harry told them his story, without mentioning his reaction. Snape's sneer disappeared quickly once he heard Harry's story.

With three Slytherin starters missing, the team went down to a major defeat to Ravenclaw in the middle of November. In early December, Hufflepuff, still demoralized from Cedric's death, also went down to a heavy defeat to Gryffindor. With the snitch being elusive, Harry was able to put in the reserve seekers and beaters after half an hour and still trounce the poor Hufflepuffs.

Other than the Quidditch games, much of the students' attention was towards the Yule Ball, back by popular demand (most of the girls in the top four years had actually signed a petition for it right after Halloween). This year, Dumbledore announced the evening before the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor game, the Ball would be after dinner on Friday, December 22 (instead of the dinner dance of the year before), which would allow students to leave on Christmas Break the next morning.

The evening of December 3, Dumbledore called Harry to his office.

"Professor McGonagall mentioned to me that you have not signed up to stay over the Christmas break. Are you planning on going to the Dursleys'?" Dumbledore was clearly doubtful.

"No, sir. I was hoping to stay with Sirius."

"Sirius has been acquitted," Dumbledore acknowledged, "but he has no permanent abode. The Weasleys would not be safe; it's very difficult to monitor apparitions in the winter, especially over Christmas. Professor Lupin's would also be unsafe."

Dumbledore and Harry were both startled by a knock on the door.

"Come in, Doctor," Dumbledore said wearily. As Pwy entered, Dumbledore said, "He is the only person who can approach the door without my knowing it."

"Minerva mentioned that Harry hadn't been the first to sign up to leave over Christmas this year. Since you called him in, may I assume that he's trying to spend time with his godfather, without an approved venue?"

Dumbledore's face tried to frown and smile at the same time.

"Did Doctor Pwy teach you how to figure these things out?" Harry asked, teasing the Headmaster a little.

"Certainly he did by example, if nothing else."

Pwy smiled for a second, before asking, "May I offer a solution?"

"Of course."

"Harry, Sirius, and anyone else they may wish, may either join me in the Valley, or if they wish some privacy, either they or I can spend the holiday in Weston. In either case, we should make it clear that Harry is going overseas without saying precisely where. That will prevent undue attention being focused on either the Weasleys or the Dursleys, or the Grangers for that matter."

Harry smiled brightly and looked hopefully at Dumbledore. Dumbledore smiled in return.

Chapter 12

Ginny Weasley was in heaven. It was hard for her to imagine how much her life had changed in the last year, especially the last six months. As she danced in Harry's arms, she felt lighter than air. It had helped that Harry had volunteered to take some dancing lessons (much to Ron's dismay), and so had so far failed to trod on her feet once.

She wouldn't have cared (much) if he had. Harry was handsome, especially in his dark green robes, with even darker green velvet trim. She felt attractive in her classical Roman-cut light cream gown. Harry had given her a single pearl and platinum pendant to wear (which matched the pearl earrings he'd given her from his mother's jewelry box), and a single white rose, which she wore in her long French braid. They had danced every dance, embraced.

The last dance was long and especially slow, and Ginny had her head firmly against Harry's shoulder, her arms tightly around his waist, and Harry cuddling her just as tightly. She knew life wasn't safe; Riddle (as she preferred to think of Him) was still out there. There had been three more terror attacks over the last two weeks, and these had succeeded. Three single aurors had been caught coming home at night. So there was still the strong possibility Harry would once again have to face Him.

But tonight, she didn't care. Harry was holding her; Harry loved her; she and Harry had made love several times over the last two weeks. She only wished they could sleep together tonight.

The next day, they would be leaving for Doc Pwy's valley. They would be returning to the Burrow for Christmas Day itself. Her father had moved up fast in the Ministry these last six months; she actually had a nice little allowance. Harry had also started giving her a galleon a week since the previous summer, despite her protests. For once, Ginny could actually buy her family presents. It was a minor point, but it made Ginny feel freer.

Harry wasn't as satisfied with life as Ginny was, although he was as happy and in love with Ginny as she was with him. For one thing, Harry was busier than Hermione, even if she was taking one class more than he was. Studying for the O.W.L.s was taking ever more time -- he would have to devote a good three full days of his vacation writing essays. His exercise routines were easier to do, but they still took up a huge amount of time. And of course, in the back of his mind, Voldemort still loomed over his shoulder.

But tonight, Harry held Ginny, and smiled. Work, school, Voldemort, his abusive childhood; everything faded from Harry's awareness, except his love for Ginny. There had been stolen moments like this before, but never an entire evening quite like this. Harry couldn't know it, of course, but from now on, these moments would become more common. He was loved: as a lover and friend by Ginny; as a best friend and brother by Ron and Hermione; almost as a son by Molly and Arthur Weasley, Remus, Sirius and even somewhat by Hagrid; as a protege by Dumbledore, Pwy, Hagrid, and Remus -- and more importantly, Harry truly felt similar feelings for them all. The one thing Harry had truly lacked was love; he finally realized this night how much love he now truly had in his life.

The quartet and other guests arrived in Titus' valley while it was still dark, due to the time difference. They decided to take a quick nap. Ron gave Harry an extremely displeased look, but he followed Hermione into one of the two large guest rooms without actually saying anything. Harry and Ginny went into the other.

Upstairs, three of the guest rooms were occupied. Sirius took the first room, while Remus and Uhura Sinistra took the two furthest ones. Lupin and Sinistra had been friendly two years before,

but now had become more intimate. All took the time adjusting potions.

After their morning run, Ron asked Harry to continue on for a while. Harry sighed, and complied.

As they jogged slowly over the snow-covered paths, Ron looked at Harry and simply said, "Harry, I know, or at least have a good idea, of what you and Ginny are doing."

Harry had been waiting for this, and knew he had to nip the discussion quickly. "You should," Harry retorted, "since I'm know you're doing even more of the same thing with Hermione. In fact, Ginny got a box of condoms the same time Hermione first did. You're starting what, your third box of thirty-six while we're still on the first?" Harry didn't mention that he and Ginny preferred other forms of contact, since he was determined not to get her pregnant, and that there were only three condoms left. Ron preferred traditional missionary; not that Ron would ever say anything let alone give details, but Hermione talked to Ginny who talked to Harry.

Ron turned red, but resisted the impulse to punch his best friend. Partly because it was true, partly because if he called his sister names Ginny and Hermione would be after him as well as Harry, partly because they were best friends, but mostly because while Harry was still over four inches shorter than he was, he was a much more proficient fighter.

"I love Hermione. I know we're still at least three years from deciding for certain to get married, but I want to be with her. You're four years from being able to marry Ginny. Do you even hope to?"

"Ron, you know how many 'ifs' that really means -- if I'm alive, if we've defeated Voldemort -- if, if, and if. But yes, I hope we stay together and make a family."

"Alright, just checking."

At lunch that day, Titus brought up a sensitive topic. "Harry, have you ever read the Warlocks' Weekly Record?"

"No," Harry replied. "Never heard of it."

"Hermione?"

"Of course. It's published every Saturday morning in Newton; it arrives at Hogwarts Sunday morning; probably Saturday night at Weston. It's a lot less biased than The Daily Prophet, although it doesn't have a lot of detailed news. It's mostly summaries of news from around the world. They even had a stop-press about the possibility of Voldemort's reanimation back in July. I wanted to order it, but they only allow institutions and warlocks to subscribe to it."

"Why do you ask?" Harry asked simply.

"They were wondering if you would answer some questions. Now, I have the questions here. You'd have to write your answers so that it looked like an interview, and they might ask some supplementary questions. You and they would discuss the final draft."

No one at the table looked overly enthusiastic.

"Can I see, Doc?" Ginny finally asked. Titus handed her the list. After reading it carefully, she nodded and handed it to Hermione.

Hermione read it, nodded and handed it to Harry.

Harry sighed, and read through the list. "Sirius? Remus?" Harry asked, holding out the list to them. They looked over the list, and agreed as well.

It was raining at the Burrow on Christmas Day. Titus brought everyone in at just after noon, Burrow time. The twins had driven their mother mad with their anticipation.

Before they started opening the presents, Charlie, who had arrived the previous afternoon, made an announcement. Hagrid, it turned out, was becoming so involved with Madam Maxime that he had decided to quit his position as Care of Magical Creatures teacher (but stay as grounds keeper). Charlie had agreed to take over, since the Romanian government was ready to take back responsibilities for the dragon camp. Charlie wasn't certain how long he would take the job for; he'd signed a contract for a year and a half.

"So, Percy," Fred piped up amid the congratulations for Charlie, "any chance of you taking over for Filch? That way we could all spend the rest of the year together!"

This was not well received by anyone, except for George.

They finally set to opening presents. Harry had damned the consequences, and gotten something for everyone -- Titus had taken him secretly shopping, once in Weston and twice in an American shopping mall on three Saturday nights in December. He bought Mr. Weasley, now an associate minister, a box of Muggle books on technology -- since most were 'Idiot Guides' and 'For Dummies,' everyone got a laugh at them, but Arthur really looked like he enjoyed getting them.

Ginny had told Harry how much her mother loved lavender. Harry had bought nearly every Muggle product he could find at two mall shops containing lavender. This caused even more teasing, and Molly Weasley had for once laughed herself off her old rocking chair, as she saw the different oils, bath salts, and other products.

Percy got three Muggle books on getting ahead in management. Titus had recommended a new Muggle book on Egyptian culture for Bill. The twins had gotten an assortment of Muggle tricks, which Harry told them they could try improving. Not knowing Charlie would be changing his job, Harry had found him a jumbo jar of magical burn ointment. "Can't have too much," Charlie had admitted. After all, he still had a fire crab to deal with. Harry had bought Sirius and Remus each a good work robe.

Ginny had created a design for Harry, which he'd had etched into large goblets. It had two stags, one looking a little younger, standing on a field of lilies. A large dog and a wolf stood guard on the sides. Harry had sets of four made for Dumbledore, McGonagall, Pwy, Hagrid, Sirius, Remus, Ginny, and Hermione; pairs for Sinistra, Flitwick, and Pomfrey, and sets of twelve for the Weasleys and himself.

Harry and Pwy together gave Hermione a set of books on the Old Believers. Of all the presents given, however, Ron's present from Harry was easily the most enthusiastically accepted. Harry gave Ron one owner's share (out of the 500 total) in the Chudley Cannons.

Harry's gift to Ginny, a set of emerald earrings, were admired by all the Weasleys, although not with great enthusiasm, other than by Molly and of course by Ginny and Hermione.

Titus had been impressed by some of Ginny's art. A group from the Magical Artist's Guild had evaluated her work, and sent her a letter stating that, should she achieve her N.E.W.T. in Charms, she'd be accepted to the Sefydliad's Magical art program. After Harry's presents, that was her favorite memory of the day.

Harry was quite happy with how his gifts were received; as much as he liked his own gifts, he had more fun giving. Still, the Weasleys adding him to the family clock meant a great deal to him. Ginny had designed a seal ring for Harry (the same stag that represented his father on the goblets) and Remus, Sirius, Hagrid, Dumbledore, and Pwy had purchased him one made out of his alloy from the shop in Diagon Alley. Ron had bought Harry some sealing wax and Hermione had used another of Ginny's stags/wolf/dog/lily designs for stationary. The twins had supplied the Christmas crackers, which called out Harry's name when they exploded. (This was a prototype for birthday crackers, which would then proclaim the honoree.) Charlie gave Harry his old Quidditch captain robe, while Bill gave Harry a fedora with a dragon-hide hat band. Percy's practical present had been a pamphlet called "Managing Your Gringotts Shares."

The quartet and their professors went back to Titus' in the late evening Burrow time, which made it about 4:00 at the valley. Titus showed Sinistra and Lupin to his cottage at Weston, Sirius to Hogwarts, and then took himself to visit his old family.

"What do we do now?" Ron said in honest bewilderment. "They won't be back until New Year's Day." The other three rolled their eyes.

"Come on, Ron," Hermione said softly. "I have some ideas for what we can do, upstairs."

"What? Oh!!!" Ron frowned. "But what are. . . ."

"We'll be down in the Jacuzzi," Ginny said firmly. "The door will be locked, and if you come down, I'll cut things off you won't want to imagine."

Ron gulped.

10 Questions With Harry Potter

Nearly everyone in our world knows the name of Harry Potter. The so-called Boy-Who-Lived survived the attack of the Dark Wizard still commonly called 'the Dark Lord,' 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' or simply 'You-Know-Who.' That Wizard, it was hoped, was destroyed in the attack on the Potters of October 31, 1981. As we reported (July 1, 1995), the Dark Lord has apparently risen again, in a Dark Ceremony performed June 24 in Western Britain. An upsurge in Dark activity has been reported in Britain and surrounding areas since then.

Young Potter (15) was an unwilling participant in that ceremony, as we were finally able to report in the story confirming the the Dark Lord's return in our August 5 issue. Mr Potter is currently on Yule vacation in North America. He agreed to answer our monthly *10 Questions*.

1) Rumors have abounded in the press over the last 14 years over your upbringing in the Muggle world. How accurate has that reportage been?

HP I haven't read any of the stories. I have to say that my Muggle guardians were very, if subtly, abusive. They regarded my mother, and therefore me and the rest of the Magical community, as 'freaks.' They hoped to starve or crush the magic out of me. They failed. I don't hold Muggles in general responsible. The Muggle world is as wonderful in its own way as ours is, but my relatives weren't. I'm very glad I have my godfather as my guardian now.

2) Your godfather is Sirius Black, recently shown as having been wrongly convicted of being a Death Eater and murderer. Do you really know him well enough to prefer him as your guardian?

HP Simply answered, yes. And I'm glad he's arranged for other guardians should (the Dark Lord) come after him. I hope never to hear from my mother's relatives.

3) Are the reports that the Dark Lord was reanimated in a Dark Ceremony last June, and that you were an unwilling participant, accurate?

HP Yes.

WWR Could you tell us anything about it?

HP I made a full report that night, even if the British Ministry ignored it for about a month. I'd rather not talk about it.

4) Did his reappearance totally ruin your triumph as the youngest Tri-Wizard Tournament winner?

HP I wasn't the Tri-Wizard champion. I was the co-champion with Cedric Diggory. I hope any time we're mentioned, his name goes first. And yes, our victory was turned into ashes. I only hope people remember Cedric as champion.

5) How did Mr Diggory die?

HP He was killed by Peter Pettigrew, under the command of the homoculus that was a stepping stone to (the Dark Lord's) reanimation.

6) Do you feel the Dark Lord is after you specifically?

HP It sounds egotistical to say that, but I've been told that He feels, since His killing curse rebounded from me and disembodied Him, (the Dark Lord) feels he has to deal with me, along with a few others, before He can really start again.

7) Do you think He can be truly beaten?

HP He can't win; the question is how much harm He can do before He's stopped.

8) You have two and 1/2 years left in your basic education. Do you have any plans for after that?

HP No; I'll wait and see what the magical world is like then.

9) You've been linked to. . . .

HP Stories like that show one area that the British Muggle world really does better than we do. If we had the laws the Muggles do on libel, I'd never have to work again.

10) Any final statement you'd like to make?

HP Remember Cedric Diggory. (The Dark Lord) can strike down anyone. Do something today to fight the Darkness.

Chapter 13

Monday, January 1, 1996

"Looks like they're back," Harry remarked as the quartet made the final approach to the cabin on their morning run.

"Looks. . .like. . .something's. . .wrong," Hermione panted. She had been the most lax in keeping up her running over the last two weeks, and was feeling the long run.

They stopped in the garage, breathing deeply and looking at the concerned face of Titus Pwy.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked after a few seconds of silence that were a few seconds too long.

Pwy and Sirius exchanged looks. "Voldemort and his Death Eaters attacked Azkaban last night. He broke out the Lestranges and some of his minor followers, and it looks like most of the Dementors have followed him, too," Pwy told them.

"How bad is it?" Hermione asked.

"Bad, but still far from hopeless," Pwy answered. "Not all the Dementors switched sides, not that they really take sides. There were Seven hundred and twenty-three Dementors stationed in and around Azkaban, even though there really only needed to be about a hundred and fifty. Five hundred and ninety four went over. Voldemort destroyed three of the others, but his Dementors threatened to Kiss him if he didn't stop -- after all the Dementors that stayed didn't do so out of loyalty, they did so to feed off the remaining prisoners, just like the ones that followed him aren't doing so out of active evil, but because they believe they will feed better. The remaining hundred and twenty-six are enough to guard the prisoners that are left, although we might move a few to some of the other prisons around the world, and we are trying to pressure the Ministry to get rid of all the Dementors. There were four hundred and thirty-two prisoners. They were mostly from Western and Central Europe, plus North Africa, and a few European prisoners who were sent to Azkaban for committing crimes elsewhere. Voldemort seems to have freed seventy-two and killed eighty-seven prisoners, and twelve of the fifteen humans on duty. The remaining three may have been working for Voldemort."

"Voldemort also left three extra bodies," Sirius told them. "Karkaroff and young Crabbe and Goyle."

There was a moment of silence for the pair who had tried to at least partially break away from their past.

"Dementors can be destroyed?" Ron said after the silence, now that the bad news had ended.

"In theory, yes, but only with extremely bright light. However, very few wizards have that kind of power. There is an ancient Greek sun-spell. . . ."

"The one that modern Muggle historians mistakenly call Greek fire?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly," Pwy answered, impressed. "A strong witch, like you two," he pointed to the Weasleys, "can use that spell to create nearly the direct power of the sun. That can dazzle an enemy's eyes, but it's nowhere near strong enough to destroy a Dementor. Your Patronius deals with them much better. A really powerful witch, like you," he pointed to Hermione, "or Remus or Sirius, can hurt them badly but not really to the point of incapacitating them."

Harry sighed. "And I suppose I can perform it?"

"Probably," Pwy replied. "It can't hurt to try it, unless you flash it directly in someone's eyes. At Ron's power, he could fully blind someone with about five seconds direct contact; Hermione could do it in about a second."

Ginny pulled out her wand. "Teach us. We also need to learn the Patronius, today."

"I already know how to do that, too," Harry muttered.

"Harry, if you weren't special, Voldemort probably would have searched me out and killed me as a child," Hermione snapped. "The Weasleys would all have been killed before Ginny was even born."

"I know," Harry said, resigned. He pulled out his wand. "Let's go."

The final three days in the valley, the quartet worked hard on the sun spell and Patronius. All could project a cloudy Patronius by the time they left, although only Harry's was fully formed.

Friday morning, they left to spend the next two days at the Burrow. Titus took them directly back to Hogwarts late Sunday morning. To all their shock, Titus had them set their luggage in the great hall, to be taken up to their rooms by the elves, and then hustled them to see Dumbledore.

Once they were seated, they could see Dumbledore was in a very grave mood. The couples nervously joined hands. Pwy stood behind them, and they saw his expression was now one mixed of anger and compassion.

"I shall have to make this announcement again tonight, but I thought you should know now. Last night, the Dementors made some sixty attacks all over Britain and Ireland. Ninety-three people were Kissed. Three current Gryffindor families were attacked. Seamus Finnigan and his parents were Kissed. I'm sorry, Miss Granger, your parents, and the three volunteers guarding them, were among those Kissed as well. Mister Weasley, Miss Weasley; Miss Clearwater's family were the third one attacked, and your brother Percy as well as the Clearwaters were Kissed, although they at least were able to disable the Death Eater who was guiding the attack. Draco Malfoy was the only Death Eater captured. By now, he likely will have been Kissed as punishment."

Hermione sat, frozen, as tears ran down her face. Ron immediately drew her close. Ginny was as stunned as anyone, but asked, "Why . . . why the Clearwaters? They're not Muggles!" She was clearly remembering setting the basilisk on Penelope and Hermione to get Harry's attention, when she'd been under the Imperius control of Tom Riddle Jr.

"Reginald Clearwater was a Muggle-born auror, and his wife was a Muggle-born Gringotts auditor on special commission for the Ministry, going through certain families' financial records. Penelope, her brother, whom you should remember was a Third year Ravenclaw who had several arguments with some of the younger Slytherins last year, and Percy. . . were additional victims of His terror."

"And nothing can be done for them?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

"Nothing I know of," Dumbledore stated sadly.

"Doc?" Hermione turned and asked, pleading.

"I'm sorry. In theory, if a Dementor is destroyed, the souls are released," Pwy answered, "which would at least end the soul's torment. However, even if that's true, I have never heard of any way to rejoin those souls to their bodies."

"You mean, their souls are. . . ." Ginny fainted. Harry just managed to catch her.

Dumbledore watched the students for nearly a minute after Ginny was revived. There was nothing he could do, no comfort he could offer. He looked at his own mentor for comfort, and saw only fury building in Pwy's face and stance. "Damn," Pwy finally muttered in frustration. "DAMN!" He shouted so loudly that it even drew Ginny's attention as she recovered from her faint.

"Titus?" Dumbledore queried, worried. He'd never seen Pwy in a rage before, and it was truly a frightening spectacle.

"I am so sick of these mind games! If I catch a Death Eater, I will find some way to end this!"

"You can't do that!" Dumbledore commanded.

Pwy's anger deepened. "If I can't do that, then there's one other thing I can do, for all of you. We weren't sure, but now I am!" He gathered up one end of his denim cape and flung it around his body. He disappeared in a cloud of fire and smoke.

"I thought no one can apparate in or out of Hogwarts!" Ron exclaimed, drawing a dirty look from Hermione.

"You can't," Dumbledore explained, "however, someone very powerful can apparate within Hogwarts. It's very tiring, and he wouldn't have done it unless he was also very angry. The fire and smoke are merely. . . what do the Muggles say? Special effects?" He frowned. There was some other meaning to that type of apparation, but he couldn't remember it at the moment.

They all sat in sad silence for nearly ten minutes. Dumbledore finally sighed, and turned to the quartet. "If you need to see Madam Pomfrey, please feel free to do so. If you prefer not to come to the feast tonight, please feel free to visit the kitchens. I presume I do not have to remind you how to find them?"

"No, sir," Harry said. As the least affected person, Harry stood to shepherd everyone out of the office and towards Gryffindor Tower. They all had a lot to think about.

Before they could exit, however, there was a tapping from the direction of the window. Dumbledore flung open the window, and a large raven flew in with two letters. "Important!" squawked the raven, dropping one of the letters on the desk.

Dumbledore's hand actually shook a little as he opened the black envelope. There was now no chance of the quartet leaving without direct orders. As Dumbledore read the letter, the raven took off, still clutching the other envelope.

"Harry, do you have your father's map available?" Dumbledore asked quietly, still looking at the letter.

"Yes, sir." Dumbledore had returned the map to him at the start of the school year.

"Notify everyone in the castle. Everyone except yourselves and Hagrid, excepting the elves but including Mister Filch, are to assemble in the great meadow just outside the Hogwarts grounds on the road to Hogsmeade by Six-thirty. The Heads of the Houses will escort their students that stayed over. You four and Hagrid will meet the train at Six, and have the students, and yourselves, taken via carriage to the field. Make certain you are all there before Six forty-five. After you eat lunch, tell the house elves dinner will be late. Understand?"

"Yes, but what's happening, sir?" Harry asked, since the other three were still in a slight degree of shock.

"Titus has summoned the Cigfrans."

"The Cigfrans?" Hermione asked, "Welsh ravens?"

"The Ravens, messengers of the Celtic warrior goddesses. You know that Titus is a Llofrudd; that is, he's authorized to use deadly force as he sees fit?"

All four nodded.

"The Cigfrans are a slightly lesser order within the Old Believers, much like our Aurors, but with a sort of religious authority as well. By using the Dementors, Voldemort has crossed a line; his terror is now a threat not just to Britain or Western Europe. He is a danger to all. The Old Believers may officially join the battle. Tonight, we will hear what they have to say."

"It doesn't seem like you're too sure if that's a good thing or not, sir," Hermione said, her tears now ended as her curiosity was fully aroused.

"The war may continue for some time even if they join, but Voldemort will not now succeed even in the limited senses I had feared. But the Old Believers are more powerful than they have been for nearly two thousand years, and once they become involved, they may not bow out easily. They will not conquer us; but their influence will be much stronger than it was. I do not know if that will be good or bad; people may still be debating that when your great grandchildren are older than I am now." He shrugged. "On the whole, it is a good thing, but that still does not mean the struggle will be fast or any less bloody."

Fawkes began to sing. Dumbledore sat back, and the tension left his face. "Go, children," he said simply.

Harry got everyone back to Gryffindor Tower. There were only a few First and Second years present. Harry got the map, and went off to notify the staff. The other three, still in shock from the news of Percy and the Grangers, agreed to meet in the kitchens in a hour.

Of the seventeen faculty/staff, all but Pwy were present in the castle or at Hagrid's. Bill and Charlie were with Hagrid, along with Fred and George. They had just been given the news about Percy right before they had. Harry probably should have ended his search there, but wanted to let them know that Ron and Ginny were back, and would be in the kitchens soon. He went there first. The four grieving brothers nodded, and took the news of the meeting with a shrug.

All of the faculty were surprised to have Harry show up in their offices and inform them of Dumbledore's orders. Harry refrained from stating that Doctor Pwy might have been involved, or explaining who the Cigfrans might be.

Most of the rest took the news with a confused look on their face. One exception was Flitwick, who merely nodded his head and said, "I see. Probably for the best." The other was Snape, who actually shivered at the thought. "Even the powers of the Light may bring Darkness," he muttered before slamming his office door in Harry's face.

It wasn't just the population of Hogwarts that gathered in the meadow, patchy with snow. Most of the population of Hogsmeade was also present, and so were dozens of people from Diagon Alley, including Mr. Ollivander and Tom the Innkeeper. There were also Ministry officials, reporters, and other people that Ron pointed out were well-known wizards and witches from around the country. Bill pointed out a group he said were Ministry officials from Western Europe and some diplomats.

Harry noticed that the Hogwarts people were on the left of the field, Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley on the right along with the reporters, officials in the middle. It was if they all knew where they were supposed to be. Marcus Frasier, a Seventh year Slytherin prefect that many felt was a hidden Death Eater (and who was also the best Runes student in years), overheard the remark when Harry made it to Lupin.

"Maybe we do."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"Is it true the Ravens are coming?" Frasier asked instead of answering.

"Yes," Harry said simply.

Frasier and Snape both shivered and exchanged a look. "What?" Remus demanded. "Tell us now, Severus." The students gathered around. There were still a few minutes left before 6:45.

Snape looked around, and chanted, "'Nature must be in balance; for every lion there must be a snake; but all must beware the Ravens' masters; for when they return to our shore; the Great Snake will be no more.' We always thought it was a warning to all Slytherins to beware the Old Believers; for to us, the Old Snake isn't just Slytherin House, but the pure-blooded wizarding world we

represent."

"But it could also mean Voldemort," Harry said.

"Yes, Potter, it may," Snape admitted. "Or it may be, that in destroying the Dark Lord, our very way of life may be destroyed. Never forget that in the world of the Old Believers, Doctor Pwy represents what might be called the liberal, radically modern wing. That is very much a minority point of view. There are many others in that culture who think of all other Magical people as lower in worth than any Malfoy ever regarded the dirtiest, poorest, stupidest Muggle. There are even a few, we're told, who await the Cleansing -- the ridding of all of Ireland, Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium, Western Germany, Switzerland and maybe more of all other people, Muggle and Wizard alike. Only then will they come and reclaim their lands."

"And the Old Believers are our old over-lords," Frasier said. "We're likely standing here because this is where our ancestors stood for at least twelve-hundred years, unless you believe the oldest traditions -- in which case it is where they stood for thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of years. And I mean that literally -- this is the meadow where the Druid wizards executed justice in this part of Scotland." He turned to Bill and Remus. "You know what we may see tonight? The Wicker Man? The Antelope?" He shivered again.

"The what?" Harry asked.

"The Wicker Man was where the Druids imprisoned those condemned. Then, they were burned alive in it. It's the symbol of Druid justice," Hermione said. "But what's the Antelope?"

"The Old Believers claim they're descended from the primeval shamans that came into Europe over forty-thousand years ago," Dumbledore said, walking over. "A new theory says that they may be able to explain the cave drawings of animals and hunters. A journal article that just came out last month speculated a famous figure, that of a half-man half-antelope or stag, might be their symbol of greatest power. The author, reputed to be a follower of Voldemort, disappeared the next day. Mister Frasier seems very au current in all this."

Frasier flushed.

Suddenly, the area in front of them roared, with flames forty-five feet around shooting some ninety feet in the air. Gradually, a tall form took shape.

"The Wicker Man!" The shouts came from dozens of people. Some people fell on their knees, others hugged in fear. A few simply stared at it. In less than a minute, the flames had disappeared, leaving the wicker and wood framework

In front of the form stood 27 men, all in dark robes, hooded so that their faces were invisible, carrying stone-tipped spears. "The Ravens?" Harry asked.

"The Cigfrans," Dumbledore acknowledged.

Three figures stepped out in front of the Cigfrans. They were dressed in darkest red robes. They were armed with a sword on their left side and stone axes on their right.

"The Llofrudds," Dumbledore said softly.

The center of the group remained open, and nine figures came dancing out. They were obviously young men and women, since all were nude except for their sandals, capes of pelts, and full-headed masks. The four women were a doe, a mare, a female reindeer, and a cow, while the five men were a bear, a bull, a mammoth, an Irish elk, and at the center of the group, a stag. They were shaking rattles. Most shivered at the sound of the dancing rattles, although Harry felt empowered. Despite their attractive bodies, the dancers were much more frightening than in any way erotic.

And finally, a hooded figure emerged dressed all in white, carrying a long oak staff with mistletoe, a gold sickle on his belt.

A Druid chief had returned to Britain.

The Druid stepped out in front of the group, followed by the nude stag, one Llofrudd, and one Cigfran. The other dancers stopped. The several hundred people stood in total silence. The man's deep voice carried to everyone. "It has been a long time. It has been Four hundred and forty-two years since a Druid leader of any kind has stood on these shores. It has been Nineteen hundred and forty-six years since we have meted out justice to all on this Island. Now, you have allowed one to grow too great in evil. And by you, I mean the entire community in Europe and the Mediterranean! For where did Tom Riddle find his training in basic evil? At Hogwarts, in Slytherin House -- and in the British Magical community abandoning of him to a Muggle orphanage. For where did He find wizards ready to take advantage of his already Dark nature? In the followers of Grindelwald in Britain, Western and Central Europe, and above all in Germany. For where did Tom Riddle finally go to transform himself? To evil wizards in Russia, in Scandinavia, in North Africa. One of you, whom some of you considered the lowest of your lowly world because she was born of what you would call squib or even Muggle parents, defeated him by blessing her son as WE taught, who was able therefore to defeat him. Did you then hunt down his evil essence and capture or destroy it? No. You hoped it was over. It is not over. It has now begun again. And you are next to helpless. Only a powerful old man, a powerful boy, and one of ours that we allow to wander in your world stand between you and death or mindless, soulless, life."

The face inside the hood was hidden, but he seemed to look at everyone for a moment before speaking again. "While a few of us enjoy the comforts of the Muggle world, we can not care if it lasts or is destroyed. As lovers of nature, many of us almost wish it would be destroyed. So our concern is for you, not the Muggles. You, who have strayed from the paths of true belief. Yet, you are of our kind. Some of us find some value in you. Others think you're as selfish and worthless as the Muggles many of you despise."

"And now a Llofrudd, who has labored more mightily for your world than any alive in Europe, yes even more than Dumbledore here, has appealed to us in your name. We have consented to consider the appeal because of your evil wizard's use of Dementors; evil creatures created by wizards like yourselves to serve their needs. We will send some help, if you ask. When it is over, we shall ask three favors. We will not tell you what they are before then. If you refuse them, we are unlikely to ever help you again. And remember, without our help Grindelwald, Voldemort, and more than three dozen other Dark Wizards would have had greater influence than they did these last fifteen hundred years. You will need our help again. Our favors, we think, are of little price compared to the help you have given you over all this time."

The Druid called then out nine names. Harry knew Minister Fudge, Mr. Weasley, and Mr. Diggory. The other six were Ministers or representatives from Ireland, France, Spain, Benelux, Germany, and Switzerland.

Once those nine were called out, he began again. "Is Ollivander the wand seller here?" the Druid demanded.

Mister Ollivander stepped forward, proudly. "Choose additional four representatives from Diagon Village and then four from Hogsmeade," the Druid ordered. He turned to the Hogwarts group. "Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, Sprout, Hagrid, Lupin, Potter, and Granger, come here!"

The Druid drew a glowing line from about six feet from the ground to the ground with the end of his staff. "This represents one quarter of a standard hour. At that time, these twenty-seven representatives will say yes or no to our aid. Mister Ollivander, I suggest you hurry your selection." The line slowly started to spark and disappear.

He turned to the nine nude figures, who had been standing very still despite the cold. He waved his

staff and they turned into wolves. He waved it again, and he had somehow transported in nine Muggle port-o-lets. 'I guess he knows something about Muggle culture,' Hermione thought with a mental giggle.

"No one is to leave. Those metal sheds are Muggle portable toilets, if anyone needs to use them. Question, Snape?"

Snape had in fact been approaching the Druid from behind. "Yes, why Potter and Granger? They aren't even adults!"

"They are the future. Granger represents both the best a true witch can be in your culture, and the best a Muggle-born can be, which is considerable. Potter is Potter, and you should look past your childish behavior towards him and see him as he is."

Snape started to flush in anger. His wand hand twitched.

"Touch your wand, and you're dead. Dumbledore trusts you, which is the only reason you stand here as the representative of Slytherin ideals instead of inside Justice."

Harry walked over to Dumbledore, Hermione followed. "Professor, what do you recommend?" Harry asked.

"If you fully trust Titus Pwy, agree; if you do not, don't," Dumbledore told the entire Hogwarts group. "Do not vote yes because you fear Voldemort; do not vote no because you fear the Old Believers."

"We don't know Pwy," Florian Fortescue said, walking over. "We know you."

"I know him," Ollivander said.

"As do I," Hare, the only representative from Knockturn Alley added. "He's strong, honorable, and wise."

"Is he the one that summoned them?" Ollivander asked.

"I believe so," Dumbledore answered.

"But can we really trust the Old Believers," Zonko asked. "I mean, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is evil, but that doesn't mean we can trust these people." He looked nervously at the Wicker Man.

Remus Lupin, meanwhile, had walked over to the nearest wolf guarding the perimeter. She growled at him. Remus growled back. They stared at each other for a few moments, then the wolf started barking at him and moving around in front of him. She then stopped, sat, and looked at him. Remus nodded and walked away.

"What the hell was that all about?" Snape demanded.

"The pack has no intention of making this their range," Lupin said.

"What does that mean?" Snape then turned on Hermione. "And don't you roll your eyes at me, girl!"

"Then I suggest you listen to what Professor Lupin said," Hermione said, rather snappily for her. "I don't know how trustworthy the Old Believers are. Looking at how they're portrayed in Magical history, which means mostly legend, I see a lot of fear and possible misrepresentation. From everything else I've seen, which isn't nearly enough I admit, I see no reason to mistrust them."

"Naive girl," Snape muttered. He turned to Dumbledore. "Well, do we say yes or no?"

"I will vote last," Dumbledore said. "I do not wish to be of undue influence."

"But Professor Dumbledore, sir!" Hagrid protested.

"You should go with your own thoughts," Dumbledore said simply.

Harry turned to the Druid. It was no use arguing with Snape, he decided, and so if Dumbledore

wasn't going to give direction, it was time to get the information he wanted some other way. "Are you a member of the Council?"

"No, Harry Potter, I am of the Tuatha."

"I see. You said you would help us fight, not that you would fight for us, correct?"

"That is correct, Athro Potter. This is primarily your battle, after all. We will have our plans, just as you will. I shall leave two of these three Llofrudds and the Cigfrans to fight, and Sersiants to guard any prisoners we take. An additional Llofrudd shall be here soon, who shall stay and command our forces. We shall have a council of nine, the three Llofrudd, a Cigfran, Dumbledore, and two nominated from the British ministry, plus one from Eire and one from France."

The Druid turned to the entire group. "It is time to vote. Does anyone care to start? No? Then we shall start with the Government."

While Fudge abstained, Diggory and Weasley voted yes, as did the representatives of Ireland and Benelux. Germany, Spain, and France voted no. Switzerland also abstained.

The Townspeople voted four yes and five no. It therefore stood at 8 yes and 8 no with 2 abstentions as it went to Hogwarts.

Snape stepped forward and voted No. Harry voted yes. Hermione stepped up besides Harry and voted yes as well. Hagrid followed. The other professors joined them. Even without Dumbledore and the abstentions, there was a majority. Dumbledore then voted yes, and three of the five no votes from town switched, as did France and Spain. Fudge finally voted yes as well.

It was done.

"I believe these young students have been out long enough tonight, and have a feast awaiting," the Druid said. He raised his staff. "May the Blessings of the Gods be upon us all, as we try to do good!" White sparks flew out of the staff. When they hit Harry, he was reminded of the feelings phoenix song stirred in him.

"Athro Potter!" the Druid called. Harry, the last to leave of the Hogwarts group, turned. "Your extended family is proud of you."

Harry was confused, but pleased. The Druid nodded at Harry, who nodded back.

A fiery circle formed, and two figures formed. One was dressed as a Llofrudd; from the size, many recognized him as Titus Pwy. Next to him was a struggling Draco Malfoy, bound and gagged.

"You got to him before he was Kissed?" the Druid asked.

Pwy merely bowed assent.

"All Dementors in use by the British have fled or are destroyed?"

Pwy bowed again.

"What!" Fudge turned and yelled. "They were on our side!"

The Druid turned on him. "They were on no one's side. They are all on their own. One is as likely to Kiss Voldemort as serve him, and the same is true of the ones that you believe you used. The Dementors are unnatural creatures, and all we find will be destroyed!"

The Druid turned to Pwy. "Give that one to Justice!"

Pwy dragged the struggling Malfoy to the Wicker Man, and threw him into one of the cages, releasing the magical bindings. Pwy shut the fragile-looking door and walked away. Malfoy threw the gag off, and started screaming and trying to open the door. The door remained shut, and Draco remained unheard, despite the appearance of mere wicker bars and strips.

"Any who serve the Dark Lord, any who have bore his Dark Mark, you have one week to surrender

to us." The Druid stared at Snape, who had tried to lead the way back to Hogwarts. "You will pay for any crimes you have committed, but suffer nothing beyond that. After that time, expect no mercy." The Druid and one of the Llofrudds disappeared in fire and smoke. Dumbledore finally remembered that this was the form of apparition Druids used on religious missions.

Pwy's voice came forth loudly, carrying over the crowd's noise. "This is now the Llys and Carchar, the Court and Prison, of the True Believers. Leave, unless you have business with us."

Chapter 14

Saturday, March 9, 1996

The Gryffindor team rode out of the stadium in triumph on the shoulders of their Housemates. They had triumphed over Slytherin 330 - 60. Harry had once again put in the second string for part of the match.

As Harry approached the castle after his shower, hand-in-hand with Ginny, he saw McGonagall coming towards them. "The Headmaster needs to speak with you, Mister Potter." She glance took in Ginny, and then Ron and Hermione. "Just you. Come along."

Harry of course wondered what was wrong. It was just over two months since the Old Believers had joined in the fight against Voldemort. So far, it had all been little skirmishes; there had been no more great attacks. Three Death Eaters had been killed, while eight more Death Eaters had joined Malfoy in the Wicker Man, where they were stunned most of the time, like Moody had been the year before. Twenty-one of Voldemort's Dementors had been destroyed.

Fudge had been retired from office. Amos Diggory was now the Minister, while Arthur Weasley was his Deputy. Gringotts had reported a complete return to normal business by mid-January.

Harry had had only one trance -- the afternoon after the Druid had held the gathering. Voldemort was certainly angry, but Harry also thought he detected fear.

Doctor Pwy seemed to be going about his normal routine during the day, but Harry could see from the Marauder's Map that he was usually gone from the grounds right after his last class. Pwy was rarely seen at dinner.

Harry wished he had time to see from the map who might be with Dumbledore, but McGonagall was pushing the pace to the Headmaster.

"Anthrax Ripple," McGonagall said with a derisive look. "Up you go, Potter." She turned and left.

Harry knocked quietly on the door, and Dumbledore asked him to come in. Dumbledore, Pwy, Lupin, and Black were sitting, looking at him. Snape was there, but seemed to be ignoring everyone.

Harry greeted them all. He had just seen Sirius a few days before, so neither were as effusive in their greetings as they sometimes were.

"Sit down, Harry," Dumbledore invited.

"We have been made an offer, which to some degree concerns you," Pwy told him simply. "Peter Pettigrew has offered to surrender, on certain conditions."

"And that concerns me how?" Harry asked. "I mean, I understand why you'd tell me if you captured him, but do I get a say in his surrender?"

"To a degree," Pwy answered. "Pettigrew is responsible for some dozen murders from when he framed Black; he killed Cedric Diggory; he is an accomplice to the murder of your parents and Bertha Jorkins; he took your blood for an illegal ritual; and he framed Black. No doubt, he's guilty of more than that."

"No doubt," Sirius growled.

"Now, why does this concern you, Harry? That has to do with who you are. You are the heir of Gryffindor, as I told you before."

"What?" Sirius, Snape, and Remus shouted.

"I see you kept that secret from everyone?" Pwy asked. Harry nodded. He didn't like to think about

it, although he had told Hermione, Ron, and Ginny. "What you don't know is that Gryffindor was a direct magical heir of Merlin on his father's side and the heir of two other powerful Old Believer families, one of them mine in fact, on the mother's. In addition, it turns out that your paternal grandparents' direct ancestors made an unknowing habit of marrying other heirs of powerful families. Your mother was a break in the pattern only because her ancestors were not magical heirs, but they were blood heirs of several powerful bloodlines."

"I know you dislike the fact that in some ways you are special," Dumbledore said. "It's a burden you didn't and wouldn't choose, but it is a fact."

Harry didn't want to think about that yet. "And this affects Wormtail and me how?"

"You're a direct heir of Merlin -- and so also a direct heir of the Hereditary High Priests of what you would call the Stone Circles."

Harry broke in on Pwy, "You mean like Stonehenge?"

"Exactly. You are not a priest, let alone a Druid, but you have certain religious rights, should you choose to exercise them. And you saved Pettigrew's life. He is therefore under your protection. We can kill him in a fight, but if he surrenders he can even claim sanctuary," Dumbledore said.

"No!"

"Now, you can make a formal statement stating that because he killed Cedric Diggory in front of you, and drew your blood, he has renounced any protection from you," Pwy told him.

"Exactly what do I have to say?"

Pwy drew out a sheet of parchment. "Read this carefully, Harry."

Harry did, and then he signed it.

"Pettigrew may still escape the worst punishments, if he gives us enough information soon enough, but he will be punished for the rest of his life if he surrenders," Pwy assured Harry and Sirius.

"If he doesn't, I want him," Lupin said.

"What?" Dumbledore and Sirius said in unison.

"If he's captured and condemned to death, I want him. For one night. During the full moon." Lupin's jaw was set. "Human or rat, it doesn't matter."

"NO!" Sirius and Harry said together.

"If anyone deserves to die, he does," Harry agreed with his surrogate uncle. "But you've struggled against prejudice your whole life, and I will NOT let you kill the rat like that."

Lupin looked at Harry. He was still at best average height for his age and despite his heavy training he was still looked a little skinny for any age, even though that slenderness was now fairly well-muscled. But the intensity of his personality was nearly over-whelming at times. Despite how much Snape might rail against it, he was a leader, by birth, blood, and temperament. Lupin might be one of his mentors, but he was also Harry's follower. "Are you sure you want to put it to me that way, Harry?" Remus said quietly. "If you do, don't deny that you're a leader, a chieftain in fact. If you ask it, I will pledge you my oath in battle."

Harry stared at Lupin. Snape looked somewhat sick.

"He's right, Harry," Pwy said. "You are a warrior prince. Accept it, and let us teach you to use that power in you. I'm not a chief; I'm more of a berserker. People, not everyone, but people will follow you. You dislike that responsibility, which can be a good thing -- if it doesn't crush you, it makes you a better, more caring leader."

"Will I really have to?"

"Honestly, Harry?" Pwy asked.

"Yes."

"If Voldemort is not destroyed by your seventeenth birthday, we will probably use your psychic link to take us to him, for the final battle."

"Why wait?" Harry demanded. "Why not go tonight?"

"No, Harry," Dumbledore told him. "It's wrong to think that way. The Doctor shouldn't even have told you yet."

"Albus is half right," Pwy told Harry. "You're not ready yet. I know you hate to hear that, but you're not. You've survived more from luck than from skill so far. By the time you're of age, you will probably be ready. If I decide you're ready before then, then we will go sooner if we need to. If you're not ready for some reason by then, we'll delay it. If we went today, we'd likely all be killed, because right now we aren't sure we can get more than two people to go with you. We're also trying to increase the number. We want at least five. But, when you're ready, we will go together if we have to. I promise you."

"All right," Harry said. "I'll work hard."

"Don't repeat anything of what we've talked about today, Harry," Dumbledore told him. "I know we can trust Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, but there are few totally safe places, even at Hogwarts, where secrets spoken stay secrets."

"What do I tell them I was told then? They're going to be more than curious, you know."

"You can say you were sent for to see Sirius, before he goes back into the field with the Cigfrans," Dumbledore said. "We have also destroyed all the known Dementors other than the ones with Voldemort. There are probably still some wild ones in caves around Eur-asia, but not many."

"Any leads on restoring the souls the Dementors have stolen?" Harry asked.

"Actually, maybe," Pwy said. "There is a spell that might work, but it all hinges on so many variables that all it means is instead of no hope, there's so little it might as remain no hope. I'm sure the four of you can figure out most of them, if you want to be depressed. There is even less hope for the Muggles Kissed than the wizards, not that there is any real hope for them."

"Any hope is better than none," Harry said.

"Harry, we'd have to capture a Dementor, which no one really knows how to do, to even have a slight chance," Pwy told him. "Then move the souls out before destroying the Dementor, which we think we might be able to do, but we're not certain exactly how. Then we'd have to figure out how to hold the soul, and of course we'd have to then rejoin it. There's only one step we can even guess at right now."

"Let them work on ideas for one of the missing steps," Lupin said suddenly. "Your lot doesn't think it's possible, so you might miss something. Hermione is the most brilliant student I've run across; and the other three are good at poking holes in theories. Let them run with it."

"Sixth years have to present a research project that combines Defense with either Charms, Creatures, Transfiguration, or Potions," Dumbledore mused. "They may be group or individual. There is no reason not to start early."

"Consider this your group's project; even for Ginny," Pwy told Harry. "Get going."

"Don't let them run themselves into the ground," Sirius instructed Harry. "Even though it means a lot to all three of them."

"I'll do my best. But I need to tell them more."

"We almost forgot the good news," Pwy told Dumbledore.

"Oh, yes, well, relatively good news," Dumbledore assented. "The guardianship papers for Miss Granger came through. She is now legally a ward of the Weasleys."

"And, speaking of guardians, may I assume you don't want to go back to the Dursleys?" Pwy asked.

"No!" Harry, Sirius, and Remus chorused.

"I will check with them, just to make certain they will not allow you back for two weeks," Pwy said, "although if you do by some small chance return, you shall not return alone. If you do not, the question remains, what do we do with you? You are not really safe anywhere in Britain other than with the Dursleys or here, and neither is a good option. Sirius, Remus, and I are needed here, and I do not think Molly Weasley would like you and Ginny and Ron and Hermione totally alone in my valley." He appeared to think. "If I give you a set of detailed guidelines, would you follow them?"

"Probably."

Pwy smiled. "I'll go over them with you four first. If you don't follow them, you'll be booted out of Weston, for good."

"Then almost certainly we can," Harry said with a smile.

"You'll be allowed to continue your training, under the supervision of the scholars in residence. Only speak of any of this and those other matters while in my relaxation room -- it's the safest room in the castle, other than this one. Remember and tell your friends -- no more general discussions of secret information outside that room or this. I'll talk with the Weasleys."

"Thank you."

Hermione managed to force four hours a week for researching their Dementor project into their schedule. There was almost no free time due to the O.W.L.s; all four even gave up the last three Hogsmeade weekends.

By now, Hermione was running the Five and Seventh year Gryffindors like a drill sergeant. Even the other Gryffindors started to fall under her discipline.

There were 12 subject areas and 2 required theory areas covered by the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. Hermione was taking 10 of the subject areas, the other Fifth year Gryffindors 9. She was helping the others so much in Divination and Muggle Studies, she applied for permission to take those extra areas. Harry, busy helping Hermione with the Muggle Studies Fourth through Seventh Years to take a little pressure off, applied to take that one as well.

Hermione was the only Gryffindor really glad that the Gryffindor -- Ravenclaw Quidditch game was May 18, instead of the last game, June 22 (since the former would decide the Quidditch Cup, everyone concerned wanted more practice time). She wanted to make certain she could take over 2/3s of the Quidditch training time each week (she had agreed to leave the remaining time to help train the team for next year) for her study groups.

"Catch the snitch quickly, Harry," she told him with mock seriousness, "that will give me time to help those Fourth years with their Arithmancy and for you to help the First years with Potions." She was only partially serious, but she had all the Fifth years tutoring the younger students to help them revise for the O.W.L.s, while she set the Seventh years to help the Sixth and Fifth years. Hermione left the bemused Harry and dragged the First and Second years off with Lavender to drill them on their History before the start of the game.

Harry satisfied Hermione -- he out-fainted Cho and caught the snitch eleven minutes into the game. Gryffindor had won the Quidditch Cup and all but assured themselves of the House Cup as well.

Hermione insisted that they wait and celebrate after 8:00 pm. That way, she was able to force everyone to squeeze in two extra study sessions. Everyone complained, but they also all went along.

Only Hermione and Ginny saw that the main reason the students all went along with this wasn't because they knew it was for their own good (although they did know that), but because Harry had told them it was the right thing to do. Harry was now the true, the only, leader for the entire House. Even the Sixth and Seventh years followed his lead.

Saturday, June 22, 1996

Exams were over -- the last had been the DADA practical for 4th and 6th years that morning. Even Hermione was exhausted. O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. results would be sent to the students in early July, while the rest of the students would learn their final scores the following Friday. The next Saturday, they would be heading off for summer vacation.

It was a beautiful, if slightly cloudy and cool day. The whole school was at the Quidditch field, to cheer on Hufflepuff and Slytherin in the final game of the year.

It was a moderately-low scoring game; neither team showed much skill. Hufflepuff was leading 90 - 60 after four hours of play, when a Sersiant appeared via port-key next to Dumbledore and Pwy. Dumbledore instantly stopped the game.

"ATTENTION! Please land! We have just received word that Dementors and Death Eaters are headed towards the Wicker Man, obviously with the intention of freeing the prisoners. All Professors except Lupin, Pwy, Hooch, Vector, and Sinistra, please start moving students back to the castle when I give the word. Madam Hooch, take the senior Quidditch players on the field and sweep the grounds for anyone not at the match. Professors Vector and Sinistra, stay here until all the students have left, then make certain no students loiter between here and the castle. Professors McGonagall and Snape, take the lead, and take the Weasleys and Miss Granger with you to help make certain the way is clear and to guard the route. Professor Flitwick, please guard the center of the line! Secure all the students in the Great Hall and the adjoining corridor with the rest rooms. Professor McGonagall, Fred and George Weasley, alert the house elves and then return to bring up the rear of the students and guests. Harry Potter, come with me. Professors Lupin and Pwy, you're dismissed."

"Weasley! Granger!" Snape ordered.

"Don't be the hero," Hermione said to Harry. "Do what you have to, but no more." Hermione kissed Harry on the cheek, and Ginny wordlessly did the same.

"Now!" Snape ordered. As Harry walked past Snape, the Professor said, "Good luck, Potter."

"Thank you, sir."

They port-keyed to in front of the Wicker Man. There was only the four of them, plus five Sersiants. "Is this it?" Harry asked.

"For the moment," Pwy said. "Let's see what happens. Lupin, guard our backs, just in case."

"There they are," a Sersiant pointed out. A wave of Dementors crested a hill, about two hundred yards away.

"Pick your target and go," Pwy instructed Harry. They and Dumbledore were soon each destroying a Dementor every five seconds; which was far too slow, even at the slow pace the Dementors were making.

A few moments later, Voldemort and thirty Death Eaters appeared.

Dumbledore half-turned to Harry. "Harry, destroy one more Dementor, and then get on the ground and cover your eyes, unless you want to go blind, alright?"

"Yes, sir." Harry did as he was told, then 'hit the dirt.'

"Un, dau, tri," Harry heard Pwy count, and then, even with his eyes closed, he could see the flash of light.

"Open your eyes, Harry," Pwy said.

Half the Dementors had been destroyed, a quarter seemed more or less incapacitated, and the remaining ones were fleeing. About a third of the Death Eaters were rolling on the ground in agony, while the others were fleeing. Only Voldemort stood on the crest of the hill, looking at them. Then he too turned and left.

The agony of the Death Eaters energized many of the injured Dementors. They quickly recovered and left. When Harry turned to ask Dumbledore why they weren't pursuing the enemy, he saw the Headmaster was sitting on the ground, looking very tired. The other two Llofrudds were now standing with them, as were six Druids.

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"We sent a very powerful concentration of light at them, Harry," Pwy answered. "Albus will recover his strength in a few minutes. We could either spring this trap, or have the forces to chase them down; we couldn't hide both. We also asked you to come because you have the power to destroy Dementors and because Voldemort is drawn to you, in order to make certain he came here instead of the school. Just in case you were wondering."

"I was. How did you know I was curious?"

"You're the curious sort. Look and see what we managed, and how."

One of the Death Eaters stood up and raised his hands as he walked down the hill. The Sersiants and the Llofrudds moved up the hill, the Llofrudds destroying what was left of the Dementors.

Pettigrew was allowed to approach the group, although there were five wands trained on him, just in case.

"Headmaster, Remus, Harry."

"Changing sides again, Peter?" Remus asked.

"Yes, for the last time."

"Come with us," one of the Druids said. "The Cigfrans have questions."

Peter smirked, and walked away from them. Lupin's wrist was suddenly grabbed by Dumbledore. "He's not worth it, Remus." They saw Remus had his wand drawn again. Pettigrew disappeared.

"What will happen to him?" Remus asked.

"Life in prison, or death by any means of his choice, with the option of being made a ghost," Pwy said, coming up to them. "I think I'll suggest we bind his ghost to a tree that has a lot of woodpeckers."

"Can you really do that?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes; we can control ghosts fairly expertly. That's why Peeves is so frightened of me," Pwy said. "That book you got last summer only has the basics as far as we're concerned."

"If you can control ghosts and bind them to something alive like a tree, couldn't you control the souls captured by the Dementors, and maybe control the Dementors? In a sense, that binding is the mirror of our problem. Then we could hold the Dementors, extract the souls, and maybe rejoin them before destroying the Dementor?"

Everyone stared at Harry. "Athro Potter," a Druid said to Harry, "we should have realized it was possible. We shall start research on it as soon as you and Granger arrive at the West. . . I mean at

Weston. It may work."

"Err, thank you, sir."

"Would you and your friends care to learn the ways of the People?" the Druid asked. Harry now realized it was the same one who had addressed the crowd after New Years.

Harry looked puzzled. "He means, would you four like to learn enough to decide if you might want to become Old Believers," Remus told him.

"Oh! Yes. At least I'm sure Hermione and I would, and if we do, Ginny and Ron would like to know, too."

The Druid planted his staff into the ground and pulled back his hood. Wild black hair and intelligent, intense blue eyes were the first things Harry saw. Then his eyes went back to the hair.

"My name is Harri Myrddin; and we're such distant cousins that we shouldn't even be considered relations, but somehow, I think we are."

Harry smiled and shook the Druid's hand. "Cefnder," Harry said.

"Cousin," Harri agreed.

Chapter 15

The quartet stayed at the Burrow until July 4, with six Aurors and three Sersiants helping to protect them. They were waiting for their O.W.L. results while the twins awaited their N.E.W.T.s. Their final subject grades would be 1/2 their scores for the year and 1/2 from the O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. scores. Ginny of course already had her scores for the year (Defense 99%; Charms 98%; Transfiguration 98%; Muggle Studies 97%; Herbology 94%; Astronomy 93%; Runes 92%; Potions 88%; and History 87%, for an over-all average of 94, placing her fifth in her class for the year, and sixth over-all for their combined four year score -- and first for her year amongst the Gryffindors).

"Well, who should go first?" Ron asked nervously once the owls delivered their results.

"I say let the twins go first," Ginny said with an evil grin.

"Go on!" Molly ordered.

Fred and George peeked, and gave sighs of relief. They both had N.E.W.T.s in Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Theory I & II, and Defense. Anything above five was very respectable; and they'd managed one more N.E.W.T. than they had O.W.L.s.

"Go on, Ron," they both demanded.

Ron sighed and simply opened his and handed it to Hermione without looking at it.

"You have your O.W.L.s in Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Creatures, and both Theories -- although just barely in Magical Substance" (this was mostly Potions and Herbology) "and Herbology. You just missed in Potions and Divination. So, seven O.W.L.s, with final grades of Ninety-nine in Creatures; Ninety-five in Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense; Ninety-three in Herbology; Eighty-seven in Astronomy, Potions, and Divination; Seventy-eight in History; over-all average Ninety point six-seven, which is your highest yet."

Harry handed his to Hermione as well. "O.W.L.s in Muggle Studies, Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Practical Magic Theory," (mostly Charms and Transfiguration) "Astronomy and Creatures; you just made it in Divination and History and just missed in the others. Nine. Final grades: A Hundred and five in Defense; Hundred and two Charms; Ninety-nine Creatures; Ninety-six in Astronomy, History, and Transfiguration; Ninety-three in Divination (Much higher than usual!); Eighty-seven in Potions and Herbology. It also says here you had the top grade in Defense and were in a three-way tie for top score in Charms -- it seems you outscored every one in the practical side -- over-all average Ninety-five point six-seven! Well done! That's five points higher than you've done before!" Everyone congratulated Ron and Harry.

Hermione opened hers, and smiled. "All fourteen O.W.L.s!" She basked in the congratulations. All of Hermione's scores were at least a 96 (Potions, of course, was her lowest). She was the top scorer in Transfiguration, Arithmancy, and Runes, and had been one of those tying Harry in Charms. Hermione placed 1st in the class (currently just 33 students), Harry 4th, Ron 9th, and 1st, 2nd, and 4th in their Gryffindor year. There was also a note from McGonagall saying this was not only the first time Gryffindor had placed #1 over-all since 1977 but the first time Gryffindor had placed first in every year ever, and congratulating Hermione on her coaching.

"You know, Ginny," Ron said seriously, "you might end up with Hermione as a teacher yet!"

That evening, Doctor Pwy took the quartet to his Cottage in Weston. It was, of course, early afternoon in the Rockies. The top floor had two large bedrooms, with water closets; a small bedroom, and a small bathroom. The downstairs was simply kitchen, dining room, and sitting room/library ("Call it a solarium," Pwy told them). There was a nice study in the attic. The cellar

had a root cellar, wine cellar, and pantry.

Two house elves, a couple in fact, came with the house, although Hermione was relieved to see they both 'had clothes.' Hachi would keep the small yard and make certain that there was enough wood for the cooking fireplace (and, some nights, for the bedrooms as well) and look after the chickens. He kept some pigs at their home in the southern part of the valley, and would take any scraps home for them. Hati would take care of the food, laundry, and basic cleaning for the students.

The students had to keep to a fairly strict code of conduct when outside the cottage, even in the garden. Deviation from one of the two sets of clothing rules was allowed only on their morning run, and they had to stick to the authorized routes.

Every morning, they would have to be finished with their morning run by 7:30. They were expected to be at the Sefydliad by 8:30 every day except Sunday. From 8:30 until 11:30, they were to help the group researching the Dementor-handling spells. From 1:00 until 2:00, they were to be coached in various subjects. From then on, and on Sundays, they were in theory on their own.

Every afternoon, Hermione went back to work with the research group, while Ron usually went to play chess, except Wednesdays, when Ron, Harry, and Ginny joined a flying group. Harry spent some afternoons meeting his very distant cousins, others practicing dueling. Ginny split her time between being with Harry when he was visiting and drawing when he was dueling. Sunday mornings, all four went flying. Saturday and Sunday late afternoons, they studied religion with various Druids. Hermione went back to do more research early Sunday afternoons.

Every morning, Hati would fix them a simple breakfast. They'd eat lunch either at the Broga or at the Sefydliad. Harry would stop whatever he was doing at pick up Hermione at 6:00 (she was nearly always the only one left in the research room reserved for the project). Then the trio would track down Ron. Most days were nice enough for them to eat in the garden (which wasn't encouraged as a daily habit, but not forbidden). Hermione would sum up where the project stood and what they'd be looking at the next day.

Birthday parties every year really weren't part of Weston culture. And, since sugar was one of the banned substances, that rather ruled out having a birthday cake. They did have a honeyed dessert for Harry's birthday dinner, however.

"What are you thinking, Harry?" Ron asked as they finished off their light dinner ale.

"I just wish this was real."

Hermione frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"This isn't real?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"It's not real." Harry insisted, "this is just a summer interlude. Voldemort is still out there, and we have two more years of school, Ginny three. When all that's over, then maybe living like this will be real. I like this life-style." He thought a moment and then smiled. "No offense, Hermione, but I'm not a natural scholar like you. Still, learning basic runes has been fun. I sent a note to McGonagall and asked if I could start Runes as a tenth class next year. Too bad I can't add Muggle Studies as well."

"Too bad you didn't start last year, you might have been able to get a late O.W.L or even N.E.W.T.," Hermione added.

"Well, I have the languages now. I asked to see if I could skip the first year or two."

"Excuse me, cousin!" Harri Myrddin called out over the low stone fence. There was a small crowd of Harry's distant cousins there as well. Harri was the oldest, in his early forties. Most of the males had hair just like Harry. "May we join you?"

"Certainly," Harry said, switching over to the Welsh dialect they'd all learned over the last year. "Welcome to Pwy's Cottage, Wise Master."

"We usually only celebrate important birthdays," Harri's wife Lowri said, "but we decided having you at our out-post to the World was important."

Harri's brawny youngest brother Owain, who ran a traditional pub in Weston, tapped a small keg. "This is as mild an ale as can be made. Not much stronger than that awful sweet butterbeer you folks drink."

"No matter that all your close family is gone," Harri said, raising a small cup of ale as a toast a few minutes later, "you still have families. A very distant family by blood, to be sure, but still family. And we see you have at least one other one forged by the bonds of friendship and adventure. So, to our kinsman, Harry Potter, may he celebrate many more happy birthdays, and may some of them be with us!"

The group enjoyed the light ale. Several neighboring families came over to see what the commotion was all about. They brought food, ale, and beer and joined in. The few who might have disapproved quickly joined when they saw a member of the Tuatha (who rarely visited the area) leading the celebration.

As the sun set, Harri stood on a bench, and led a prayer of thanks. All the group, including the quartet, raised their hands to give thanks. In the gathering darkness, small balls of light formed between the hands of several of the participants, including Harry's, Ginny's, and Hermione's.

As the group broke up, they asked Harri what that meant. "I invoked Powers. For the Light to show between your palms has several meanings, since I assume you did nothing deliberate to create it."

"We didn't," Harry assured him.

"It means that you hold the strong blood of one of the Ancient Priesthoods. Obviously, Hermione, you have strong magical blood deep in your past. It also means that the Powers find you both interested and worthy. Should you four wish to join the Outside Believers, our fellows who live out in the World, this demonstration would help."

"Nothing happened to me," Ron pointed out.

"Faith comes in many forms, Ron" Harri assured him. "If you accept our beliefs, that would be enough. Your faith in your friend, in your family, and in your love count for as much with us as these other demonstrations. Believe it or not, Ron Weasley, your faith in your friends and family is even stronger than these other three have, and they in turn have stronger faith than most. We value you all for who you are. Even if we make much of Harry, we are impressed with you all. If we were not, we would not allow you here at this point, even with Harry and Hermione asking you to be with them and Titus Pwy vouching for you."

The quartet sat around the dining room table, each with a mug of illicit hot chocolate about an hour later. "So, you three going to become Druids?" Ron asked.

"No," Hermione said. "It would take decades of training, and we're already five years behind. I really do like the Old Religion, though."

"But we're all too too decadent," Ginny said with a smile. "We need chocolate, potatoes, wizard radio. . . ."

"Butterbeer," Harry said.

"Quidditch," Ron added.

"Saunas and Jacuzzi," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Bikinis!" Ron added.

"Pumpkin juice," Ginny said with a longing smile.

"Ice cream." Harry said with a hungry expression.

"Disposable nappies."

"Hermione!" the other three yelled.

"By the way, Harry," Hermione went on, "while we stuck with the local custom, a few others didn't." She handed him some presents from Remus, Sirius, and Hagrid, mostly sweets.

There were also their Hogwarts letters and a letter from Doctor Pwy. They had managed to capture one of Voldemort's strongholds. It was an abandoned mine in Wales, and they had over two hundred of the Dementors trapped there. As the research group sent along theories, they would try them out. Over sixty soulless victims were still alive, including Percy and the Grangers, and they had been moved to the mine as well. The Hogwarts letters merely had a list of their next year's required books and supplies, plus a prefect badge for Ginny.

The next morning, the group was up too late to run, but they did make it up to the Sefydliad on time. Ginny and Hermione had gotten the group to start comparing spells for controlling ghosts and demons (since Dementors were believed to be derived from an illegal crossing of minor demons and lethifolds), to see if they could derive any common principles. That morning, the group found what they were looking for in a set of charms used by the Old Believers to control night demons and another set of charms used by a minor Polynesian group to control restless spirits. The senior Druid in charge of the research nearly danced with joy (which would have been a major shock, since he was renown for having a sober disposition and puritanical lifestyle.) If the set of spells they had created by that evening worked, they could manipulate both the souls and the Dementors -- the trick would still be joining the soul back to the body. Even if the soul was rejoined, there was no way of knowing how the restored mind would react.

Hermione had always been the least enthusiastic runner in the group. In the four days that lapsed between their discovery and the first full report of the results to come back, however, Hermione ran every morning and walked the rest of each day, since the research was on hold. Ron walked most of the day with her, although Ginny and Harry took turns as well. They also had a difficult time getting her to eat.

As worried as Harry was about Hermione, he was also a little glad she was drawing so much attention from Ron and Ginny -- the more they helped Hermione, the less they worried themselves about Percy.

The other researchers also came to spend time with Hermione and the Weasleys. This had been a purely academic exercise for them -- none of them had relatives or friends who had been Kissed. In fact, the Old Believers had always hunted down and destroyed any Dementors that strayed into the United States or Canada. Still, the researchers had grown very fond of Hermione, and despite only spending three-quarters of the time each day with the research compared to the team, she had actually cleared the most material during the search. They respected her abilities in addition to liking her. They also knew how important this was to her and the Weasleys. The Druid in charge of the research shocked everyone by his appearance in town to comfort Hermione, the first time he had appeared in the actual town in over twenty years.

On August 3, one of the Council of Druids had told the group that the Dementors had been sorted; those without trapped souls or with souls which had been trapped so long the host bodies had died had been destroyed. Before the latter had been destroyed, however, the souls had been successfully released without any evidence of tampering. Of over three hundred souls released, only one had become a ghost, and she, a Muggle Kissed some three years before, had expressed a great deal of

thanks before going off to haunt what was left of her family.

August 4 and 5, Hermione was even more frenetic in her walking. Finally, on the evening of the 5th, the Tuatha and Athro Myrddin, accompanied by most of the research group, tracked the quartet down on the top of the Sefydliad, looking over the valley. This certainly attracted attention; it was rare to see even one of the Tuatha in the cwm, let alone all three.

"Doeth Athro?" Hermione asked.

"I do not feel overly wise today, my child," Harri answered in English. "Still, we are not totally dissatisfied. We found a Dementor that had three recent souls trapped. We released the others it had, and tried to rejoin the three souls in several ways. One had been separated from the body too long; and the stress killed the body. That soul went free. The other two souls rejoined. We must now wait and see how well they are joined to their bodies. The experience of being Kissed, captured, and rejoined may be too much. The two may still die, or may not be sane."

"I understand. Perhaps, if they are not fully. . .functional, the next attempt should have a loved one present at the rejoining. That might improve the chances of it working."

"It may indeed. We must wait and see these results first. I know you are worried and anxious, but you are wearing yourself, and those Muggle shoes, out. Please, take more care. We will know within two weeks."

"At least I know they have a chance. What more can I ask for?"

"You may ask for anything. Just don't expect too much," the elderly woman member of the triad told her.

"Is it too much to hope that my parents are at least trapped inside of one of the Dementors you captured? That it hasn't been destroyed?" Hermione seemed trapped between hope and despair.

"We don't know; we can only hope as well," the senior member of the Tuatha said simply. "Waiting is not easy, especially for one as young as you. However, use the meditation Pwy taught you last summer. It is small comfort, but that, and the love of your friends and all of our prayers will help sustain you."

"Too bad you can't test this all out on the souls of the condemned," Ron muttered.

"True; but it would be rather unethical to restore a soul to a body and then either have to kill the body and break the bond again or else let a murderer go free," Harri said simply.

Ron sighed. "That's what I thought, sir."

Harri put his hand on the tall boy's shoulder. "Don't despair, Ron. If it's possible to rejoin the souls, we will. We have no more forgotten your brother than we have any of the others, wizard or Muggle."

"Thank you, Athro."

Harri turned to everyone. "Come. Lunch should be ready in the dining hall, correct Athro Myrddin?"

The Head of the Sefydliad looked at his distant, younger cousin -- the youngest member of the Tuatha, the religious leaders of the Old Believers. He looked at Hermione -- he had doubted her abilities were yet equal to the task, and she had proven herself the best. He saw the looks of hope and respect in the eyes of the researchers -- Druids, wizards, and witches that he worked with and honored for their abilities -- all directed to the young quartet, especially Hermione. For once, he was honestly humble. "Yes, Doeth Athro. We will make it worthy of this group and their accomplishments."

Wednesday, August 14, 1996

Hermione had given up running and power-walking since the 5th, and had instead started steadily pacing all around the valley nearly from sunrise to sunset as they waited for the results of the tests. Nothing had been directly heard from Voldemort in some weeks, although some information had leaked back that he was contacting various Pure Blood groups around the world, looking for support. Many had refused him -- Voldemort himself, with his Muggle father, was too 'tainted' for their groups' beliefs. It seemed as if everything was suspended until news of the rejoined souls came out.

Hermione was standing out in the garden at dawn, having spent a very restless night, as most of her recent ones had been. She felt badly about that, as she had taken to wearing Ron out at night, and then driving him and her two friends to distraction during the day. It had reached the point where even Ron welcomed their hour lessons every afternoon, if mostly as a distraction to Hermione's worries.

"Good morning, Hermione," a deep voice came from near the garden wall.

"Doeth. . . ."

"Just Harri, unless you find it confusing," the Druid leader said with a smile. "You aren't an Old Believer, at least not yet, and there's no need to be so formal with me when we're just alone here in the garden." In truth, he'd had little contact with the Muggle or Wizarding world outside his years at the Ysgol and some trips to Muggle New England during those same years. He had surprised himself at how interested he was in this young quartet, and how much he liked all four as individuals.

"It's hard to believe you and Harry are what, fifty-fourth cousins? You really look like you're his uncle."

"There are six lines of Myrddins that still breed true to type; five amongst the Old Believers, and Harry Potter is the last known representative of the sixth."

"Is that why. . . well. . . ."

"Why I, one of the most powerful wizards in the world, in terms of both magical and political power, have taken such an interest in you and Harry?"

"Exactly."

"It was partly that at the beginning," Harri admitted. "And you must remember, Harry is an amazingly powerful young wizard, by any standard, even if he's growing into that power slowly. It may yet be his destiny to fight Voldemort and other dark wizards in the future, and it is our duty to help him prepare. You must also remember that the wizard community is fairly small. You and Harry, and perhaps Ginny and Ron, are future leaders of the British community. In your own ways, you are all powerful and interesting people. And, as Pwy told me in his first report, you are all also likable young people. That's very high praise from someone like him, who has seen more Muggle and magical students than either of us would like to imagine."

"And Harry is destined for greatness?"

"He has the potential to be the greatest wizard leader in many centuries. He may not live up to that potential, for any number of reasons, most of them very human and reasonable. But if called on, he will serve to some high degree."

"Greater than Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore is a very amazing wizard," Harri admitted. "In some ways, the most amazingly complete wizard for over a thousand years, and one of the fifteen most powerful alive today that we know of. Harry will never have the breadth of knowledge or wisdom that Dumbledore has. Yet Dumbledore has never really led the community. In a sense, Dumbledore is Merlin to Harry's

Arthur. It's a role we wish Titus had taken on for us; but he has preferred the role of lone warrior and scholar. For good reason, of course; if he does live a number of centuries, it would tend to corrupt the system to have him on top all the time. But that's another story altogether."

"And what about me?"

"Harry listens to you. He doesn't always do what you tell him to, of course, but he does listen. He needs that grounding in rationality you can provide, just as he needs the love Ginny will provide, and the friendship the three of you give him. You are an amazing scholar and powerful witch in your own right. Do not be over-shadowed by Harry's fame and power. You and Ginny are the dominate personalities in your little group in every day life, unless Harry's sense of justice and fair play are aroused, or Ron's honor offended."

The door of the cottage opened and the three runners came out.

"Doeth. . . ." Harry started.

"That's all right," Harri said. "While Hermione and I have been waiting for you three, we've had a nice talk. However, I did come by this morning with a purpose. I was just waiting for you three to show up to announce it. We have successfully restored twenty-one of the twenty-four souls we have tried to rejoin."

The four teens were certainly hopeful to hear the rest of the news. They hadn't even known the teams were going to go on with the experiment to that degree.

"I am pleased to say that your mother was one of the successful cases, Hermione. . . ." Hermione threw herself into Ron's arms, crying for joy. "Percy Weasley was another. Unfortunately, Misses Clearwater and Mister Finnigan were two of the three failures. Miss Clearwater and your father's souls were not found amongst those Dementors."

"How are they?" Harry asked.

"They are all sane, although very confused and weak," Harri told them. "We foresee at least a year of rehabilitation for your mother, since as a Muggle she was the most affected. Probably Percy Weasley will recover the fastest, and even that will likely take some six months. Your Ministry will make the announcements tomorrow morning. They will also announce that both the entire research and rescue teams have been awarded the Order of Merlin, Third Class, and that includes you four."

"We don't deserve it," Ron said. "Except for Hermione of course."

"I agree," Ginny said.

"I certainly don't deserve it," Harry added.

"Too bad. You four come as a unit. And Harry, it was your idea. Ron, Ginny, you certainly helped with the research, and you gave the team a great deal of support, as Harry did as well. We will also give Hermione a special research certificate. In any case, you all have that and the other awards. Think of them as rewards for past heroics if you wish."

"Them?" Hermione asked.

"When you graduate from Hogwarts, you'll be automatically accepted as sorcerer's apprentices. If any of you achieve at least ten N.E.W.T.s, you will instead be automatic sorcerers."

"Well, at least there's one reward Hermione's sure to get," Ron teased.

"When may I see Mum?" Hermione asked.

"Next week," Harri told them. "We will also announce that those Death Eaters who surrender will not face the more horrendous punishments." He sighed. "Somehow, I fear it will still not be enough to stop Voldemort and his more fanatical followers. But at least it should slow him down even more."

"There have been more attacks," Harry stated to his cousin.

"Random terror attacks. Horrendous, barbarous tortures that have shocked even me, who is a great authority on Magical history -- I thought I'd read about every possible torture -- but having no real affect on the battle."

"Eleven more months," Harry muttered.

Harri put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Harry, horrible things are still going to happen. Even if we killed Voldemort and his remaining Death Eaters today, horrible things would still happen. Life is a trial in many ways. Keep dealing with it as you have been."

Harry nodded, but still thought, 'Eleven months.'

Chapter 16

Wednesday, September 4, 1996

"You asked to see me, Headmaster?" Harry asked, stepping into the office. Besides Dumbledore, Mr. Diggory, Mr. Weasley, Dr. Pwy, Remus, Sirius, Snape, and a cowed Druid were present.

"What's he doing here?" Snape snarled.

"He is necessary," the Druid, whose voice Harry recognized as Harri Myrddin's, said. "You are not."

"We are all necessary," Dumbledore said.

"Could someone please let us know what's on?" Sirius asked.

"To put things bluntly, Lucius Malfoy has offered to surrender. . . ." Pwy started.

"No!" Harry stated firmly.

"Shut up!" Snape told him.

"Pettigrew got off easier than he should have because he turned himself in. Now Malfoy? The man who kept the Death Eaters going for fourteen years? Who planted Voldemort's enchanted diary here to open the Chamber of Secrets. . . ."

"What!" Snape and Sirius exclaimed.

"Anyway," Harry went on, "except for Voldemort, Malfoy deserves punishment more than anyone. If he gets off, what's the point of punishing anyone?"

"Harry," several voices tried to explain.

"No," Harry said firmly. "If Malfoy is trying to give up, that just means he knows he's going to lose anyway. He got off last time; you can't let him get away with it. Without his kind promoting pure bloods over everyone, maybe Riddle could have dealt with his own demons without going over the edge."

Voices tried calling to Harry, to explain or (in Snape's case) castigate, when Amos Diggory stood and gave voice. "QUIET! ALL OF YOU, QUIET!" He sat back down. "Now, I know why I'm here. I know why Pwy and you are here," he said to the Druid. "I even know why Dumbledore and maybe why Weasley is here. Someone explain to me why the others are here."

"I am here," the Druid chief said, in a tone that seemed to put them all in their place, "because our liaison decided he didn't want to make this decision. I understand why he refused. I am here to make it. I want opinions before I make it. I asked for you, Dumbledore, and Harry. Pwy suggested the others. Now, Pwy will explain the situation, then I shall hear your opinions. Then, I shall decide. If any of you do not wish to participate, leave." No one left. The Druid turned to Pwy. "Titus?"

"Athro." Titus respectfully nodded to the Druid. "As I said, Malfoy wishes to surrender himself, and he says he can bring most of Voldemort's followers with him. The ones he's bringing in have conspired to commit murder, but have not committed it -- he says. Unless we can prove it, they are to be imprisoned, not executed."

"Executed?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry, executed. That's what happens to those in Justice," the Druid answered. "They are burned alive. Of course, these days they are usually enchanted when it happens, so they do not suffer, but they are still executed."

Pwy continued, "And Lucius Malfoy, of course, would be executed. I promise you that, Harry, and

he knows he will be. However, in exchange for himself and Voldemort's other followers, we would release Draco Malfoy. Malfoy should of course know we will question all those he brings in under truth spells and serums, but they apparently don't know they will be executed, unless none have committed murder, which I rather doubt, or they fear they will suffer even worse if they do not surrender. So, is it worth knocking out most of Voldemort's remaining supporters, especially, as Harry pointed out, the one who kept the organization going, at the price of Draco Malfoy NOT being killed?"

"Of course it is," Snape muttered.

"But then what does happen to Draco?" Harry asked. "Does he go to prison for the rest of his life, like Wormtail? If so, fine."

"No, Malfoy wants Draco freed, pardoned," Pwy said.

Harry frowned. "Then no."

"Hasn't he suffered enough, Potter?" Snape snapped. "Just because you don't like him. . . ."

"It has nothing to do with me disliking him," Harry argued back. "Malfoy doesn't ever believe anything he does is wrong. If he regrets anything in those few hours he's been revived since he was put in there, it's that he was caught. He told me last week he would be freed, that his father would get him out, and that one day we would pay for daring to imprison and petrify him. Well, it looks like he might have been right."

"Mere bluster," Snape insisted.

"I wouldn't go that far," Lupin mused. "Draco is a very arrogant and bitter young man. This comes partially from his insecurities, of course, the pressures of being worthy of his heritage. He is going to feel even greater pressure to bring glory to his family name if his freedom is bought at the price of his father's life, and he is not going to see that it is best done by working for others or the greater good. Release him, especially without true punishment, and you may well be releasing a time bomb."

"Those are Malfoy's conditions," Pwy said. "He must know that sooner or later, he's a dead man. His family heritage means everything to him, and for that family to continue, Draco has to be free and able to start his own family."

"Remind me, what are all his crimes?" Diggory asked.

"Plenty of minor infractions and suspicions before last year," Pwy said. "Then Draco tried to force two classmates, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, to join him in killing Potter. Crabbe and Goyle beat him up, and were later killed and then left as a warning at the Azkaban raid. He directed the two Dementors that Kissed the Clearwater family and Percy Weasley. The Clearwater son, a Third year Ravenclaw, was killed by the death curse, and Malfoy was the only wizard there. His wand later yielded proof it was used to kill young Clearwater as well as young Goyle and Crabbe. He was stunned by Percy Weasley before he was Kissed. Draco was therefore caught. He was guilty at least of incitement to murder, accessory to murder, and three murders, and was quickly sentenced to be Kissed, but the Dementors stationed at the Ministry had already defected. I was therefore able to affect his transfer while the Ministry was trying to decide who would have the guts to carry out the alternate sentence of death."

"Albus?" Diggory asked.

"I do not believe anyone is totally beyond redemption," Dumbledore said, some slight doubt in his voice, "but I must admit his actions of last year has made me believe young Draco is rather farther from redemption than I'd thought. Still, there might be hope."

"With all due respect," Sirius growled, "if Voldemort came in here, saying he'd had a change of heart and applying for the position of Defense teacher, I rather doubt you'd be tempted to believe

him."

"True. I cannot believe even he to totally lost, but it would take a great deal to convince me to accept that he was on the right road. Young Mister Malfoy is not nearly as far along as even his father, however."

"I think he is, as far as I'm concerned. If Draco is freed, at some point in time, he'll try to kill me or attack my friends," Harry said grumpily.

"Well, one of the two of you certainly has a vendetta," Snape sneered.

"You should talk," Harry sneered right back. He'd had enough -- just one potions class had shown Snape was again as vindictive as he'd ever been. The previous year's truce was over. "You've been setting the example for Malfoy since my first day in class."

Snape leapt to his feet. "How dare you, boy!"

Sirius and Remus stood up and were ready to jump in front of Harry if need be. "It's true and you know it, Severus," Remus said. "Part of it has been an act, but only partly."

"You have taken nearly every opportunity to belittle me, my family, and my friends," said the still seated Harry, with an expressionless voice. "You've done everything to try and sabotage my learning in your class, except fiddling with the actual grade, and at the same time have tried to boost Malfoy. In fact, you've spoiled Malfoy in exactly the same way you've always claimed I've been treated." Harry's voice now grew truly powerful and sarcastic (sounding, in fact, much like his distant cousin, although Harry had never heard the Druid in full dress-down mode) "Well, if he wasn't such an incompetent, he'd have murdered me as well as those others. Would that have made you proud?"

"Harry!" Dumbledore protested.

"Thank you for saving my life back in my First year," Harry said, now standing and challenging Snape directly, "but stay away from me and mine from now on. And if you succeed in saving Draco, I'll hold you partially responsible for his future crimes."

"Think you're important, Potter?" Snape said with soft menace in his voice, "You think you can threaten a teacher?"

"That's right, abuse your position and then stand behind it," Harry snarled back, "like you always do!"

"ENOUGH!" Dumbledore declared, now standing. "Harry, Potions is not an absolutely required course after Fifth year. You're dropped, since you're also carrying Runes. You may also add Muggle Studies. I want the two of you to drop this dispute right now!"

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

"Very well, for now," Snape added.

"Severus!" Dumbledore warned.

"Once Voldemort is sorted out, you and I may still have some things to settle," Sirius told Snape. "If there's anything left, you and Harry can discuss it after he leaves Hogwarts."

"Fine, on both counts!" Snape declared.

"Fine," Harry also agreed. Then he smiled in a very evil way. "Wizard's Peace, Professor Snape?" he asked.

Snape looked surprised. "Are you serious?"

"I am. I think I can do it; can you?" That would mean both would be on their best behavior towards each other and their friends and family until the duel. Snape could no longer harass Ron, Hermione, or Ginny at the least.

"Even Longbottom?"

Harry went for broke. "Even Neville. . . except any time he actually melts a cauldron."

Snape almost smirked at that. "Agreed. July Thirty-first, Nineteen ninety-eight, or one year after the defeat of Voldemort, whichever comes second?"

"Agreed." They shook hands.

"Now, if we could please get back to the matter at hand?" Diggory asked.

The Druid, who had sat quietly through all this, looked towards the Minister. "Do you have a recommendation?"

"We can't just let young Malfoy go. On the other hand, I think we can accept his life being spared and his eventual release if Lucius keeps up his end of the bargain. Drive a hard one."

"Mister Weasley?"

"I agree, especially with that last statement. The Malfoys have supported every Dark Wizard that's come along for at least these last two centuries, without being punished for it. It's time to break the pattern."

"May I assume I know everyone else's position on this now?"

"May I know exactly who is deciding this?" Snape asked after a few moments of silence, fairly politely for him.

"Of course. In English, I am a Chief Druid and a member of the Tuatha. My name is not important." He stood and removed his cowl.

Snape looked in amazement, and Sirius and then Remus started laughing, mostly at Snape's expression.

"I shall formulate my terms by noon tomorrow, and have Pwy transmit them to Malfoy. He has until the First of October to accept them; until October Fifteenth to surrender, along with whatever Pwy, Diggory, and Dumbledore agree is an adequate representation of Voldemort's followers."

"When do you kill them?" Snape demanded.

"Just before mid-night on Halloween. I believe you should be one of the witnesses."

"Will your cousin here be there, too?" Snape sneered.

The Druid smiled back. "Harry is my fifty-fourth cousin, several times removed; I believe he is your twenty-first. Mister Black here is your twelfth, and I've been told this Mister Longbottom you mentioned is your sixth cousin. Therefore, I do not believe I am overly influenced by our distant relationship. However, I have decided to offer to be his Amddiffynnydd; for Harry to be my magical Dysgyr."

"What?" Snape demanded.

"Protector and apprentice," Remus said.

"Usually, we only accept a Dysgyr for Druidical training, but Harry's magic matches mine in so many ways that I believe he would benefit from my training him."

"I sense there's something more to this," Snape said.

"Well, as his protector, his quarrels may be mine." Harri gave an evil grin so identical to Harry's that it was frightening. Hermione had been right, they did look like uncle and nephew.

Pwy had never seen this side of Myrddin, and wasn't sure if he was mostly teasing Snape or was in deadly earnest. Somehow, it seemed to be both. In any event, he decided to join in while telling the truth at the same time. One never told an outright lie about a Druid leader. "Snape, how powerful

am I?" Pwy asked.

"You're the most powerful wizard I've ever seen," Snape admitted, almost muttering it.

"Well," Pwy smirked, "you're talking to the most powerful wizard I've ever seen."

"Don't frighten the poor man," Harri teased. "I am certainly not as powerful as you, although it is close. As for Harry, he is slightly more powerful than Albus, and so needs some special training after Hogwarts. I grant you, working with Titus and Lupin here has already made him a duelist of national-level competence."

He turned to Harry. "If you decide not to teach or be an auror, you should be able to make a living on the dueling circuit, especially if you're playing Quidditch as well."

"Don't worry," Remus said with an evil smile of his own, "Titus, Sirius, and I will be tutoring him in dueling and fighting for the next two years. Harry will be ready for formal or street fighting when he needs to be."

Snape was looking a little green when the meeting broke up.

While Hermione had scheduled in slightly more free time this year, and he had been allowed to drop Potions (much to Ron's dismay, he wasn't allowed to as well), Harry found that he was just as busy as he'd been the year before. He was still carrying a full load (Charms, Defense, Transfiguration, Astronomy, Herbology, History, Care of Magical Creatures, and Divination, plus he'd added Runes and Muggle Studies).

Partly this was because he had to train the Quidditch team harder than he had the year before. The players (except for Ron) had been very experienced, and he'd had a full group of reserves to draw on. This year, he really only had five reserves, and the reserve beater and chasers weren't very good.

Partly it was because Titus and Remus were coaching him on fighting techniques even more than they had the year before (Sirius was mostly in the field). And, while his O.W.L.s were over, he was helping Ginny revise for hers, and, as Hermione said at least twice a week, "Our N.E.W.T.s will come up sooner than you think."

It was also harder to fall into the rhythm of the school year than it ever had been. Living the summer as parts of adult couples had spoiled all four of the quartet.

Worst of all, Harry's scar was aching again, although no visions bled through.

Thursday, October 10, 1996

It was during Herbology when the inevitable happened. Harry's scar exploded in pain. The scene he envisioned was confusing; hexes were being flung all over; Dementors glided about, attempting to Kiss Death Eaters who were trying to kill each other. Finally, Harry heard a familiar hissing snarl: "COWARDS! I shall find a way to triumph without any of you!" A hex exploded in Voldemort's face, making him scream in anger and pain.

Harry forced himself to step back; all his meditation training coming to bear. He recognized the place. He forced himself to surface to reality; opening his eyes, he looked right into Hermione's concerned expression. "Tell Doc," he whispered, "big fight at the old Riddle house, right now! Go, and they might catch them!"

The strain was too much. Harry passed out in Ron's arms; Hermione fled to inform Pwy and then Dumbledore.

When Harry woke up, he realized several things at once. First of all, he could tell he was in the

Infirmery. He also realized he was cuddling two soft objects under each arm and tight to his chest. He gave a start and blushed bright red when he realized that those were Hermione and Ginny, and what was soft against his chest and upper arms -- they were apparently just wearing t-shirts and shorts, while their robes were draped on a chair next to the bed.

"Wake, sleepy-head?" Ginny murmured sleepily in his right ear. The softness also disappeared from his left arm, "We were worried about you," Hermione added.

Harry, now more or less recovered from the shock, smiled and opened his eyes again. Seeing no one else around (especially Ron), he said, "You two are spoiling me. How can I ever sleep again without both of you?"

Both girls blushed and slapped him on a respective shoulder. "Git!" Ginny said. "Pig!" Hermione added. Both were smiling, however.

Harry sighed and smiled even more, hugging them again. "What more can a man want; two beautiful, intelligent women in bed. . .OW!" They slapped his shoulders again, harder, and pushed slightly back.

"I take it this means you're feeling better?" Hermione asked severely as she sat up in the bed where she'd been napping.

"Yes, sis, I am. Seriously, thanks for being here." Hermione flushed a little again. Harry pulled them both into a third hug. Harry kissed Hermione on her forehead and gave Ginny a peck on the lips. Harry also took Ginny's hand. "Sorry for teasing you both. Can either of you tell me what's been happening since I passed out?"

"Not really," Hermione admitted. "It's almost dinner; Ron was sent to get us something to eat."

"But the elves can send things here direct!" Harry said.

"His pacing was getting on Madam Pomfrey's nerves," Ginny said simply.

"I told Doc and then Professor Dumbledore before finding Ginny and bringing her here. The Old Believers and most of the Aurors went off, and haven't come back here so far as I know. Unless it's total victory, you'll probably find out what happened before any of us."

"Very good, Hermione!" Sirius announced, coming in the room. Remus came in with him.

"Titus, Dumbledore, and the Chief Druid are still working on paper work and getting the prisoners sorted," Remus explained. "In short, Malfoy's followers revolted against Voldemort's control and his followers and Dementors. As best we can tell, Voldemort has no followers now, but unfortunately He escaped. Twenty-four more that fought for Voldemort are in the Wicker Man, including the Lestranges. Seventy-two Dementors were captured, the rest were destroyed. Thirty other Death Eaters, the ones that revolted and survived, have surrendered, including Malfoy. All the others are dead."

Sirius continued, "Young Malfoy is staying in the Wicker Man until Halloween, fully conscious from now on. Your friend will be coming to talk to you about Malfoy sometime."

"Are they really going to burn them alive?" Harry asked.

"They are," Remus said. "They won't feel it, I hope."

Ginny and Hermione both shivered at the thought. Sirius looked at them. "I agree, but since they're not really aware, it just looks worse than other forms of execution."

"I wish there was some other thing we could do to them," Hermione said, rather fiercely.

"There's nothing anyone has thought of, other than Dementors," the young Tuatha member said to them, coming into the room. "We can lock them into the Halls of Sorrows, caverns of nickel ore so deep they can't apparate across a room even with a wand, and the nickel prevents most types of

wandless magic from affecting objects. But it's not fool proof. So, with a bit more humanity, we'll stay with tradition."

"Have you seen it done before?" Hermione asked.

"Once. It's not a pleasant sight, but I've seen far worse."

"Sir?" Harry asked.

"You want to know about young Malfoy?"

"Yes, sir, but more importantly, has Voldemort really escaped?"

"I'm afraid so, Harry. I rather expect he'll either go into deep hiding, or start making escalating terror attacks. Hopefully the first; that will give us more time to track him down."

"So what about Malfoy?" Ginny asked.

"We will be moving him to the village school near the Halls of Sorrows. He will be in exile, and not allowed to learn to apparate, until, at the earliest, he is twenty-five. Then, we shall reconsider his exile. Lucius insists that one of his fellow students is promised to him. When they are twenty-one, they may marry, but to do so she will have to join him in exile."

"That's not really enough punishment," Harry said grumpily, "but all things considered, I guess I can't complain."

"I should like you and your friends to be added to those appraised of Malfoy's behavior and consulted whenever his sentence is reviewed."

"Thank you, Doeth Athro," Harry said honestly.

Titus Pwy came in with Dumbledore. "Ah," Harri said, "Llofrudd. Is Justice ready?"

Pwy stared for a moment, surprised to see his leader here, then bowed assent.

"Have you decided on the minimum nine witnesses?"

"Nine?" Remus asked. "Not the general population?"

"That is allowed, but not required," Harri answered. "Since we have left the general world, nearly two thousand years ago, we have not had to do this too often. The last time was May, Nineteen eighty, when we sacrificed three Death Eaters to Justice. Nine witnesses are required, outside those responsible for the ceremony itself. As such, both the Llofrudd and I will be present."

"So far, I have chosen Snape, Black, Fudge, Diggory, McGill, and LaFleur," Pwy said, the last two being the Irish and French Ministries representatives. "I am still considering the other three spots."

"Not me?" Dumbledore asked.

"It's not pleasant, and you bear neither direct responsibility nor have suffered direct harm," Pwy said. Which certainly answered everyone's unasked question as to why Fudge would be requested.

"If Sirius will be there, may I?" Remus asked. "Hopefully I'll never get another chance to see the ceremonial aspects of the ritual."

"Of course; you may attend, even if you are not one of the official witnesses," Pwy answered.

"I will be there, if it is permitted."

Pwy merely bowed.

"And I?" Dumbledore asked.

"Don't go, Athro Dumbledore," Harri said. "Trust me on this."

"Should I go?" Harry asked. "I certainly have suffered direct harm."

"So have I," Hermione said, ignoring a very bad taste in the back of her throat, "and if Harry and I

are considering becoming Believers of a sort, then we should take the unpleasant aspects of the beliefs along with what we find wonderful."

"Witnesses can't avert their eyes," Pwy said sternly.

"They can if they are present but not one of the nine official witnesses," Harri replied. "I don't recommend that you attend; if you do, I will not permit you to be witnesses. You must be able to avert your eyes; we will force those who are witnesses to watch, so that they may swear those who are burned alive did actually die."

Ginny made some gagging noises and ran into the bathroom. Harry and Hermione looked at each other. "We'll be there, Doeth Athro," Hermione said, "Ron and Ginny probably won't be. We will abide your command not to be official witnesses."

"Then I shall also be there," Dumbledore said.

"So, we now have seven witnesses, with Professor Lupin here. How many more are you considering to draw from?" Harri asked.

"Twelve, Doeth Athro."

"Inform me when you have selected them." He turned to Harry. "Rest well, Athro Potter. We still have much to plan and discuss before the winter solstice." Harri bowed and left.

Dumbledore herded the other adults out as well. "Madam Pomfrey said you could return to Gryffindor after you eat," he said as he left. "And I see Mister Weasley returning with the results of a raid on the kitchen. Good night."

Ron came in, his arms loaded with food. "What happened?"

Thursday, October 31, 1996

There were over fifty Old Believers assembled just before sunset, guarding the Wicker Man and its condemned. The nine witnesses (Pwy had selected two from the International Press), Harry, Hermione, and Dumbledore were the only others present, and they arrived a little after 8:00 pm.

Draco Malfoy had been released from the Wicker Man shortly after the witnesses arrived and was taken away. The last thing he said was, "I'll be back, Potter! Never think I won't be! And if nothing else, I'll be looking you and the Weasels!"

Snape had shaken his head at that; it had sounded much more like a genuine threat than mere bravado even to him.

Pwy approached the witnesses with nine small vials. "This potion will prevent you from closing your eyes for more than a few seconds at a time, although it will allow normal blinking. As unpleasant as this is, you must watch and then testify." He turned to the Lestranges. "This is your last chance to be stunned before being burned alive!"

"We will be awake when He comes to rescue us! We are faithful!" Lestrangle called out. "You will all suffer!" his wife added with a scream.

"Stun the others!" There were 117 in the wicker cages. Six Cigfrans moved quickly and stunned 115 of them, while twelve Sersiants had preceded them and tied them upright and twelve more followed laid the cages with dry wood and lots of hay and herbs. That would generate smoke that would also cause death quicker than just the flames for those in the upper cages.

A Cigfran then stood behind each witness, ready to compel them to keep looking at the Wicker Man if need be. Dumbledore stood behind Harry and Hermione. Harry felt Hermione's small, clammy hand grasp his tightly.

The breeze that had been blowing died down to nothing. The Tuatha began a chant, which was

picked up by many of the Old Believers. The scholars present understood it to be a plea that the deaths of the Dark Ones satisfy the demands of Justice. Suddenly, the wolves turned back into dancers. Their chant was much older, in a language that was still known only to a few hundred people; it went back far far beyond even the first building at Stonehenge; to a time when even agriculture had not yet been invented anywhere. Harry felt that rush of power he had felt in January near the same spot.

Harri Myrddin stepped forward, and sparked a ring of oil around the base of the structure. The fire had begun. It spread almost instantly to the frame of the entire structure.

Harry suddenly knew the words of the chant, and as he dropped Hermione's hand he joined in. The dancers were drawn to him, and Harry joined the dance. The fire quickly spread throughout the interior of the Wicker Man. The chanting Old Believers and dancing/chanting dancers could not cover up the screams from the Lestranges, trapped in one of the bottom cages, but Harry didn't hear a sound beyond the chant.

Hermione, not looking at the screaming couple, was the first to see the orange streams of power rising from the Old Believers and the indigo streams coming from the dancers other than Harry.

Harry suddenly stood still, raising his hands. The streams of power came to Harry's hands, indigo to his left, orange to his right. A green light flowed between them.

A sound came out of the green light; phoenix song drowned out the last of the screaming and even the roar of the flames that were quickly consuming the structure. The green light, not the sickly green of the death curse but the brilliant green of living plants, sought out a few individuals, touching and comforting them: Hermione; Dumbledore; Harri Myrddin and the other two members of the Tuatha; Remus; and one of the female dancers. Two strands shot off towards Hogwarts.

Harri walked over towards Harry, a look of awe on his face. He did nothing to interfere. A few minutes later, Ginny and Ron appeared by floating in, looking very surprised and surrounded by green auras.

They landed and looked in amazement, then horror. The Wicker Man would have already collapsed had it not been held up by magic, and all the bodies were burning into ashes, writhing as the muscles contracted in the fire. Harry lowered his arms, and gathered Ginny into them, hiding the scene from her, and all the magical tendrils disappeared. The chanting ended, and everyone's attention went to Harry.

"What happened?" Snape demanded, over the roar of the flames.

"We have seen the rebirth of the Order of the Phoenix," Myrddin said in awe. "The Powers of Light have blessed us!"

"What nonsense is that!" Snape demanded.

"The last time this appeared was when?" Lupin demanded, "over twenty-one hundred years ago?"

"Well, the last time it happened at a real sacrifice was two thousand one hundred and two years ago tonight," Myrddin said. "It usually happened about once every three or four years, before we allied with the German tribes against Rome, bringing eventual destruction to our Ways, and then nothing for centuries, over a millennia, in fact. After we lost the right to judge others, we still at least burned effigies twice a year, and this occurred only once, and that was only for a few seconds. After we moved to America, however, we have had six occurrences, all very short. We have restored missing harmony to the world. Scoff if you wish, Severus Snape, but Harry is the link between your world and ours. Your former Lord may try as he might to bring Darkness, but the Light of the Phoenix will win in the end."

"Do you think this show would impress him?"

"Probably not. In fact, he is no doubt out killing someone now, out of retribution for tonight. He is

powerful, but in the end, he will have no more lasting affect on the world than this fire has had on the ground of all Scotland!" Having said that, the remains of the thin wooden frame collapsed into ashes. There was no sign of any bodies.

Chapter 17

Friday, November 1, 1996

It was a very quiet quartet that made its way down to breakfast the next morning. None of them was certain about how the events of the night before would be affecting them, they only knew that they would be affected.

As they approached the Gryffindor table, Professor McGonagall intercepted them and sent them to the little side room where Harry had received the first Twi-Wizard instructions some two years before.

Dumbledore was waiting for them.

Their hearts fell. Each one remembered the Druid's statement that Voldemort was likely out killing someone in retribution the night before.

"Your families are safe," Dumbledore assured them right off. He then just addressed Ron and Ginny. "There was an attack on the Burrow last night, and although two Aurors have been killed, and Fred was slightly injured, the rest of your family are fine. Fortunately, your family apparates into the kitchen, not the sitting room, which is where He was waiting. Unfortunately, He made two other attacks, and seven others are also dead."

"Who. . . ?" Hermione managed to say.

"Various ministry employees; the Weasleys were the highest-ranking. It was Voldemort's act of defiance and vengeance for the destruction of his organization." He sighed. "I thought you should know before you went to class."

"Thank you," Ginny managed to say.

Harry nodded, merely saying, "Nine months." He turned and quickly left the room. The other three stared at each other for a moment, and then fled after him.

Dumbledore sat down, looking his age.

Harry flung himself into training for his up-coming fight with Voldemort. Only Quidditch and Ginny could distract him. And even when it came to Quidditch, Harry gave up being captain to Ron.

The attacks continued to occur at fairly irregular, and certainly unpredictable, intervals. Sometimes there were two a night, sometimes as much as nine days came between attacks. So, as November flowed into December, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron were called into a meeting with Dumbledore, Lupin, and Pwy. All three knew what the topic of the meeting would be.

"I am concerned about how hard Mister Potter is working," Dumbledore said with little preamble as soon as the trio sat. "Especially considering that much of his work is outside of the curriculum. I understand, of course, why he is so obsessed with his training, but I believe he may be over-doing it."

"We agree," Hermione said, "but how can we get him to slow down?"

"I don't know that we can," Ron said, in a worried tone. "He has a calendar, marking down the days until he can fight Vol. . . Volde. . . ."

"Keep working on it, Mister Weasley," Pwy said. "You're getting better at it."

"We must get him to relax over Christmas," Dumbledore said. "For that to happen, he must understand that you are all happy and safe. Now, Miss Granger, your mother's recovery continues at

a fairly good pace. There is a well-warded rest home and spa in Wales. I was thinking that perhaps we could have your mother transferred there for the holidays, and that you and Mister Weasley could spend your vacation there, although I expect you would spend at least Christmas afternoon at the Burrow."

"But what about Harry?" Hermione asked.

"We'll come to him in a moment. How does the proposal sound for you and Mister Weasley here?"

"Wonderful, of course, sir," Hermione answered, but her previous question hung in the air.

"Now, the Dursleys are naturally out of the question, and we needn't call any more attention to the Burrow than we have to," Dumbledore mused. "I rather doubt the spa in Wales would be relaxing for him in any manner, and I also rather doubt your mother would welcome you spending the time alone with Harry or unsupervised with Harry and two other bachelors," Dumbledore finished, looking at Ginny.

"Harry needs to be able to fly," Ron asserted. He then added, more reluctantly, "And he needs to be with Ginny as much as possible and as alone as possible. He needs to remember that he has something to really live for, that he doesn't exist just to fight Volde. . .mort. He really is counting the days down, and we need to help him deal with that pressure."

"The sticking point is Mum," Ginny said.

"And your father, and our consciences," Dumbledore added drily. "I was not aware of what the arrangements were going to be last summer. I had thought you'd be better supervised." He gave Pwy a very dirty look. Pwy contrived to look innocent.

"Find a safe place for Harry to fly, then worry about the rest," Ginny said. "If Harry knows I'm safe, maybe it would best for him to get away from everything."

"Very well," Dumbledore agreed.

Tuesday, December 10, 1996

"You wanted to see me, Doctor Pwy?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, come in and sit down, Ginny." Pwy sighed. "You know, it's not as easy as you might think to find Harry a safe place to fly in total safety this time of year. The few places that are really safe really wouldn't give him the privacy he needs, especially when you're taken into account."

"How about if I'm not taken into account?"

"How do you think Harry would like to spend. . .well, let me rephrase this. You and Harry are planning to go to the Yule Ball on the Twentieth, right?"

"Right. And the train is Saturday, the next day."

"Now, Hermione and Ron would leave the next day, but not by train. I can get them to the spa via my corridor. I'll take you home the same way on Monday, which would give you and Harry two days more or less alone, since there aren't any students staying on in Gryffindor except Harry. I'll bring him to the Burrow for Christmas, along with Ron and Hermione; you mustn't let on to anyone that he'll be there -- not even your brothers or Hermione -- just to make certain nothing gets out. I'll talk with your parents. Christmas night I'll take Harry, Sirius, and Remus off to spend some time together. I can bring Harry, and you, back here any time, from New Year's Eve to January Fifth, which is when you would all be returning anyway. Talk it over with Harry. Remus and Sirius are interested, but not about to pressure him. Still, I think it might be fun for him to get away with them, and maybe Hagrid, for a week or so."

"True," Ginny mused. "They can have some fun. . . . You know, Harry once told me that one thing

he missed about not having a father, besides all the obvious things, were simple things like going fishing with him."

"Those three are ready to step in," Pwy said, "alone or together. Talk it over with Harry. I know you want to be with him, and deserve to be with him, but let him maintain these other friendships, too."

Ginny stood up. "You're a good man, Doc. I'll see what Harry says."

Harry was very uncertain about not being with Ginny for most of the holiday. She could see how torn he was, and managed to talk him into Pwy's agenda. Harry liked spending time with Sirius, Remus, and Hagrid, and Ginny managed to convince Harry that this was the best combination of their desires. Pwy refused to tell Harry what he would need on the trip, other than his broom and wand. Hagrid and the others were no help, since Pwy refused to tell them anything, either. Pwy managed to get Sinistra to agree to give Harry some extra credit if he could figure out where he ended up. Sirius and Remus pledged not to help him.

Ron and Harry stood in the common room, waiting for Ginny and Hermione to join them so that they could go to the Ball. "What was that box you gave Ginny when they went up?" Ron asked suspiciously.

"If she liked them, you'll find out," Harry answered nervously, "if they ever get down here."

"Oh." Ron became very glum.

"Ron? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, Ron."

"Some times it's hard. . .when, well, when you're rich and. . ."

"Ron. . ."

"It is hard, Harry. I'm not blaming you, or saying you shouldn't spend money on Ginny." Ron shrugged, unable to explain much more, other than. . . "But it's hard."

"I'm sorry, Ron." Ron shrugged again. Harry pulled Ron over to a far wall. "Would you ever reconsider letting me help. . ."

"No," Ron was firm.

"Ron, you're my best friend. Let me help."

Ron sighed.

"Ron, you're my best mate. You know very well that I have more money than I need. Why can't I help you for a few years, until you're ready to set up with a career? You certainly help me in every way you can, and let me help you in every other way."

"How much are you giving Ginny?" he challenged.

"Just a galleon a week up-front. It's all she would take directly, although she agreed to let me set up a small vault in both our names just before we left Weston. They deposit four galleons a week."

"Hermione got her own vault there last summer, too. Ask her if she'll take any for us," Ron challenged.

"They already deposit four a week from me -- she wouldn't take more, because Ginny wouldn't take more. They do let me pay for both vaults," Harry added. "I also put twenty-five a week into our joint vault there."

Ron was stunned. "Oh," he finally said. His shoulders sagged in defeat. "Alright. One a week?"

Harry shrugged in return. "Whatever you'll let me share with you, Ron. If it wasn't for Ginny, I'd give you half, if you'd take it. You and Hermione can have up to a third of the ready money, if you want it. Honestly, I just want to help."

"Who else have you helped?"

Harry looked his friend in the eye. "I gave the twins the Tri-Wizard winnings."

Ron had suspected that Harry had given the twins part of his winnings. "All of it?"

"All of it."

Ron was staggered. A thousand galleons was more than most working class wizards made in a year.

"Now, I figure that's less than two-thirds what I'll give you, Ginny, and Hermione over a three year period. And you know what? If I gave it all to you tomorrow, that would only make a little dent in that pile of galleons in my 'ready money' vault. And by then, I'll have access to the real money."

Ron was studying the floor, refusing to look Harry in the eye. "So, like it or not, you're getting some money. And, if anything happens to me, you'll get it all. They let me make out a will early. Ginny, Sirius, you, and Hermione would inherit everything, if . . . you know, anything goes wrong. . . ."

"Don't say that!" Ron muttered fiercely.

"Only Doc and Dumbledore know. Who else should I give it to? The Dursleys?"

"Harry," Ron said with quiet insistence, "if I take the damn money will you please not mention this whole will thing to me again?"

"Okay," Harry said simply.

"What are you two muttering about in the corner?" Hermione asked from the stairs.

The two boys looked up, and both smiled fatuously. "Wow," Ron finally muttered.

"We are the two luckiest blokes at Hogwarts," Harry said simply. Ginny looked especially adorable in medium green Roman-style dress robes and the seed pearl necklace, earrings, and bracelet Harry had given her. Ron didn't argue. He was too stunned by the sight of Hermione.

The quartet saw the train off Saturday at 10:00 am, as good prefects should. After lunch, Pwy took Ron and Hermione to Wales.

"I wonder what we should do for the next fifty hours or so?" Ginny wondered, her eyes wide with faux innocence.

"The library is closed tomorrow; why don't we make certain that we have anything we need for the break?"

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. And we'll be good students in the common room, too. Maybe they'll be less likely to do a bed check that way."

Ginny grinned. "Probably more likely. We should go to bed like normal at Eleven, and you can just come over a little after midnight, with the map and your cloak."

"It's a deal."

The two days went by very fast, and Harry was alone right after lunch that Monday. There were very few students staying over the vacation that year; just four foreign exchange students who were in Ravenclaw and three First year Slytherins whose parents were dead or in prison.

Harry and Ginny had made a determined effort to be nice to the three Slytherins, and Harry continued that after Ginny left. Harry supervised them as they flew their broomsticks Tuesday morning, and arranged with Dobby to give them each a Christmas card and a cup cake Christmas morning.

Dobby had nodded, and mentioned that two of them so far had no presents at all. Harry grimaced at that, and (after getting permission from Dumbledore), went into Hogsmeade Christmas Eve morning with Hagrid and bought each a small present.

Snape had tried to stop Harry (and Ginny) from interacting with the three young students on Sunday, or at least had questioned Harry's motives. Harry had merely replied that he remembered all too well what it felt like to be unwanted at Christmas, and he wasn't about to let the three feel that way.

Snape had looked at him strangely, but had finally nodded and said no more to Harry until he'd requested permission to go into Hogsmeade from Dumbledore at breakfast. Dumbledore had looked doubtful, until Hagrid volunteered to go in with Harry. Snape had then seconded the idea, which made Remus nearly choke on his muffin.

Snape stopped Harry just before he left to join Hagrid. "Potter, would you be willing to run an errand for me in Hogsmeade?"

"Certainly, Professor Snape." Both were still on their best behavior to each other.

"I don't know what you plan on buying those three; something silly no doubt. Please, please refrain from buying anything from Zonko's or the Weasleys or Honeydukes or anyplace similar. Two of them do need new shirts, so I got each of them one. Could you please pick up the parcels I ordered for them from Gladrag's? Hogsmeade owls are very busy this time of year."

"No problem, sir."

"Thank you, Potter." Snape started to turn. "If you wish any suggestions, Mister Crabbe needs a new House scarf; Miss Avery and Miss Flint both have cats in need of everyday cat baskets. I believe the pet shop in town sells them adorned with little House seals -- ones without seem more likely to meet with . . . accidents."

"Thank you, sir. I'll keep those in mind." "That tells me more than I wanted to know about life in Slytherin!" Harry thought.

Harry stopped at the kitchen after he returned from Hogsmeade, and dropped the gifts (he had followed Snape's recommendations, but had also bought each Exploding Snap decks as well) and parcels off, along with a gift for Dobby and one for Dumbledore (two pairs of socks in both cases, although Dumbledore's weren't as gaudy as Dobby's). This year, Harry had small gifts for Pwy, Sirius, Remus, Hagrid, and Harri Myrddin as well as his friends, Ginny, and the rest of the Weasleys. He had already sent the Dursleys and Dudley food gifts from Hogsmeade via regular mail, although he rather doubted they would appreciate the Every-Flavour Beans.

Harry didn't sleep well Christmas Eve; his scar was hurting again, and the only thing that he knew of that could help when the pain was this bad was being held by Ginny, who of course was at the Burrow. He was awake, therefore, when Dobby came to reset the fires at 4:30.

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby enthused when he saw Harry was awake, although he said it quietly for him.

"Hi, Dobby. I was hoping I'd see you in private this break." Harry was glad that, if he had to be awake, he had caught Dobby now. Dobby had mentioned a few weeks before that he tried to be the one to take of Harry's room whenever possible.

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby is always ready to work in this room! And Dobby is very

proud of Harry Potter, his friend Wheezy, and of course his beautiful Miss Wheezy!"

"Not Hermione?" Harry teased.

"Miss Minny is a great witch, but. . .Dobby will not criticize Harry Potter's friends!"

'Well,' Harry thought, 'at least he's not banging his head with something.'

"Dobby, may I ask you something, and will you keep it a secret?" 'After all,' Harry had repeatedly reasoned, 'you can trust a house elf with your secrets.' And Harry had to share this secret dream with some one.

"Of course, Harry Potter!"

"In four to six years, if we all survive, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and I might set up house, either together or next door to each other. Would you, or you and Winky, or you and some other elf of your choice, care to join us?"

"Harry Potter, sir?" Dobby was so shocked he wasn't sure what he heard.

"Would you like to come work for us? You'd have to take a little more pay, and one day off a week, mind, or Hermione would pitch a fit, but would you?"

"Dobby would gladly go back to slavery to be Harry Potter's!" Tears of joy formed in Dobby's eyes.

"But you wouldn't be anyone's slave. You'd be free, just working for us and staying our friend. If you don't want to, you'll still be our friend. Tell me by next Christmas, and not a word to anyone else, not even Winky or my friends. I would still need you to keep secrets, you know. If there's some other house elf, one that we'd need to buy her freedom or something, let me know by then, too."

Dobby nodded. "Dobby understands. Thank you, Harry Potter, for best Christmas ever. Now get into bed. Dobby will help you rest for a few hours."

"You're a good friend, Dobby," Harry said. "I'm sorry we don't come to see you often enough."

Dobby teared up again. "Dobby is yours, Harry Potter, sir, your servant and your friend. Now sleep." Dobby touched Harry's scar and the pain disappeared. "Just sleep, my Friend and Master Harry Potter, sir," Dobby crooned.

Pwy transported Harry to the Burrow right after breakfast, and took his and the Tuatha member's present with him. He'd be delivering Hermione and Ron later that morning.

This year, only Ginny and Ron would be home. The other Weasley boys were spending the holidays with their girlfriends' families, except for Percy, who was in the last stages of rehab -- he'd be coming home the following day (Penelope Clearwater had been the last soul recovered, and was behind Percy in terms of her rehab; they were spending Christmas together and had just announced their elopement). Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were rather speechless with Harry -- two large heavy boxes had been delivered to them in Harry's name, and they just weren't certain what to say to him.

With daily access to his small account in the Weston branch of Gringotts the previous summer, Harry had finally thought to get an accounting of how much money he had in all his accounts. The totals had both staggered and embarrassed him. Since there was only some seven months to go until he had access to truly outrageous wealth, there was no reason not to splurge a bit with the 'ready money' vault. Even so, he'd only spent a little less than a fifth of all the money between the time he'd started Hogwarts and his last little spending trip to Hogsmeade.

"So," Mrs. Weasley asked after Hermione and Ron had arrived and Hermione's mother's health been ascertained, "shall we eat first or open presents?"

"Presents, please!" Ron begged.

Mrs. Weasley had given each couple matching jumpers (amber for Ron and Hermione, bottle green for Ginny and Harry). Ron and Ginny got more clothes from their parents, while Hermione was added to the family clock. In addition to everything else, Harry had ordered a set of everyday robes for each of the Weasleys, his 'uncles,' Hagrid, and Hermione.

Ginny gave everyone framed sketches; her art work had now reached a level where it was an excellent gift. Hermione of course gave books (Harry and Ron each got "The N.E.W.T.s Are Closer Than You Wished they Were"), although Ron also got sugar quills. Ron gave Ginny a gift specially chosen for her -- a box of variously-shaded green Every Flavour Beans. He and the Twins gave Harry a mock Chocolate Frog card, which made Harry blush. ("Only a matter of time 'til you get a real one, mate," Ron had teased.) Ron gave Hermione a silver ring.

Harry gave Ron, Ginny, and Hermione gift certificates to the various clothiers and cobblers in Weston, so they could dress in the local fashion at times in they wished. ("I'm surprised they would accept the idea of a gift certificate," Hermione commented. "I talked it over with Tudor Pwy, and he helped me. They all liked the idea of getting the money then, and not having to make the clothes for two or three years.") Harry had, of course, also given Ginny the pearl jewelry before the Ball.

The two large boxes were revealed to be chairs in matching leather styles for the Weasley sitting room. Mrs. Weasley's was a large spring rocker, Mr. Weasley's was a recliner with as many gadgets as Harry could find that didn't require electricity. The Weasleys were again rendered speechless.

Harry left rather reluctantly that evening. Where ever Pwy had taken him, it was already broad daylight on Boxing Day. All four men were in the hallway of what looked like an open cottage, with screened windows with bright light and warm humid air pouring through them. The four took a time adjusting potion, and napped while their body clocks adjusted to the new time.

When they woke up, it was already past noon. A light cold lunch was laid out, as were the Christmas gifts the group was exchanging, plus a few more for Harry from Pwy and Myrddin. They decided to delay the presents, and explore where Pwy had landed them.

It turned out, they'd landed on a small tropical island (perhaps some six by nine miles in size). Harry and Sirius explored it by broomstick, while Remus and Hagrid walked down the high hill the cottage was set on, following a small stream as it made its way to a lagoon. They could see the surf crashing against a reef some two hundred yards out.

For some six days, the four fished and swam in the surf. Hagrid made friends with some of the parrots, and split the cooking duties with Remus. Harry and Sirius flew, and took care of clean-up. The only work connected with school Harry was allowed to do was plotting the island's latitude via the stars, and he was not allowed to dwell on Voldemort in any obvious fashion.

If the Weasley's provided Harry with a home of sorts, Remus, Sirius, and Hagrid were his doting uncles. While the worries that had been driving him for so long couldn't disappear overnight, Christmas and his holiday combined helped him push those worries far away for the moment.

Harry returned to Hogwarts New Year's Day mentally and physically refreshed. He and Ginny would have Gryffindor by themselves until January 5, when the rest of the students were returning.

Ginny wasn't as rested as Harry. She was happy to see that something like a spring returned to his step, however.

Hermione also returned happy and well-rested on the 5th. Although her father's soul had never been found, and that was still hard to live with, her mother's recovery was heartening. She was even happier about how close she and Ron had finally become, and that her mother accepted their relationship.

Life was far from perfect -- above all, Voldemort was still out there, but life was better than it had looked a year before.

Saturday, March 15, 1997

Harry dragged himself down to the Hall for breakfast. Ron followed him, looking even worse. Gryffindor had easily beaten Slytherin in late November, while Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had battled to a 200 - 200 tie (Cho finally caught the snitch, since it looked unlikely that they would ever have a chance to catch up to Hufflepuff's score in any other way).

Ravenclaw had defeated Slytherin two weeks before. This morning, it was Hufflepuff - Gryffindor. If Hufflepuff could somehow defeat Gryffindor, they would be the favorite for the Cup that year, an honor they'd been lacking for many years.

The team gathered silently in the changing room after breakfast.

"All right," Ron said, his voice cracking a little from the stress, "we all know this is a big game. Beaters," he said glancing at them -- he'd learned before the Slytherin game that he should only say positions, since he'd messed up every name, including Harry and Ginny's, "remember to guard the goal. Their strength is in their chasers. One of you must be at our end the entire game. Hufflepuff's aren't likely to take any cheap shots at our seeker, so unless he calls for help, let him take care of himself. Chasers, don't get fancy in our end. Take the quaffle and run with it -- reserve passes for their end. Alright?"

"Right!" the team said.

"Anyone else?" Ron said with a quiver.

"Remember," Harry said, "they're good, but we're the best. We can take 'em. Listen to Captain Ron at our end, to Ginny at their end, and if I see anything, I'll let you know. Ready, team?"

"READY!" they all screamed.

"We're ready when you are, boss," Harry told Ron.

"Let's go!"

Scanning the stands, Harry saw that not only was Dumbledore present, but so were Arthur Weasley and Amos Diggory. The Minister looked fairly relaxed, which impressed Harry. He was still unable to enter the Quidditch field without thinking of Cedric.

The match was fast and closely played. Harry hated to admit it, but the Hufflepuff chasers were by far the best set that year. If Ron hadn't been the best keeper, Gryffindor would have been quickly far behind.

Ron made save after spectacular save. He still wasn't quite as flamboyant or certain as Oliver Wood, but then Wood was now considered one of the top three keepers in the British Isles. If Ron kept improving, he certainly would have a chance to play professionally.

Finally, Harry saw the snitch, almost right next to him. Harry ended the match, with Gryffindor winning 240 - 180.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny were subdued when the team was congratulated by Minister Diggory. They were gracious to the Hufflepuff team, and Ron and Harry could tell the Hufflepuffs were busy calculating how much Gryffindor could still lose to Ravenclaw, which might still allow Hufflepuff, but not Ravenclaw, to win the cup.

Obviously, the Gryffindors had the noisiest table that night. Ron had attacked the food as soon as it appeared; his nerves might have prevented his eating any breakfast, but they left him even more ravenous than usual. Hermione, also as usual, was trying to get Ron to alter his eating habits ("You can eat like this now," she said yet again, "but sooner or later, eating like this will blow you up like Harry's cousin!").

It was Ginny who saw Dumbledore and a very shaken Arthur Weasley coming up to the Faculty Table. She elbowed Harry, who drew others' attention as he looked up. Silence rippled from Ginny and Harry throughout the Gryffindor table, and then to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, and finally Slytherin.

"I regret to announce," Dumbledore said in a shaking voice when the Hall became quiet, "that Minister Diggory and his party was attacked just outside Hogsmeade almost an hour ago by Voldemort, five new Death Eaters, and three vampires. The Minister, and two of his party, were killed."

"Obviously, the war, which had been sputtering, has been restarted. We are asking the Old Believers to send back their law enforcers in their previous number." Dumbledore turned and stumbled a little as he did so. Harry, Ginny, and Hermione exchanged looks. Harry's face hardened, which attracted Ron's attention.

Harry stood. "Four and a half months," he said, as he turned and stalked from the room.

"Shit!"

Everyone at their end of the table stared. It hadn't been Ron, or even Ginny, but Hermione, who had expressed their opinion. "What?!" she snarled quietly at Ron and Lavender, who caught her eye, "We've managed to distract Harry since Christmas from thinking all this is on his shoulders and nobody else's. You all remember what he was like. Harry's even been doing well in all his classes, and he was eating better." Hermione frowned. "Why. . . ."

"Why what?" Ginny demanded. "Face it, Hermione, Voldemort hasn't been tracked down by some of the most powerful Aurors, hit wizards, Llofrudds, and Cigfrans in the world. Harry will have to do it, somehow, and you know that he will." Ginny stood and stalked off after him.

"I was just going to say, 'why, I think he even looked like he'd been sleeping better until this morning,'" Hermione said in a small voice.

"He hasn't been having loud nightmares anymore," Neville admitted.

"Ginny hasn't either," one of her dorm mates added from down the table.

"They probably will now," Ron said gloomily.

"Shit," Hermione said. Several Gryffindors said the same.

No one noticed that, two tables over, Pansy Parkinson was smiling.

Chapter 18

The first incident happened in late March. The Second year Hufflepuffs were coming down a set of stairs, approaching the dungeons, when there was an explosion. One boy died, bleeding to death as the force of the explosion had destroyed his foot and lower leg. Three others were seriously injured, although all recovered.

Three days later, it was the Fifth year Ravenclaws. A week later, the Fourth year Gryffindors, and five days after that, the Third year Slytherins and Hufflepuffs were caught as they came in from Care of Magical Creatures. In each case, the person who tripped the explosion lost his foot and part of his lower leg. The Fifth year Ravenclaws knew enough first aid to save the young man when their group was hit, the others did not.

There was no obvious pattern -- the incidents took place in different parts of the castle (although always those frequented by students), and all four were boys.

"Where can we even start to begin?" Snape had complained after the second attack. "We haven't a clue what sort of spell or device is causing this."

By the third explosion, they knew it was some sort of device, triggered by magical interaction of some sort. By the fourth, it was known that the trigger was a boy's stepping on the device, which must be disguised in some manner. They were unlikely to be invisible -- that took a fair amount of magic (unless demiguise hair was being used) which the various Aurors and other wizards checking the castle should have spotted.

The trigger of being stepped on by a boy (the various experts had determined that the boy had to have started puberty, and that once a certain testosterone was reached it would be safe) meant that if the person dropping the 'chameleon mines' (as they were dubbed) was a girl or a male old enough, it was no wonder that they might lay about for a few days before they were tripped. (The younger boys were mostly discounted, as there could be no certain way to predict when their hormones might reach the unsafe level.) This meant anyone fitting the criteria could be planting the devices.

'Anyone' could also be under the Imperius curse. There is no way to tell for certain by simple observation, unless the person is struggling to throw the curse off.

The girls quickly took the lead by sweeping in front of their classmates. Over a week's time, three devices were discovered that way, as their chameleon charms took a few seconds to conform to their new locations.

While all that was going on at Hogwarts, Voldemort was continuing the randomly-spaced attacks. The Llofrudds and Cigfrans were splitting their time between Hogwarts, trying to track down Voldemort, and trying to track down any vampires that were anywhere in Britain. The Ministry Aurors were working on the first and third investigations as well.

Harry had consulted with Remus, Sirius, and Ron, and then turned the Marauder's Map over to Dumbledore. Dumbledore had found 16 witches and wizards to watch the map, two at a time, at all times. They were all fully qualified, but had met with various mishaps over the years (they were crippled by various injuries to some greater or lesser degree). All wanted to help in the fight, and they would stand vigil. And, with Mad-Eye Moody in charge of them, 'Constant Vigilance' was assured.

Only three vampires had been found in Britain. All three had been living primarily off of animal blood for years; two (Muggle acolytes of the third) had never killed. The Master Vampire, a former wizard, was centuries old, and hadn't killed since the 1640s (although he did occasionally feed a little and then obliviate his victims). He had kept other vampires out of London and the South-east

since Tudor times. The Master was working with the Ministry to check various locations -- he didn't want vampires to become an issue, which might endanger his own existence.

In short, the advantage still lay with Voldemort.

Pwy and Lupin talked the heads of Houses into running alarm drills. Sirius Black was put in charge, and by mid-April, all the Houses except Slytherin had fast response times.

Snape was puzzled that Black hadn't brought the Slytherin's slow response time to the attention of the students. When questioned, Black gave him an answer he didn't like, but Snape agreed to say nothing to his students, either.

Tuesday, April 22, 1997

It was a few minutes before 1:00 am, when the witch watching the Marauder's Map suddenly realized what was happening. A group of names were moving around the second floor, near the stairs leading down towards the entrance hall. Nine names were moving up the stairs already, although they seemed to be going up the stair wells in a somewhat vertical manner.

Dian de Momery blinked, but then she remembered it wasn't her job to interpret what was going on. Her partner would be back from the rest room in a few moments, but she left the map for a few seconds as well. She sounded the alarm -- it notified Dumbledore, the faculty, and the prefects.

In less than five minutes, the Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff Common rooms were set to repel any attacks, with the head of House and the Prefects already making certain students were all accounted for. It would take Slytherin at least five more minutes to be ready.

The alarm, a high pitch whine, suddenly changed pitch -- the students knew that meant this was NOT a drill.

"Potter!" McGonagall called. "Here." She handed Harry a marble.

"What!" Ginny and Hermione screamed, while Ron and many of the students simply looked on in shock as Harry disappeared.

"He's gone to join the Headmaster," McGonagall told them. "Now, don't worry about Potter; we need to be ready."

Harry appeared in the "Map Room," and heard Sirius talking to the others. "It looks like a group of twenty-one came in via the tunnel to the Chamber of Secrets. It looked like it was still collapsed when Harry and I checked it out the other day."

"Look at the way they're moving," Remus said, just looking at the movements. "They're vampires in bat form."

"I agree," Dumbledore said simply.

"They're congregating around the entrances of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff -- six each. Only three near Slytherin, and they aren't really that close," one of the watchers commented.

"What do we do now?" Harry asked.

Pwy smiled. "I have a Llofrudd and eight Cigfrans ready to go . . . now. I sent them a signal telling them what to expect."

Three new dots appeared near each of the besieged Common Room entrances.

The dots showing the vampires disappeared one at a time over the next five minutes.

"Damn!" Pwy said.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"They should have won, but not that quickly. We know that at least two of Voldemort's vampires were wizards; not very powerful wizards, but wizards. Unless they're the ones near Slytherin, that means he has more somewhere in reserve." He frowned. "Even regular vampires should have fared a little better than that."

"I thought only wizard vampires could transform?" Harry said, puzzled.

"It's easy to turn Muggle vampires into bats. They can transform back into human, but not back into bats without assistance," Dumbledore said.

"Then that might mean that there are dark wizards of some type down at the cave-in, ready to transform them through," Remus pointed out, "maybe even Voldemort."

"Let's go," Harry said.

"Wait a minute!" Sirius objected.

"Titus, stay here and direct your people to pick up the ones near Slytherin," Dumbledore commanded. "Harry, Remus, Sirius, come with me."

"But. . . ."

"Only a Parseltongue can get us in, Sirius," Dumbledore reminded him.

"True, but wait a moment." Sirius touched the map and said an incantation. The map faded, and suddenly the area from the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets to the cave-in appeared.

"It takes about a week for a new area this large to blend into the map," Remus explained.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone or anything there," a watcher commented. "At least on our side of the cave-in."

"Then Sirius and Remus will go and question Myrtle. Keep your pagers ready."

"Pagers?" Harry asked. "I didn't think they could work here."

Sirius held out what looked like a pocket watch. "Muggle idea, but worked with magic."

"Oh!"

As the pair left, a watcher told Dumbledore and Pwy that two of the vampires near Slytherin had been destroyed, and the one remaining was being brought in for questioning. Harry pressed to the far back of the room, so that he wouldn't be noticed and sent away but also wouldn't miss anything.

The petrified vampire had once been a woman of at most twenty; she was slightly built with bushy hair. "She's under the Imperius curse," the Llofrudd known to Harry just as Cadfael said. "I doubt if she's been a vampire a month, maybe only a week."

"How about the others?" Pwy asked.

"Similar. I doubt if any of them had been vampires longer than three or four months; in fact I'd bet on them all having been made less than a month ago. They're still identifiable; we might be able to figure out who they were and see if there's a pattern of any kind."

"Ask Hermione to come here," Harry said.

"What?" Pwy asked, not expecting Harry to draw attention to himself.

"I've seen photos of Hermione's family. Not only does she look a little like Hermione -- nose, hair, and those front teeth are just like Hermione's were before they were magically shrunk -- but she looks even more like her cousins. Hermione's mother has two sisters, and each has two daughters, all a little older than Hermione. This looks like the second youngest one. Ronnie . . . or rather Veronica Grace, I think the name is."

"That's what the map says," de Momerie said. No one other than the crippled witch had thought to

look at the vampires' names.

"Ivo, Ofydd, come with me. You'll fetch the two Weasleys and Miss Granger and return them here to see if they can make contact with this . . . vampire," Pwy ordered. "Harry, you and I are going to take a look at the dead vampires. Gryffindor first. Come along!"

Two of the other vampires turned out to be Hermione's cousins. More surprisingly, were the identities of four of the others. 'Wow,' Harry thought, looking at one of the bodies in front of Ravenclaw, 'I wonder how many vampires fed on Dudley?'

Vernon, Petunia, Dudley, and Marge were all dead. Harry wasn't sure how to feel about that. He had never liked any of the four, but he never wanted them dead, either. They were just one more item on the agenda he would have to discuss with Tom Riddle at their eventual confrontation, assuming there was time for conversation. So, Harry didn't cry (as Hermione did, at the sight of her three cousins), scream for revenge (as one of the Sixth year Ravenclaws did when he saw his squib older sister), but he did mourn their loss to a mild degree.

The Master vampire from London agreed to take Veronica in as an apprentice. It wasn't a very happy ending in the tragic deaths (and one un-death) of the twenty-one Muggle and Squib relatives of Hogwarts students.

"I wonder why Voldemort made such a minor psychological attack?" Sirius wondered. Sirius, Remus, Harry, Pwy, and Dumbledore were having a private breakfast. Classes were canceled for the day, since the students had been awake until at least 4:30 am.

"It was a good psychological attack," Dumbledore maintained. "The Ministry will now have to track down every close Muggle and Squib relation of every student and backer of the Light and warn them if possible. That means less investigation elsewhere."

Pwy also had an answer. "For another, that entrance was probably only good for that kind of attack. We don't know if any other exit, where ever any might be, would be large enough to send anything larger than a bat through."

"I bet it is at least one," Harry said, "in fact, I bet it's the mysterious underground cavern Sn . . . Professor Snape mentioned once. You said we can't collapse the slide," Harry continued, turning to Dumbledore, "or really destroy the entrance. Their magic is too interwoven with the very magic that sustains Hogwarts."

"That's right."

"Perhaps there's some other way to gain entrance to the stone slide or the area around the base besides the Chamber. We collapse the tunnel as close to Hogwarts as we can without undermining the foundations because of this attack and think it's safe. That leaves the way open to an attack through some other entrance. In fact, there must at least be a way from the bottom of the slide or the slide itself into the castle, because the basilisk was too big to fit through the water pipes in Myrtle's bathroom. There must be some way to gain access either to the drainage pipes or some other sort of passageways via the way to the Chamber."

"Good thinking, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Take a nap, and then you, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione try and remember any place the basilisk had access to. Off you go."

"Do you really think he's hit on something?" Sirius asked hopefully.

"I believe so," Dumbledore said. "The magic that was used build this castle is not really understood. There is a magical framework that cannot be altered, except by addition. There must be passage ways or at least storm drains that intertwine with that basic structure. If so, Riddle or some of his old followers may have found out about it, or he may know of it from the basilisk. Either way, he may not know the details, and we dare not leave the idea unexplored."

And so that Saturday morning, a small group were gathered in front of an ancient grated access-way to a drainage shaft in the far northeast corner of the dungeon. Sirius and Titus Pwy carefully opened the old grate. "Damn," Sirius said, shining the light from his wand up the shaft. "Padfoot can't maneuver in that!"

"Told you!" Harry said. "That's why I brought Ginny, Dennis and the rest of the volunteers."

Harry had recruited the eight smallest Fourth and Fifth years he could find and trust (plus Third year Dennis Creevy). Ginny was the tallest (or 'least short' as Ron had jeered) at five foot one, Dennis (the only boy) was the stockiest. The other seven were Carolyn Merkle (Fifth year, Ravenclaw), Joyce Stoffers (Fourth year, Ravenclaw), Tabitha Cliff (Fourth year, Hufflepuff), Beeko Komura (Fourth year Slytherin, and the tiniest of the nine), Doreen Smith, Paula Hughes, and Regina Holmes (Fourth year, Gryffindors).

"Are you sure, Harry?" Sirius asked.

"Sure about the need, and all nine of. . . ."

"The 'Little Rascals'?" Dennis said with a smirk. The Muggle-born/raised and other Gryffindors laughed. Beeko and Carolyn didn't seem as amused, but accepted it.

"I think this a very good group," Pwy told Sirius. "All are good to excellent at Defense, and those that are good at Defense are excellent at either Charms or Transfiguration." He turned to Harry. "What's your plan?"

Harry took out what looked like mobile phones. "These are charmed." He handed each person there, including Sirius and Pwy, a phone and a card with phone numbers running from 01 to 18, and gave the group five minutes of instructions and practice.

01 Dr. Pwy

02 Sirius Black

03 Professor Lupin

04 Professor B. Weasley

05 Professor C. Weasley

06 Harry Potter

07 Hermione Granger

08 Ron Weasley

09 Carolyn Merkle

10 Joyce Stoffers

11 Tabitha Cliff

12 Beeko Komura

13 Ginny Weasley

14 Regina Holmes

15 Paula Hughes

16 Doreen Smith

17 Dennis Creevy

18 Mapping Center

Harry next handed each a charmed electric flashlight, an automatically refilling water canteen, some chocolate and nutrition bars, and a small spare flashlight. He also gave each a small ward detector. He showed them all how the equipment worked (Dumbledore had shown Harry earlier). "The purpose is to map these drains and internal passageways. The phones will relay your positions. If you come to some access not easily to fit into, or that goes off in a difficult angle, or just looks too dangerous, take your phone and outline the perimeter as much as you easily can. That way, we'll at least know it's there, no matter how small it is." Everyone nodded.

"Try and keep together, at least stay in the sight of one other person. This drain goes in three

accessible directions -- down goes into a funneling chamber, taking rain water towards the lake, and it's too small to explore after the bottom of the funnel. That leaves west, south, and up. Weasley, Creevy, Cliff, go up. Merkle, Stoffers, and Komura go west. Holmes, Hughes, and Smith, that leaves south for you. Sirius will wait here, in case you need to retreat here. It's Nine thirty. At Eleven thirty to Eleven forty-five, call in and we'll try and get you close enough to an exit so you can take an hour break. If you need to come out for a bathroom break, let us know. Every so often, at least one of your phones will beep. Answer it, that's your check-in."

Harry grinned. "Try and enjoy."

"Yeah, right," Ginny muttered. She was trying to give an air of sardonic detachment, but in reality she was thrilled that Harry thought enough of her to include her; she would have hated for him to be over-protective. Ginny crawled into the passage, and started climbing the old damp rungs stapled into the side. Tabitha Cliff, nearly as tall as Ginny and the heftiest of the thin girls, went in next. Dennis saluted and followed. The other two groups clambered in as well.

None of the three groups found anything of interest. There were plenty of drainage passages, all too small for anything much larger than a skinny rat (or a small snake) to get through. The number of large drains were few. It looked like there would be twelve vertical drains and nine levels of horizontal, and so far only three of the horizontal ones (each running around near the circumference of the main keep and the mail towers) were really large enough for people to pass through (although the basilisk could have gotten through most of the others).

By 5:00, that was confirmed. Three of the nine levels of horizontal drain passages had been explored and mapped, although only two of the vertical ones had been. No additional vertical passages larger than six inches in diameter had been identified from the roofs. Three Cigfrans had been on duty in the landing area around the end of the stone slide since the attack. The passage leading to the area had been collapsed back as far as possible.

It was the next day when the trio of Merkle, Stoffers, and Komura came across a disguised exit. By the end of the day, all the exits to the drains had been identified, fifteen in all. The known exits were now warded. There were also six disguised doors that were marked to be investigated later, although it turned out each led into small rooms which in turn led into the main castle -- all were now well-warded.

If Voldemort was planning on gain entrance in this manner, he'd have a surprise coming. And if all he wanted to do was waste the time of the castle's defenders, they'd lost very little of it, since the students had done most of the work.

Tuesday, April 29, 1997

"Potter, can I talk with you? Alone?"

Harry was more than surprised. In over six and a half years, this was the first time Millicent Bulstrode had ever directly spoken to him.

"Sure." He followed her around the corner from the library.

She was still a large girl -- a little taller than Harry and broader in the shoulders, despite his workouts.

"Why were you nice to young Crabbe, Avery, and Flint over Christmas? You knew who their fathers were, and who Flint's brother was."

"Yes, I knew who their fathers were. I saw them around Voldemort when he was brought back. And I knew what Marcus Flint had done. They hadn't done anything that I knew of, though. And I also know what it's like to be left alone, especially at Christmas."

Bulstrode nodded her massive head. She looked thoughtful, and went on. "You never tried to get

back at us, I mean me or Greg or Vincent or even Pansy after Draco . . . left."

"Why would I? Crabbe and Goyle had broken with him; you never did anything to me or my friends that I know of since you wrestled Hermione at the dueling club our second year. And Pansy had to suffer just from his going."

She nodded again. "That's what I thought, too. You know, my parents were never Death Eaters and still aren't. Three of my uncles were, though. Another one might be now. But my parents weren't. Nobody much liked me, except Greg and Vincent. Pansy and I have always just had to get along. Right before, well, Greg and I were getting along more than okay. Well, I'm not so sure about Pansy. Here. Look at this."

She shoved a ledger at Harry. He opened it and read it. His eyebrows went up in surprise.

"You understand this?"

"Yes," Harry said softly.

"It might mean they'll kill me, but I need to do this, for Greg."

"I understand."

"Good." She turned and walked away.

And hour later, Harry was meeting with Dumbledore, Snape, Pwy, Remus, and Sirius. He was dismissed, however (to his annoyance), after he presented his evidence.

"So, Pansy Parkinson was the agent," Pwy mused. "So obvious, I guess we never saw it."

"What do you mean by that?" Snape snapped.

"Come on! She's the student with the most ties to the Death Eaters," Sirius nearly shouted.

"True," Remus mused, "but while she was always trying to be close to Draco, I never saw her as being any sort of active supporter, beyond a more zealous prejudice than most Slytherins."

Snape sneered at that last comment.

"In any event, is there any reason not to turn her over to either the Aurors or the Cigfrans?" Sirius asked.

"I supposed we must," Dumbledore said sadly.

"She is our only possible link to the new Death Eaters," Pwy pointed out.

"Planning on sacrificing her, like you did those idiots with your little packages?" Snape snarled.

"She's responsible for four deaths, Severus; what would you have us do? Give her a pat on the head?" Pwy snarled back.

"No, but I don't want her simply used and disposed of, either."

"Good point," Dumbledore agreed.

"I rather doubt she has any direct links," Snape went on. "At most, we'll find an intermediary, and possibly not even that."

Sirius jumped in. "Could young Malfoy have been in contact with her?"

"No, not since he was put in Justice. It is possible someone used his name to get to her, however," Pwy told them.

"I agree," Snape added. "It doesn't excuse her, of course. Could she be sent into early exile with Draco?"

"Only if she has information to trade," Pwy said firmly.

"Surely she is too young to be executed!" Snape protested.

"She's old enough to kill," Pwy said coldly. "She's not stupid; she's certainly old enough to know the consequences, especially after the executions last autumn."

"Her crimes were only against Hogwarts students; it's not a matter for your people," Snape argued.

"Then don't ask us to punish her for you," Pwy replied. He stood. "Make your own decisions." He disappeared in smoke and flames.

"Are you going to turn her over to the Aurors, then?" Remus asked Dumbledore.

"I do not like the idea of turning her over, but I really don't see much choice," Snape admitted. "I'd like to talk with them before they arrest her, if that's your decision."

"I see little alternative to her immediate arrest, and no advantage to waiting. Sirius, if you could contact the Ministry for me?" He handed Sirius Bulstrode's ledger. "Remind them that Miss Bulstrode should not be punished for failing to come forth before this. Her suspicions were aroused, and she felt she had no real proof until this past weekend."

"Yes, sir."

"Have them speak to me when they arrive. I shall also brief them and then bring them to see you, Severus."

"Agreed."

"Remus, I want you to talk with Harry. You may need to talk with Titus and his superior first. . . ."

Chapter 19

Friday, May 2, 1997

"Would you like some tea, Harry?" Remus Lupin asked, a little nervously.

"No, thank you," Harry answered, wondering what this was all about. He'd learned over time that Remus was most likely to offer tea when he was nervous about something. "Go ahead, if you want some, though."

As he fussed, Lupin asked, "I suppose you want to know about Pansy Parkinson?"

"She's a killer, but she's still here."

"She is."

"Are they going to wimp out and just send her into exile with Draco?"

"No. The Ministry want to watch her until mid-July, although we doubt it will do much good. If she's made no contacts with Voldemort's supporters by then, she'll be arrested. She left the chameleon mines after she was seventeen. She'll likely spend the rest of her life in one prison or another."

Harry could live with that. "Has Bulstrode been warned?"

"She has. And I hope you'll let anyone you told know, too."

"I only told Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, and they didn't tell anyone." Harry sighed. "What else did you want to talk about?"

"Sirius and I are worried about you."

Harry shrugged. "Not much I can do, except train. Doc says I'm dueling at a high national level, maybe international. I have my power up, too. If I'd fought Wormtail and Voldemort two years ago like I am now, I probably could have saved Cedric and beaten them long before he was resurrected, and I would have beaten him in a fight. I can probably beat him today."

"We don't want you going to fight him alone."

Harry gave a sad smile. "Don't worry. I won't. I already promised Ginny I wouldn't. Shall I promise you, too? He might find some way to capture me alone, but short of that, I have no intention of fighting him and his followers all by myself."

"Well . . . that's . . . good."

"I'd rather someone else capture or kill him, but somehow, I think it will come down to me. At least Doc and some others will be with me, so I can concentrate on fighting Voldemort."

"It might just be your fate to take the others to fight Him, you know."

"That would be great! Trust me, I have no desire to die, Remus. I will, if I have to to defeat him, but that's my last choice. I don't have a death wish."

"That's good to hear. I'm sorry this is on your shoulders, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "After almost six years, I'm getting used to it." He sighed. "It's taken me a while to forgive Dumbledore for sticking me with the Dursleys. I still wish he could have found some other solution, but he was right not to have me raised in the general magical population. I don't think growing up with this burden would have made things anything but more difficult."

"I wish we could have had a better solution for you, too."

Harry shrugged again. "We don't get wishes like that. If I think about it too much, I just feel

depressed. I try to think of Ginny and this summer before my birthday instead."

"What are you doing this summer?"

"I guess Hermione will be spending time with her mother. . . ."

"Where is her mother, or can't you tell me?"

"She's somewhere in America, that's all any of us know."

"Good; she's safe then."

"I hope so. I imagine Doc and the Old Believers will have us some where there as well."

Remus finally sipped his tea. "Be careful of where you step these next few months. We don't want you port-keyed away, let alone hurt."

"I'll do my best. What else is on your mind?"

Remus sighed. He wished Sirius was here, but instead he was out again, trying to hunt down the new Death Eaters. "How's your scar?"

"It's twinging a bit, but not as bad as it sometimes did over the last two years. I've been talking with the Headmaster about it."

Remus smiled. There was a soft pop and a covered plate appeared. "Eclairs?"

Harry smiled.

Thursday, June 26, 1997

"Snape at Three o'clock," Ron muttered.

Harry looked. Sure enough, Snape was bearing down on the trio. "There goes a happy lunch," Ron said, even more softly.

"Miss Granger, you may wish to consult the Head of your House. I believe you shall find the Sixth year marks are ready for distribution."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said, surprised.

Snape took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I do have three things to say before you all leave tomorrow. First of all, Miss Granger, it seems I must congratulate you not just on your own marks, but on the coaching you have been giving every one in your House, last year and this. I do not know what field you might be intending to pursue after next year, but it should either be teaching or research."

"Thank you, sir!" Hermione and the other two were now very surprised.

"I must add that it was good of you to include some of the . . . younger members of my own House and the others in some of your revising sessions in the library."

"Harry suggested it, sir."

Snape glanced at Harry for a moment, but was looking at Ron when he said, "Thank you, too, then, Mister Potter. Mister Weasley, do you have an explanation of why your friend's tutorials did not seem to benefit you as much in the practical as it seems to have the others?"

"Yes, sir," Ron answered honestly, since Snape tone was still amazingly civil. "I don't believe . . . it is very unlikely I shall even come close to scoring my N.E.W.T. in Potions, and equally unlikely that I'll ever be brewing anything other than the simple medical potions we learned last year, even in an emergency. Therefore, I concentrated on the material what would be useful on knowing for the Magical Substances N.E.W.T."

"I see. Well, that's your choice. Mister Potter," he said turning on Harry, "I did mean it when I thanked you for asking Miss Granger to include those Slytherin students. In fact, thank you for looking out after them. I could see some of your younger House members would have enjoyed taunting them, and were very tempted. I know it was mostly your doing they did not." Snape sighed. "If you wish to call off our duel in fourteen months, I should be . . . willing to as well. That would not affect the agreement to a Wizard's Peace while you are still a student here."

Harry's jaw dropped, but Hermione elbowed him back to attention. "Very well, sir. I agree we should stop the duel." Harry held out his hand. Snape shook it, turned, and left.

"What was that about?" Ron asked in wonder.

"I guess he finally grew up," Hermione said.

"Could be," Harry said. "Here come two more; Goyle and Crabbe, it looks like."

It was indeed the younger versions of Goyle (now in his second year) and Crabbe. Both were slightly smarter than their older brothers (which, as Ron often pointed out, wasn't saying much), and also much nicer (which even Ron admitted made them acceptable).

"Harry," George Goyle said awkwardly, "can we ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Are you really going to fight the Dark Lord this summer?" Crabbe asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. "I hope not." He knew the rumors that were flying around the school.

"If you do, be careful," Goyle said. His younger Housemate elbowed him. "Oh, right. Here." He handed Harry a rolled parchment, and the two fled.

Harry unrolled it, and his friends were shocked to see his eyes sparkle a little. As he had always managed except that one time with Ginny, however, no tears fell.

"What is it?" Hermione asked. Harry handed it to her, and she and Ron looked.

There was a dark red lighting bolt down the center, and the inscription, "GOOD LUCK, HARRY POTTER." Fourteen Slytherins had signed it, mostly from the First and Second years, although Blaise Zabini and his girlfriend had as well.

"If I've done nothing else, I've probably saved at least a few Slytherins from going Dark," Harry said, a little awed by the influence he had over them.

"Come on," Hermione said, "We wanted to talk to you about that!"

"But what about our grades!" Harry asked.

"This is more important," Hermione said. Harry knew he was in trouble.

"What?" Harry asked, a little brusquely for him. He refused to move.

"We have to ask you to promise something," Hermione said, deciding to ask right there.

"No."

"You don't know what it is," Ron insisted.

"Bet I do, but go ahead."

"We want you to promise you won't go after Voldemort alone," Hermione said.

Harry looked at them. "Fine. I promise Let's go get our marks."

"No arguing?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"I already promised Ginny a year ago and Remus last month. Now, let's go collect our grades, finish

packing, and cheer Ginny up. Remember how dazed we all were last year! Then, we can get ready for the feast."

"Harry. . . ." Hermione started.

"Look, barring a miracle, I'll be facing Voldemort sometime in the next year if not sooner," Harry said, almost angrily, "most likely in about thirty-five days or so. Unless he kidnaps me again, I won't be alone. If he tracks me down, you two, Doc, Sirius, Ginny or someone should be near by. If we track him down, it'll be Doc and some of his people with me. I'm more ready than any Sixth year student ever had the right to be. Now, let's go see our grades."

Ginny was waiting for them. Each student plucked the envelope with their name on it from McGonagall's bulletin board. "Ginny," Hermione said, "you do the honors."

"Hermione. . . . Transfiguration a Hundred and eight; Arithmancy, Runes, Astronomy and Charms, a Hundred and two -- that puts you as number one in your class for Transfiguration and Runes -- Creatures, Herbology, and History, a Hundred; Defense and Potions, Ninety-nine! That's an average of a Hundred and one point four; putting your unsurprisingly number one in your class as well as in Gryffindor."

"Ron, you have a Ninety-nine in Creatures; Ninety-six in Charms; Ninety-fives in Transfiguration and Defense; Ninety-three in Herbology; Eighty-seven in Astronomy and Divination; Eighty-four in History; and a Seventy-seven in Potions. Your over-all average is a Ninety point three three." Ginny looked at him. "Not bad. You lost a spot in the over-all class standings, though."

Ron shrugged. "As long as I get at least six or seven N.E.W.T.s, all will be forgiven."

"Harry you were the top scorer in Defense and Charms, a Hundred and six and a Hundred and four; a Hundred and five in Muggle Studies; Transfiguration and Creatures, a Hundred each; History Ninety-nine; Astronomy, Runes, and Herbology, Ninety-six each; and Divination Ninety-four."

"If everything else fails, your Divination mark shows you could become a great novelist," Hermione teased.

Ginny and Harry both stuck their tongues out. Ginny continued, "That's an average of Ninety-nine point six; placing you second in Gryffindor and third in the class for the year."

"Now we just have to wait for your O.W.L.s," Ron teased.

"Don't worry about my O.W.L.s -- after the twins and yours, Mum will love my scores."

Ginny was right. She'd gotten 11 O.W.L.s, in Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Muggle Studies, Creatures, Herbology, Runes, Astronomy, History (mostly do to Harry's coaching, since history was now a favorite class of his), Magical Theory, and Magical Substances. Her grades were Defense 99%; Charms 98%; Transfiguration 98%; Muggle Studies 98%; Creatures 98%; Herbology 97%; Runes 95%; Astronomy 93%; History 92%; and Potions 87%.

The quartet was set to leave for North America. Hermione's mother had finished her rehabilitation, and was acting as a consultant with an American medi-wizard research group -- they'd never had a trained dentist to help with the more mundane aspects of dental care. (Too much magic could harm the teeth, and many common potions had wearing effects on enamel. She was helping them understand the use of fluoride and other common Muggle techniques.)

Hermione and Ron would join her until after Harry's birthday. This caused a slightly tearful farewell on Hermione's part. Unspoken was the worry that they might never see Harry alive again.

Ginny and Harry were traveling deep into Old Believer territory. By their best guess, they ended up somewhere in the north-east of British Columbia, or perhaps the extreme southeast of Yukon or

southwest of the Northern Territories. Until Doctor Pwy deemed Harry ready, there was no chance of Voldemort hunting Harry down and forcing a fight.

Where ever it was, it was beautiful. It was another long valley, with huge mountains towering around them, and dozens of miles wide. There was a carpet of evergreen trees across the valley floor and skirting the hills and some of the lower sides of the mountains. Small glaciers sparkled off some of the mountains.

There was a small wizarding settlement. Technically, Harry and Ginny lived in one tent, while Doc Pwy and Sirius lived in another. The living arrangements inside the primitive-looking tents broke most of the rules the Old Believers had, but no Old Believer came into the tents, other than the first reception rooms, and so no one said anything. Dobby had come along to help Harry and Ginny out, while one of Pwy's house elves was keeping house for him and Sirius, and they kept all banned items far out of sight of the reception rooms.

Over the next four weeks, Harry trained hard. Ginny often joined him, but she also spent time with Sirius and some of the others in the valley, including Harri Myrddin, who was staying in the valley full-time to help Harry train.

Ginny had cornered Myrddin privately the third day they were there. "Doeth Athro?"

"Yes, my child?"

"Tell me honestly, do you think Harry will survive?"

He studied Ginny for over a minute, and then smiled. "Please don't do anything . . . long term. I will not lie and promise you that Harry will survive, but I can assure you he probably will. I know that's not as much as you'd like to hear, but it is honest. If you were three or four years older, I would still tell you to wait under these circumstances."

She blushed. "Yes, sir." 'So much for that idea,' she thought.

"Remember, knowing you're safe will lend Harry strength. Knowing you are well-trained and able to protect yourself gives him a sense of security. Knowing you love him, and his love for you, will give him the will to survive."

Time passed all too quickly for both Harry and Ginny. Harry's birthday passed by with no official recognition. Harry and Ginny merely spent the day together, since Myrddin and Pwy gave him the time off.

The pair approached Harry on the morning of August 1st. "It's time to go back to England, Harry," Pwy said. "We won't be confronting Voldemort today, but we're launching the attack from there."

"We understand," Harry said, clutching Ginny's hand.

"We'll send for you two later," Myrddin said to Ginny and Sirius.

"Are you going, too?" Ginny asked.

"Yes," Myrddin answered. "Harry won't be facing this alone, I swear it."

Harry was a little surprised to emerge from Pwy's corridor near the Great Hall at Hogwarts. "But we can't apparate from here!"

"No, we can't," Pwy answered, "but we need to be safe until we launch the attack."

"How many of us will there be?"

"In the first wave, just us three," Pwy said. He held his hand up to cut off Harry's protests. "We

never found a way to send in more than three. We did, however, make a good alternative plan. The first thing we have to do is scatter these." He handed Harry a small marble out of a bag. "These will allow the second wave to apparate in. We have sixty Old Believer law enforcers and Aurors ready."

"But. . . ." Harry started, looking at Pwy and the Druid. "If you're worried about me," Harri Myrddin teased, "I may not be a trained warrior, but I think I showed myself ready and able." Harry was a bit abashed at that. The Druid chief had indeed shown himself more than combat ready over the previous four weeks.

Dumbledore approached them. He silently handed Harry the Sword of Gryffindor.

"If we can partially disable him, you must use this on Voldemort, if you can," Myrddin said. "If you can't, one of us will try and take your place. I'm sorry, Harry; this seems to be the most certain way."

Harry nodded. He'd been worried something like this was likely. He sighed. "Will Ginny be here when we return?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said simply.

"Ron and Hermione are alright?"

"Yes," Pwy answered, "and they should be here, too."

"When?"

"I want you to take this, Harry," Dumbledore said, holding a small vial. "It will give you a few hours of dreamless sleep. When you wake up. . . ."

"I understand. I guess I always knew this would happen." He looked at Dumbledore. "I'd hoped I'd be more than a tool."

"You are, and have always been, more than that," Dumbledore said, "but I understand why you feel this way today. I hope, when this is over, you can feel free, and that you'll forgive me."

"I've already forgiven you, sir." Harry gave a small thin smile. "We can only feel free until Malfoy or some other dark ambitious bigot starts it all over again."

"Human nature doesn't change," Myrddin said. "Fortunately, it works for the good as well."

Chapter 20

Saturday, August 2, 1997

Ginny was pacing up and down the Gryffindor Common Room. Ron and Hermione, sitting on a sofa, watched her but knew better than to say anything. Remus, Charlie, Percy, George, and Fred sat around the room. Dobby sat on the floor in front of the fireplace, where a tiny fire was burning, pulling slightly on his ears. Sirius was pacing in his own way -- Padfoot was walking up and down the stairs.

Myrddin, Pwy, and Harry had apparated from Hogsmeade at 7:00 that morning. In less than five minutes, all of the sixty trained assault wizards, wearing distinctive brown robes and cowls, disappeared as well. After twenty more minutes, a second wave of thirty attackers, medics, and a few others went in. Since then, there had been no word.

The group of watchers had been brought to Hogwarts via floo from the Burrow a little after 9:00 am. None had been very interested in breakfast or lunch. It was now nearly 3:00 pm.

Padfoot suddenly ran down the stairs and started barking at the entrance. Everyone was standing by the time Dumbledore opened the panel.

"Well!" Sirius cried as soon as he transformed.

"Everything is as well as can be expected," Dumbledore stated, "although not as well as we'd hoped. Harry is exhausted, but physically whole. He killed Voldemort's reformed body; Harri Myrddin and Titus Pwy were then able to disperse the Dark Lord's essence, finally killing him. Nine on our side were killed. Over two dozen were seriously to drastically injured. Everyone else is at least lightly injured -- Harry had a sprained wrist and many scratches and bruises, some serious. Those should all be healed by the time he awakens after dinner. Professor Bill Weasley. . . ." the group gasped, they'd thought Bill was with Hagrid at Hagrid's hut, "and Hagrid were both slightly injured when the second wave, what Titus called the 'clean-up crew,' went in a little later."

"Doctor Pwy was rather more injured, but nothing overly serious. Professor Snape is in grave condition, and may not survive." He sighed. "They found six dormant vampires and forty-eight Death Eaters, plus Voldemort. All of them have been destroyed. The war is over."

He held up his arm, holding off the rush to the Infirmary. "As I said, Mister Potter will not awaken until after dinner. Professors Weasley and Hagrid will be at dinner, as will the Druid Chief. Madam Pomfrey and the medi-wizards are busy taking care of the other injured, and should not be disturbed. Miss Weasley may see Mister Potter tonight, the rest of you tomorrow morning, when I hope he will be released. Now, I need to notify the Ministry and inform the international press." He walked out.

"It's over?" Ron said. "It's hard to believe."

Everyone stared at each other for a moment. Fred and George then gave a whoop of triumph and hugged each other and then their brothers. Remus and Sirius did the same, while Hermione, Ron, and Ginny joined a group hug. Soon, everyone was hugging each other.

Dobby slipped out first, as only house elves could within Hogwarts. He made his way into the infirmary, and stood looking at Harry Potter. He waved his hand over Harry, and smiled at what he found after a second pass. After three minutes, he popped back to Gryffindor's Common Room.

Everyone was just sitting, smiling.

"Where did you go, Dobby?" Ginny asked.

"Dobby went to see Master Harry. Dobby knew Miss Wheezy and other friends of Master Harry

would still be worried, so. . . ." He waved his hand, and a visual of Harry sleeping appeared.

"Master Harry is asleep, and will be healed by tonight."

"Thank you, Dobby," Ginny said sincerely.

"Miss Wheezy is very welcome. Dobby will go to set up your rooms, now." He popped out of the room.

"I wish he wouldn't call Harry that," Hermione muttered.

"Get used to it," Remus said with a smile. "I rather think Dobby has adopted Harry, and there's not much anyone can do about it without hurting his feelings."

Harry suddenly realized that he was awake. One deep breath, and he knew he was still in the infirmary. He also realized that while he had minor aches all over, his head felt clearer than it ever had.

And then Harry remembered why. Some seventy-five minutes into the battle, Myrddin and Pwy had managed to partially stun Voldemort. Harry had swung the sword, and killed Voldemort's body. Myrddin and Pwy had done some things Harry still didn't understand to the greenish mist that came from it, destroying Voldemort's essence.

Voldemort was gone.

He'd woken up the night before, been fed a little stew by Ginny, and after a quick visit to the toilet, had fallen back asleep. Harry smiled and opened his eyes to a new world, and saw it was dawn. The second thing he saw was Ginny, asleep in the chair next to his bed.

Harry crept out of bed to the lavatory, wand in hand. He came out fifteen minutes later, clean and ready to face the day.

"Awake already, Mister Potter?" Madam Pomfrey whispered, coming in from another ward.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tell me the total truth, for once. How do you feel?"

"Still a little banged up, just little aches really, but over-all, I feel pretty good. I never realized it, but there was always a little residual pain from my scar, no matter how weak or far away He was. It's gone."

She smiled. "There's a spare robe behind Miss Weasley, and your slippers are under that chair. Why don't you wake her up, and get out of here? I do have some seriously ill patients in the main ward, and we can use the space."

"How's Professor Snape doing?" Snape's appearance had driven Voldemort over the edge, giving the two powerful Old Believers the chance to break through the shields they and Harry had been slowly weakening. It had come at a price -- the killing curse had missed Snape, but he'd caught much of it's reflective power.

"Still touch and go, but we still think there's a good chance he will pull through." She bustled out.

"Ginny?" Harry prodded softly.

Ginny opened her eyes, and saw Harry. She smiled, and Harry's heart melted. "I love you," she said equally softly.

"I know. That's why I came back. I slew the dragon for you four years ago, and helped defeat the evil wizard. Now can we live happily ever after?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "It sounds like you're proposing. You can't propose yet."

"Don't tell me there's a third task?" Harry asked, eyes open wide in mock amazement.

"Idiot. You can't propose until I leave Hogwarts. Mum would skin you alive if we got engaged now."

"Today's August Third, right?"

"Right."

Harry pulled his wand out, and made some quick calculations in the air. "So, I can propose in Six hundred and ninety-seven days?"

Ginny giggled. "Yes -- and the way things are going, I'll say 'yes,' even if it's to marrying you the next day."

Harry smiled. "I hope Ron and Hermione can wait that long."

"For what?"

"I was hoping to make it a double wedding."

"Ron might not like to share -- and Mum forgot to threaten him not to get married right after school, so far as I know."

"True. And they might want to get married at Weston, or before they go."

"You know, the art program can be up to a five year program, if I want to be accepted into the Magical Art Guild?"

Harry shrugged. "I think I could find five or six years of things to do at Weston."

"Actually, it would be two years at Weston, then three years as an apprentice. That could almost anywhere; there's no way to predict who might offer to train me."

Harry smiled. "Gin, we have the money to live anywhere."

She blushed. "Where ever you are, I will be, Harry. I promise thee." Harry recognized that as 'the witch's pledge' -- they might not be able to announce their engagement, but if he answered, they were betrothed by ancient custom.

"Where ever you are, I will be, Ginny. I promise thee." They leaned to kiss, which completed the pledge.

Harri Myrddin walked in just after that moment, and the two settled down. "Harry, get your dressing gown and slippers on. We have a busy day arranged for you." Seeing the distressed look on his face, the Druid added, "Don't worry. One day of embarrassment will be followed by two weeks of relaxation."

"Just two weeks?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I'm certain Ms Granger will want to start him on the N.E.W.T.s by then," he teased. "Come along!"

It was indeed an embarrassing day for Harry. He was awarded the Order of Merlin (First Class), and accepted as a Warlock, a Sorcerer, and as a member of the International Confederation of Wizards. He endured an awards lunch, and dinner with many of the Ministers of Magic from Europe and North America, as well as Myrddin and the Head of the Council of Druids.

Harry was also presented with 10,000 galleons by the British Ministry and another 10,000 from other Ministries. He donated one third of the British reward to help those who had lost family members in the war, one third towards magical orphans in general, and one third to help children of Muggle decent whose parents might not wish to fund their Magical education. He handed Dumbledore the remaining galleon, and asked that each year Hogwarts reward the Pure-Blooded student who had done the most for the Muggle-borns of the school that year by inscribing their

name on a plaque, which he would pay for. The galleon would be part of the plaque.

In a stroke of evil inspiration, Harry insisted the plaque be called the Snape - Potter Award. Ron, Sirius, and Remus had all been sent from the Hall until they'd stopped laughing.

Harry split the other 10,000 five ways. One fifth went to each of the three causes, and he gave another fifth to the Hogwarts Infirmary ("To help pay for the all the treatment I've had, and will have, there." Madam Pomfrey blushed a bright scarlet when she took the money.) The final fifth, he gave ". . . to the three people who have helped me survive this long ordeal in more ways than anyone can count -- Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, and Hermione Granger."

The quartet sat in the Gryffindor Common Room that night, full of good food and a little tired of all the fuss.

"So, Ron what are you going to do with all that money?" Harry asked.

"You're a right bastard, Harry," Ron growled.

"So, who gets the two knuts?" Ginny asked.

"What two knuts?" Harry asked in return, puzzled.

"Well, we're splitting two thousand galleons. . . ."

"Two THOUSAND. . . ." Ron said in disbelief, for the ninth time that day.

"So that's six hundred and sixty-six galleons, eleven sickles, and nine knuts each, with two left over," Ginny explained.

"Oh. . . ."

"Six hundred and sixty-six. . . ." Ron was still in a little bit of shock.

"Why not draw straws," Harry teased. "Or maybe you and Hermione should have them. I'd hate to burden Ron any more wealth than I already have."

"Good idea," Hermione said. "And you might as well give me Ron's share anyway; he'll just spent it at Zonko's or someplace equally foolish. Most likely buying chocolate frogs until he can find that Agrippa. I'll invest it for him."

"WHAT!"

Harry held his hand out to Ginny, and they retired to her room while the other pair conducted their foreplay by argument.

Chapter 21

Wednesday, August 20, 1997

"Don't be so bloody obstinate!"

"Language, Harry!" Remus teased.

"Why won't you take the ruddy money!"

"I'll take my shares back," Sirius said, "and we'll start paying Remus his dividends. We just don't want the money those shares put in your account over the years. Get used to it! Find something worthwhile to spend it on!"

Harry gave them an evil grin -- nastier than any Potter had ever had. This was worse -- it was Lily's smile. "Oh, I've already spent money on something worthwhile!" Harry walked out of Remus' sitting room.

"I'm worried," Sirius said.

"Really?" Remus responded, "I think we should be terrified."

Warlocks' Weekly Record, August 30, 1997 *10 Questions With Harry Potter*

Considering the events of August 2, there were a number of possible candidates to interview this month. Fortunately, our first choice, and the newest member of our Brotherhood, Harry Potter, agreed.

1) How does it feel to have defeated the Dark Lord?

HP I didn't, of course. I was a small part of a team effort; the article you printed detailing the battle was totally accurate, so far as I could tell. That is, of course, one reason why the side of Light will always win in the long run; Darkness is only really united in groups by selfish motives. The only times it succeeds are when it perverts good or neutral causes and when the Light is disunited. The Light can unite for the common good.

2) What cause was perverted here?

HP Voldemort's followers believed in Pure Blood over everything; strange, when you remember His father had been a Muggle. I'm proud of my Magical heritage; I think we all should be, no matter if you're an Old Believer who can trace your Magical ancestry dozens or even hundreds of generations or just a few generations -- like most of His followers. But being proud of your ancestry should never turn into Pure Blood ideology. The Muggle-born or raised must have equal rights to a magical education and to rise to where their abilities take them. Being raised in the Muggle world, no matter what your parentage, is enough of a handicap to give any Magical-raised person a real advantage.

3) Is there anything that should be done to lessen that advantage?

HP There may be in some countries, the only places I really know are Hogwarts and Britain. I don't see any systematic changes that need to be made, except perhaps the need to keep a watch out for extreme attitudes against the Muggle-born. And you can't force people to change their attitudes.

4) You have come in for a lot of praise, and some criticism, for giving away the 20,000 galleons you were given as a reward, mostly to charity. Any comments?

HP I'm well-off. If I actually needed the money, I wouldn't have hesitated to keep at least some of it, even if I was just one of the many people who deserved rewards and praise. Since I don't need it, I took the opportunity to send it where it might do some good.

I believe in all three causes (Relief for families destroyed in the latest war; aid to Magical Orphans; Educational aid for Muggle-borns whose parents resist giving them a Magical education). I donated 750 galleons of my own, and will be doing so every 2nd of August. Anyone wishing to donate to any of these causes can send it to: *The British Ministry of Magic, Office of Charities, **attention Penelope Weasley***. If the latter two charities had existed, Voldemort and I would both might have been raised in better environments. His life could have turned out very different; mine would have been better.

5) What are your plans for when you graduate from Hogwarts next June?

HP Probably I'll spend a year playing county Quidditch, unless some League team picks me up as a reserve, and on the national dueling circuit. Then I hope to study get my Master of Charms certificate. After that, we'll see.

6) Why not the international level, considering your recent achievements?

HP Dueling and fighting are similar in some ways, but very different in practice. We'll see if I'm any good at stylized dueling.

7) It's been rumored that you're close to the Old Believers. Any truth in that?

HP To a degree. I don't think I could join the Old Believers in their communities; I'm too much a child of both modern Wizard and Muggle life. I do find the Old Religion more than just interesting. If there is any way in which I might become a bridge between the Old Believer communities and the general Wizarding communities, I'll pursue it.

8) You're a new warlock; any comments on the Brotherhood?

HP Not really; although I do wish there was a comparable group for witches.

9) What are you looking forward to most in the near future?

HP I hope I, and the rest of the Magical world, just have a nice, normal year.

10) Anything else?

HP I hope there's no need for my name to appear in any newspaper or journal after this, except perhaps the sports pages. I also hope everyone remembers that the forces of Darkness are never totally gone. If we keep alert to the possibilities of Darkness, maybe we'll prevent the rise of some other Dark Wizard in the future. There'll always be elements that try to push the limits. Help keep the limits, so we can all work and live together. *In our victory, **we should remember Cedric Diggory and all the other victims***; if we remember how many of them were taken by surprise, maybe any future Dark Wizards will be stopped earlier in their careers.

Saturday, September 6, 1997

"Just hold onto the portkey, Hermione!"

"We're NOT supposed to leave the grounds! I'm the Head Girl, I can't just. . . ."

Harry rolled his eyes. "For the fourth and last time, I'm bringing a professor and a future professor with us and Professor Dumbledore gave me permission. **Now, GRAB ONTO THE PORTKEY OR I'LL BODY BIND YOU AND DRAG YOU THERE!**"

Harry rarely yelled at anyone, let alone in that tone, and so Hermione quickly took hold of the old riding broom. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Neville already were holding it. Fred, George, Remus, and Sirius, on the other hand, were daintily holding onto an old smelly sock.

Harry sent the mischievous quartet a smile, and they all vanished.

They reappeared in an abandoned church.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked before anyone else could.

"This was Saint Brendon's Church, in Merthorp in . . . actually, I forget if there's a new county name. The old, and final Magical, county name was Westmoreland." Harry led them out of the empty church, and onto a high street.

There had clearly been some disaster here. A series of houses and a few small shops lined either side of the street, but most were empty stone shells. A few places had obviously held wooden buildings, and had burned to the ground. There was also an apparent effort to demolish some of the shells as well. A few of the houses, however, with slate roofs, were intact.

"The village burned just over five years ago, no one knows exactly why -- I remembered it from the Muggle television reports. More than half of the village was already abandoned when it happened. There had been some sort of mine and mining village about two miles to the southeast; this old village had become where the managers lived. The mine played out just before the end of the last century and that village, Coblynton, was abandoned after the First World War. The remaining residents here, all fairly elderly, had been at a village church fair about five miles north when the fire came through. They had little choice but to leave for the most part. Two residents stayed on; the last died last spring."

"The rail line to the mine that also ran through here was closed in the early Twenties, and the station here was closed in the late Fifties. There's no major road near by, just a few villages, all at least five miles away. This High Street follows a minor lay line, and an even more obscure one runs through the village and through the mining village, following the old railroad for most of the way. Fortunately, the only right of way is the High Street, so no hikers should be trying to stray through from other directions. The entire area, from about three miles north, four miles on the sides, and some ten miles south, including the mining area, was for sale."

"And you BOUGHT it?" Hermione demanded.

"Yes."

"Why?" Sirius asked. Hermione, Remus, and Ginny rolled their eyes at him. "What?" he demanded.

"As you can see, I'm having most of the shells leveled," Harry went on. "There are nine good houses, two very large, five pretty good sized, and two that are still three bedrooms each. There's also the church and the largest shop over across the street, plus a number of intact out-buildings -- there really isn't another street."

"And what are you going to be doing with all this?" Sirius demanded.

"After I leave Hogwarts, I'm going to try to play Quidditch and duel for a year," Harry reminded them. "After that, Ginny and I will be spending two years in Weston, studying. What I'll be doing then, I don't know. I do know that this is in easy apparation distance of Hogwarts -- I mean Hogsmeade," he corrected himself before Hermione could, "and not out of the question for London, although it would be easier to portkey there. I'm not putting any pressure on anybody, but I'd like you to consider the following."

He took a deep breath. "Remus and Sirius, there are those two houses there. I thought you might be interested in having those two houses. The shell between will be gone, and you can have a pair of nice summer houses for when you're not at Hogwarts." Pwy had announced he was going to retire ". . . for at least a few decades," and Sirius would take his place the following year. Both men were pursuing serious relationships, and none of them had real homes.

"Fred and George, you've said you wanted to spend more time developing new gags and staying wholesale instead of running a retail business. Well, how do those two houses down the street look?"

With that big shop serving as your lab? Assuming your fiancées agree, of course."

The two men grinned. Their business was going well, and they were saving up to buy homes before setting a final date for their weddings. They'd bring Angelina and Alicia here tomorrow, and see if they'd be as thrilled as they thought they might be.

"Neville, you told me what you wanted most was. . . ."

"To be a farmer, both regular crops and working up magical plants into a wholesale business."

Harry nodded. "Well, there's a lot of old farmland and orchards that need work, if you want to lease it, plus that remaining house for yourself and those two smaller ones for any farm workers you might want to hire. There are a couple of barns and a few other outbuildings laying about you might find useful."

Neville was the most stunned of all. "How . . . how . . . much. . . ?"

"If you'll sell us all food at cost, how about a knut a year, plus the taxes?"

Neville smiled. He had some capital, but would need to invest that in equipment. He hoped Eloise was still interested in joining him.

Harry walked over to Ron, whispered something in his ear, and handed Ron a small box. Ron jumped, turned white, and squeaked.

"Now," Harry ordered, "or I'll do it for you."

Ron swallowed, turned to Hermione, and knelt on one knee. He opened his mouth, but couldn't make a sound. He opened his mouth to try again, and before Ron could say anything, Hermione swept him into a hug, and cried, "YES!"

"And that takes care of the eighth house," Harry said. "You'll notice, there's a separate apartment that must have been for the butler and housekeeper that would be great for your mum, Hermione. Why don't you all look at your prospective houses, and let me know how you feel. I should add first of all that this whole area has been declared magical, and various anti-Muggle charms will be put up once the workers are done." They all knew that this wouldn't work against determined Muggles, but it would deflect some 95% to 99% of them at first and the charms and wards would grow stronger over time. "And second, I'm turning the old mining town over to a small colony of free and freed elves. They are also interested in providing domestic service for wages. Work out the details with Hermione and Dobby." Harry handed out the keys and then took Ginny's hand, tucked it through his arm, and they strolled to the main manor house.

"I never thought I might live in a house this big," Ginny told Harry a quarter hour later. "Just how many children are you planning on us having?"

"I hope we have at least one; beyond that, as many as you want, as long as it doesn't damage your mental or physical health."

"So I can have a dozen or so?" she teased.

Harry shuddered, but said, "As many as you want, but I think a dozen would crowd my study and your studio, even in a house this size."

Ginny laughed. "It is a perfect room for a studio, isn't it? I love it, Harry. Even if nobody else moves in, we are. I know you can't officially ask for nearly twenty-two months or mum would have a fit -- she's going to be angry enough that Ron asked so early -- but I think we'll decorate together."

"Dobby and his mate would like permission to take over the woodshed. We can use the carriage house for any wand-turning and for any auto we might buy, if that's okay?"

"Fine by me."

Warlocks' Weekly Record, September 20, 1997
OLD BELIEVERS NAME THEIR PRICE

The Old Believers announced this morning their price for aiding in the destruction of the Dark Lord and his forces since January, 1996.

The first demand claims that there are still three unplotable Old Believer religious sites (one in Wales, one in Scotland, and one near the Franco-German-Swiss border; the precise locations were not revealed) which have apparently never been discovered. The Old Believers are to retake possession of them, and ask that free access to them should be granted to the Old Believers, through their Council's regulation.

The second is for licenced proselytizers (that is, licensed by the Old Believers) to be allowed to preach the Old Religion in at least Britain, Ireland, France, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Luxemburg, and Belgium. All national ministries are to acknowledge that only the Council and the Tuatha have the right to acknowledge acceptable congregations, and to regulate them. National Ministries will still be enforcing all National and International laws and regulations on all their magical citizens.

For the third, the Old Believers have submitted a plan to increase the power of the International for the coordination of law enforcement against Dark activities.

The Old Believers have asked for at least initial responses by October 31.

Warlocks' Weekly Record, November 1, 1997

Here is a summery of the responses to the Old Believer requests, as of press time.

The British, French, German, and Swiss Ministries have agreed to the first request (on sites). The British, Irish, Swiss, German, Austrian, and new combined Benelux Ministries have agreed to the second (on religious activities). The French, Spanish, and Portugese Ministries, along with 150 of the remaining 203 national and international authorities, have agreed that only the Old Believer (Druidic) Council and the Tuatha have the right to acknowledge acceptable congregations, and to regulate them. Nine of the others had already recognized that right.

A Conference has been scheduled to start next May 1 in Geneva, with all 213 national and international authorities agreeing to attend, to work out an agreement on greater law enforcement against Dark magic.

Chapter 22

Friday, November 6, 1998

Ron Weasley was not an entirely happy man. He had left Hogwarts with six N.E.W.T.s (Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Creatures, and both Theories) and joined Hermione (who had 13 N.E.W.T.s -- she hadn't tried for the one in Divination) in Weston. Hermione was studying Transfiguration, Arithmancy, and Runes, and so was very busy. They had married on July 10, and spent a month's honeymoon visiting Muggle Canada and the United States before settling in.

Titus Pwy, Hermione, and Harry had created a portal, which allowed them to travel between Pwy's cottage in Weston and the church in Merthorp (which was also the official portkey and apparation points for the village), which they visited every other weekend. Hermione's mother was established in her separate apartment, and had opened a small dental clinic in the market town, some fifteen miles away.

Ron was busy with his sersiant training. After the Yule celebrations, he would be inducted, and have fewer weekends to spend with Hermione or to travel to Merthorp.

Overall, he should have been happy, and overall, he was. But he knew that he was receiving this training because of Harry and Hermione; that he had a house in Merthorp because of Harry. It was hard not to be a little jealous, and a little of the glow was taken off his otherwise satisfactory life.

And tonight was not making things any better. Here he was, walking down the High Street to meet Fred, George, and Neville. Harry was the Seeker on the Chuddley Cannons for the year, and they were going to see their home opener.

The Cannons were off to their best start in over a hundred years -- currently 5 - 1, and four of those wins were totally due to Harry. Harry had also entered three dueling meets, and was 10 - 1 - 1. Harry had outscored Ron on the N.E.W.T.s. (Harry had 9 -- Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Practical Magic Theory, Runes, Astronomy, Creatures, Muggle Studies, and History -- to Ron's 6) and would be studying at the Sefydliad on his own merits. Harry was happier than any time Ron could remember -- even more so than their first few weeks of their first year.

Ron stopped dead in the street, and realized exactly how he was feeling, and why. He wasn't ashamed, or even embarrassed, but he understood why he had been feeling jealous, and why he didn't have to. Harry wouldn't have made it without lots of help, a lot of it from Ron. Just like Ron deserved to be happy, so did Harry. And Ron was happy; he had Hermione and he would have a career.

"You're looking happier than usual," George said when Ron finally made it.

"We're off to see the Cannons win," Ron retorted, "why not be happy?"

George and Fred laughed. Ron noticed Neville was orange. "Haven't you learned, Neville?"

Neville handed Ron a piece of boiled candy. "I'd have thought you'd want to go in Cannon colors, too," Neville teased.

"That's right!" Fred said, and popped one in his mouth. He slowly started turning orange. Ron shrugged, and he and George took one as well.

"How long does it last?" Ron asked.

"Oh, the candy should last about ten to fifteen minutes if you suck on it, and the color will last about two hours. If you crunch it all at once, you stay the color for about twelve hours. We can't release them until we get that bug out, or come up with a warning that the Ministry will accept," Fred answered.

"Let's go!" George prompted.

Late the next evening, Harry and Ron strolled down the High Street from the apparation point (in the old church) towards their houses. Harry had entered another dueling meet, and had dispatched his two opponents easily, moving on to the second -- and final -- day of competition.

"You seem pretty preoccupied," Harry said. "Think I should have fainted better in that first match, or let the chasers try for a goal instead of catching the snitch for a tie last night?"

"No. I guess I'm still just trying to sort some things out."

"Like what?"

"I just realized it last night, but I was pretty jealous of you and Hermione, and a little resentful."

This didn't surprise Harry, but he didn't show it. He was glad Ron could finally talk about it.

"Why?" he asked, to encourage him.

"Well, why am I allowed to be at Weston? Hermione is brilliant; if anyone deserves to be at the Sefydliad, she does. You do, too. Ginny will, next year. I'm there, but only because of you and Hermione."

"I talked with my cousin last weekend."

"Huh?" Ron was a bit confused by the apparent change in subject.

"He was saying how well you're doing in your training."

"Really?" That a member of the Tuatha was even paying attention to that minor a detail was surprising.

"He of course has seen me fight."

"True." "Where is this going?" Ron thought to himself.

"He told me back in August that while I'm doing my charms training, I could be trained to be a Llofrudd if I wanted."

"Wow." Ron was impressed.

"Last weekend, he told me that he thought you should be trained as a Cigfran as well, as part of the International Law Enforcement Agency." This was the new agency to combat Dark Wizards.

"Really?"

"Really. He wanted me to sound you out. And you certainly aren't being offered this because of me, let alone Hermione or Ginny. You're earning this."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Not exactly."

Ron huffed. "Meaning what?"

"Can you keep a secret from Hermione?"

"Probably not," Ron admitted.

"So all I can say is, trust me, Ron. You're earning your own way from now on. And unless we're confronted by a Grindelwald or Voldemort, you and I shouldn't be within the same chains of command. I don't think either you or I would want to be under the other's command on a long-term basis."

"Harry, to be honest, it would bloody well bother the hell out of me to be under your command every day, but there's no one on earth I'd rather follow against a Dark Wizard."

Harry flushed a little. "Thanks."

"You're taking the same path as Doc, aren't you?"

"Essentially."

Ron thought about it. "Cool." He decided he should bring up the final likely topic of contention, since he knew once Harry decided to be close-mouthed on a subject it would take himself, Hermione, and Ginny at a minimum to get him to talk. "Seen Ginny lately?"

"Last Saturday; it was the first Hogsmeade weekend."

The reminder that Harry could only easily visit his sister on Hogsmeade weekends and official visits comforted Ron a little; he and Hermione were not just together, but married -- he'd achieved something before Harry. Ron then dismissed the idea as unworthy. "How's she doing?"

"Well, she's having more fun as Head Girl than Hermione did, or Percy did as Head Boy, that's for sure."

Ron laughed. "Well, let's say she's having a different type of fun, anyway."

"True."

"Are you really going to give up being a professional seeker after this year?" Ron asked.

"I've reached the upper limits in terms of size, Ron. If I put on another kilo or two of muscle or another half inch in height, I just couldn't do the dives needed to even be a second reserve. It's not a matter of broom size or power, either."

"I never thought of that."

"Hey, if we just make the play-offs, I'll go down in the club history books."

Ron frowned. "Ha, ha; very funny. How about the dueling?"

"It's fun. If I had your chess ability on top of everything else, I could be a world champion with ease. I'm not certain if I can make the move up to the international level or not. Doc says they'll be giving me time off to compete, and that I'll make the jump easily, but I don't see it." Harry looked at Ron. "Are you competing in the chess leagues?"

"Yeah," Ron admitted. "It's a tough group. I'm picking up, though. I'm getting close to the master's level."

Harry smiled. "We're on our way, aren't we?"

"We are!" Ron declared.

Sunday, June 13, 1999

"AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST, FLYING SEEKER FOR THE CANNONS FOR THE LAST TIME, THE CURRENT BRITISH NATIONAL DUELING CHAMPION, THE NUMBER THREE RATED DUELIST IN EUROPE AND NUMBER TWELVE IN THE WORLD! THE ONE, THE ONLY, HARRY POTTER!"

Harry flew out into the Bats' stadium to fairly loud cheers, especially considering most of the crowd were Bats' fans. Win or lose, the Cannon fans were ecstatic. They understood that Harry was getting a little too muscled and tall to stay a professional seeker, but hoped he could hang on for one more game. The Cannons had placed fourth that year, the highest they'd finished since before World War I. This was the first time they'd been in the finals since 1907. If they won the championship, it would be the first since the late nineteenth century.

"Does one player really make that much of a difference?" a reporter had asked the greatest seeker in recent British history (now retired) for a story the day before the match.

"It does when it's Harry Potter," she'd answered. "Potter is a great seeker, although far from the greatest playing today; though he's probably in the top ten, certainly in the top twenty. What he also provides is inspiration and leadership. Every player has consistently played right at their top form, which is difficult to do, even for professionals, or for an entire season. Potter really isn't that much a better seeker than the Bats' Johnson, but he's more inspiring than any of the Bats' players. Hell, he's the most inspiring player I've ever seen."

Fortunately, Harry hadn't read that yet. If he had, he would have been far more nervous. And, if he'd been any more nervous, he wouldn't have made the quickest catch in the history of the British professional championships -- 2 minutes, 57 seconds.

In the stands, Ron Weasley fainted. The Cannons had won, 150 - 0.

Saturday, July 10, 1999

Great Hall, Hogwarts

"Welcome to the first marriage feast we have had here in a number of years," Albus Dumbledore said. He was standing a bit shakily; his age and the stresses of the last nine years or so were showing. "Eight years ago today, I was thinking about how to get Harry here his Hogwarts letter and worried about reports of Voldemort gaining some strength in Albania. Last year, we were at Ottery Saint Catchpole, and I was announcing the N.E.W.T.s of Harry and the happy newlyweds."

"Today, I can announce Miss Weasley, excuse me, Missus Potter's, N.E.W.T.s -- Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Muggle Studies, History, Herbology, Runes, Magical Theory, and Magical Substances, for a total of nine."

He waited for the applause to die down. "We all know the exploits of the groom. He now leaves Britain and his beloved Quidditch, taking his even more beloved bride to study at the Sefydliad. I can only say that I hope that both continue to be as successful in the future as they have been in the recent past, without nearly the trials and tribulations of the darker past. I therefore raise my glass and ask you to do the same."

Monday, September 1, 2003

The new Headmistress of Hogwarts stood, and under her stern eye the children quieted quickly for the after-sorting speech. "First of all, welcome back. You will be happy to know that Professor Dumbledore will be staying on as an advisor for at least this year. Even though he conducted the sorting ceremony, he will not be acting as the Deputy Master. Professor Sinistra will be taking over that position as of tomorrow." The students applauded vigorously. Everyone had been afraid one of the teachers they didn't like might have the job -- the Slytherins were afraid it might be Black, everyone else was afraid it might be Snape.

"Taking my position as Head of Gryffindor will be Professor Black." The Gryffindors led the applause now. "We have five new professors this term -- the largest and youngest lot in the history of Hogwarts. Professor Flitwick and Professor Trelawney have retired. Professor Charles Weasley has left to lead the International Confederation Department of Dragons and other Class Five Creatures. Professor Filius Weasley has taken a position as Head Curse Breaker and Trainer for Gringotts. And, of course, we needed a new Transfiguration professor."

"The new head of Ravenclaw is Professor Vector. The new Runes professor is Cho Chang, Head Girl, Ravenclaw Nineteen Ninety-Seven." The Ravenclaws now led the applause.

"The new Care of Magical Creatures instructor is Blaise Zabini, Head Boy, Slytherin Nineteen Ninety-Eight and the new Divination instructor is Hannah Abbott, Hufflepuff Nineteen Ninety-Eight." Those Houses applauded each vigorously.

"Taking my place is another former Head Girl, Hermione Weasley, Gryffindor Nineteen Ninety-Eight. The new Charms professor is also a Nineteen Ninety-Eight Gryffindor, Harry Potter." The applause was almost deafening. The five new professors stood and bowed. When Zabini and Potter gave each other an obviously friendly handshake, the applause somehow grew louder.

Headmistress McGonagall looked over the group of instructors. They were settled onto chairs in a room that hadn't even been marked on the Maurader's Map. "Some of the new faculty may know where the staff room is. This room, however, only appears on the first two days back and during the month of June. We use it to grade our share of O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. papers."

"Now, everyone knows everyone else, and it is now Eight Thirty-three. We have until Ten Forty-five, when we have to do rounds." She waved her wand over a side-board, and a series of bottles, decanters, and glasses appeared. "What?" she demanded, looking straight into Hermione's startled expression. "You don't think we face the year totally sober?"

Snape drawled, "We certainly don't end the year that way." He stood and went to the bar. Sirius and Remus followed. Snape turned, "Especially since these two arrived." Remus and Sirius laughed.

"Well!" Hermione huffed.

Harry laughed as well and fought his way to the bar, coming back a few moments later with a drink for Hermione as well as his own. "Come on, I know you like Madeira. Unless you're pregnant again."

Hermione flushed. "Hermione!"

"No, I'm not. . . ."

"Good. You don't need to out-produce Molly before you're thirty, you know." Hermione had had three sons already.

"You should talk." Ginny was just starting on her third pregnancy.

"Weasleys do seem to be determined to keep Hogwarts in business for the next two generations, don't they?" Remus said, walking up. Three more Weasley cousins had been sorted into Gryffindor, plus one each for Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff that night. There were therefore currently 36 Weasley cousins enrolled, 24 of them in Gryffindor, which was now the largest House, and there were more to come. The six Weasley boys had already produced 15 children.

"I guess, after Sirius, none of us are surprising as teachers," Harry teased as his godfather approached.

"Please," Zabini said from behind them, "Granger . . . err, Weasley . . . was destined to be here. It's you and I who are surprising."

"What about me?" Hannah asked, also approaching.

"If your 'inner eye's' been working, you should have known all along," Harry teased.

"My 'inner eye' says that if you encourage any of my students to pull half the stunts you and Ron are alleged to have played in Divination, I'll have your hide."

"How's Blaise really doing?" Hermione asked. Zabini flushed.

Hannah smirked. "He's doing well as well as he looks. The wedding will be just before New Years."

She accepted the congratulations. Harry pulled Zabini aside, and they walked over to a corner.

"Haven't seen you since the last ride on the Hogwarts Express."

"What's five years for bitter enemies like the scion of Gryffindor and the last male Slytherin of their year?" They glared at each other, then broke out laughing.

"Seriously, sorry I missed the wedding, Harry." He grinned. "It was pretty short notice."

"S'okay -- I won't miss yours." Harry grinned in return. "Blame Ginny's mum -- you've met her," Blaise shuddered in exaggerated fear, "and she told Ginny right after we started dating that she couldn't become engaged until after she graduated. So, we didn't officially get engaged, we just made the arrangements as best we could. It wasn't our fault you were off in Australia."

"There aren't many dual-Muggle/Magical veterinary degree programs around."

"I'd never thought of you as loving dragons or fire-crabs. You never looked all that thrilled in class, anyway."

"None of those," Blaise said with a genuine shudder. "I have just have the degrees in Muggle and magical veterinary medicine and we're going to be doing more care than dodging class five animals. Here's a rough guide I printed up -- I've been asked about fifty times."

Harry was impressed. Blaise had been near the top of the class, but Harry hadn't realized how driven and intelligent he must be to have finished a difficult course like his in such a short time. Harry glanced at the card.

3rd Year Non-magical Familiars (Cats, Rats, Owls, Toads, etc), Ghouls, Winged Horses;

4th Year Flobberworms, Auguries, Fwoopers, Jabberknolls, Knarls, Porlocks, Jarveys;

5th Year Puffskeins, Crups, Kneazles, Nifflers;

6th Year Salamanders, Unicorns, Griffins, Hippogriffs;

7th Year Medical Treatments.

"Looks reasonable."

Blaise grinned, "I doubt Hagrid will think so."

"Wait til little Hugo starts here in seven years. Hagrid's likely to be the over-protective type."

"He's coming here, not Beauxbatons?"

"No, little Sophie will, though." Madame Maxime had been rather surprised when she had two

children in three years.

"And you aren't over-protective?" Blaise teased.

"Compared to Ron and Hermione, no."

Blaise grinned even wider. He could just imagine. "Are you going to be here weekends?"

"Probably not for many. Ginny'll probably be in Hogsmeade after this year, but I'll be going back every weekend until then."

"I was thinking more of the dueling. You came in fourth last year, and you're the top rated this year."

Harry looked abashed. He'd nearly won the World Championship for the second time last year. "No, I'm taking a year and a half off. Then I'm going to get Doc Pwy out of retirement, and we'll enter the pairs division."

Zabini grimaced. "I'll place my bets now, then. No one will give me odds once they see you two."

"Everyone will think Hannah foresaw it," Harry teased.

"I heard that, Potter!" Hannah shouted.

In a quiet corner, Albus Dumbledore smiled. The path that Titus Pwy had vaguely foreseen for him some ninety years before had been successfully traveled. The staff of Hogwarts was as young and strong as it ever had been in its history.

Visions came to Albus, and he wasn't sure at first if they were true visions or daydreams. He saw Sinistra stay on as Deputy Mistress, while Hermione became the youngest Head of Hogwarts in history. He saw his, McGonagall's, and Hermione's official portraits, all done by Ginny, smiling in what had been his office. He saw Ron and Harry defeating Dark Wizards, together and separately, some as strong as Grindelwald, although none as strong or as evil as Voldemort. He saw scores of red-headed children playing pranks for decades, if not centuries, to come, often aided by children with wild, stiff black hair and others who also looked familiar. He saw three stone circles brought back to life, and the Old Beliefs becoming strong again without becoming oppressive. He smiled when he saw an elderly Hermione in the robes of a Druid Council Member -- no need to worry with Hermione in that power structure.

Above all, he saw Hogwarts continuing, providing equal education for witches and wizards of all backgrounds and faiths. He wasn't sure how far that vision reached, but knew it was hundreds if not thousands of years. And over all his visions, Phoenix song led and comforted him.

Life would never be perfect; evil would always exist. But good would triumph in the end, and life would go on.