

Harry's Second Chance

by

DrT

Table of Contents

Harry's Second Chance.....	1
Chapter I.....	3
Chapter II.....	10
Chapter III.....	16
Chapter IV.....	22
Chapter V.....	29
Chapter VI.....	35
Chapter VII.....	42
Chapter VIII.....	49
Chapter IX.....	56
Chapter X.....	63
Chapter XI.....	69
Chapter XII.....	76
Chapter XIII.....	83
Chapter XIV.....	89
Chapter XV.....	95
Chapter XVI.....	102
Chapter XVII.....	109
Chapter XVIII.....	116
Chapter XIX.....	122
Chapter XX.....	130
Chapter XXI.....	136
Chapter XXII.....	142
Chapter XXIII.....	149
Chapter XXIV.....	155
Chapter XXV.....	161
Chapter XXVI.....	167
Chapter XXVII.....	173
Chapter XXVIII.....	181
Chapter XXIX.....	187
Chapter XXX.....	193
Chapter XXXI.....	199
Chapter XXXII.....	207

Chapter I

Sunday, June 21, 1998

The greatest war in wizarding history was over. Over the previous year, Harry Potter -- aided by his companions Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger -- had searched out the four remaining Horcruxes and destroyed them. Harry had then confronted and killed Voldemort just after midnight that very morning at a battle near Hogwarts.

It was victory.

The cost of victory had been high, just as the costs of the war had been.

Luna Lovegood considered just a few of these costs as she watched over Harry just before dawn broke. Bill and Ginny Weasley had been killed during the attack on Bill's wedding day, as had six other guests that late July. Percy Weasley had died defending the Ministry building he had so worshiped in October, as had over a tenth of the other Ministry workers, and over a third had been injured, many severely. Three teachers -- Hagrid, Hooch, and Slughorn -- had been killed on the Hogsmeade visit in December, and almost a fifth of Hogsmeade had been destroyed. Her father had died of wounds sustained in the major attack on Diagon Alley in early January. Ronald had died killing Nagini in April and Neville in the confrontation with Bellatrix Lestrange shortly thereafter, which had at least also resulted in the capture and execution of the Lestranges and Severus Snape. Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and Vector had been killed in the battle the night before, as had over two dozen students and Hermione. About a quarter of the castle was damaged.

She wondered how long it might take the British magical community to recover. Many had speculated that it might not recover at all even before the final battle.

Harry opened his eyes. "Where am I?" he rasped. He allowed Luna to give him some water before his eyes demanded an answer.

"I took you to a private room near the teachers' quarters," Luna said. "We need privacy."

"What for?" Harry asked. It was difficult to engage Harry after all he had seen and been through, but Luna had at least caught his attention.

"Do you believe me honest, Harry?"

"Of course you are."

"Even if I have odd ideas?"

"At least I know you honestly believe them," Harry answered.

Luna managed a tiny smile. "True. Well, believe this. First, both my mother and I possess what Professor Trelawney calls 'the Inner Eye'."

"True," Harry agreed. He had learned to listen to Luna's insights which came from this ability over the past year.

"My mother was also very skilled in charms, both in researching old ones and developing new ones." Harry merely nodded, remembering that this research had also killed Luna's mother.

"The week before my mother . . . died, she sent me a letter which magically arrived on my seventeenth birthday."

"Which was this past Valentine's Day," Harry answered, which made Luna smile.

"Yes. Harry, my mother did not die in a charms accident, she sacrificed herself."

Harry blinked. "Sacrificed herself? For what?"

"Not for what. For you, and the world."

Harry frowned. "But she didn't know me! Why. . . ?"

"Because it was the right thing to do." Luna leaned a bit closer. "Harry, you know I care about you."

"I do. I care for you, too, even though. . . ."

Luna held up a hand. "I know you aren't in love with me, Harry, although you have great affection for me. That is not the point. Mother foresaw what happened last night. She said in the letter that, although you would win the battle, the costs would be far too high for you. In addition and more importantly, while Voldemort would be gone, you, the side of Light, and the Ministry would be so damaged that much of the Pure Blood agenda would still come into being over time in much of western Europe, especially in Britain."

"I didn't need to know that," Harry growled. The victory had been hollow enough

"My mother disagreed. She worked in the Department of Mysteries, doing research on time. She developed the portable time turner, such as Hermione used. Before then, they were about the size of a desk. She worked out a way to give the world of Light Magic, and you, a chance at a better victory."

"And what chance is that?" Harry asked, intrigued.

"I repeat the ritual my mother did, with some variations. . . ."

"No! You'll die!" Harry's face crumpled. "You're the only friend I have left."

Luna smiled. "Harry, this version of me will not survive in any event. If we don't do this, the surviving Death Eaters will likely track me down and slay me. If we do, then everything starts over. You'll go back to the day my mother died. On the negative side, your current mind will be combined with your ten year-old body."

Harry wrinkled his nose at the thought of the Dursleys.

"On the plus side, your magic along with your memories should travel back with you."

Harry smiled at that, but then frowned again.

"If you're thinking about not having your wand, you have become unusually proficient at wandless magic over the last year," Luna pointed out.

"True," Harry agreed. "However, I was thinking about the underage magic rules."

"Those are fairly lax for children before we enter Hogwarts. The Ministry shouldn't even know. . . ."

"They'll know," Harry said. "I was always more monitored than anyone else. Any stray magic was always blamed on me."

Luna frowned in thought, and then said, "I doubt if they could trace you away from your relatives' house before you had a wand."

"Good point," Harry said after a few moment's thought. "But what about you?"

"The spell and ritual send you back," Luna reminded him. "I should retain no memory of these past eight years or so and the same is true of everyone else. Only you will. My mother's letter said that I had to decide if the price of victory was too high -- it obviously has been. Next time, I hope we shall know that the price was paid a long time before and was not too high."

"There must be a down side," Harry mused. "There always is."

"Well, the odds are you will succeed with less difficulty this next time," Luna pointed out.

"However, that is not assured. This time, you won at great cost. You could lose, and even if you win at a lesser cost, you might have to face losing loved ones all over again."

"But not all of them," Harry said in a tired but determined voice. "Not again."

"I hope you are right," Luna agreed.

Harry took Luna's hand. "I promise to try and make friends with you during your first year."

"Thank you, Harry." Luna looked at Harry with her large silver eyes. "You do realize that you will stand out from all children your age much more than you did this time." Harry grimaced at that. "You might not make the same friends that you did this time around."

"I suppose not," Harry agreed. "But they'll be alive, if I can help it." He frowned. "When do I go back to, by the way?"

"To the early morning of the day my mother died, the Twenty-first of June, 1990, eight years ago this very morning."

Harry thought back to that summer and grimaced. Then he nodded.

"So, I may do this?"

"You should," Harry said. "And thank you. You've been a good friend, and more."

Luna's wide eyes again disappeared as she looked shyly down. "Harry . . . may I ask one favor before we do this?"

"Of course!"

"Would you kiss me?"

Harry smiled. "I had intended on doing that even before you mentioned this ritual."

Thursday, June 21, 1990

Harry woke up, disoriented and in the dark. He wondered why he felt so weak.

Then he remembered -- he was no longer an athletic nearly eighteen year old, but a scrawny, underfed not-quite ten year old.

Harry felt a moment of panic. Had he ever even been that wizard? Had the last seven or eight years been a dream? What could be worse than waking up in July, 1991, and never getting his Hogwarts letter? Even the hell he thought Luna had sent him back from was not as bad as that.

Harry sat up and pulled on the light cord, lighting up the cupboard under the stairs. He looked around for a moment, and then concentrated on a small broken toy knight. "Accio," Harry whispered.

The little figurine flew into his hand.

Harry smiled, an almost nasty smile. Things were going to be very different this time, for everyone concerned.

Near the village of Ottery St. Catchpole, a small girl with straggly dark blonde hair laid upon her mother's body, crying. "We did it, Mummy," Luna said. "You did it because it was right. I did it because it was right, and because I love him." Then she went quiet.

In an Albanian forest, a Muggle under the possession of Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, collapsed, screaming. Voldemort had been able to absorb very small amounts of magical energy from young, and distant, Harry Potter. That source was now cut off. Voldemort, once he regained what passed for consciousness in his state, would need to start over.

"Well, boy," Petunia said with her usual disapproving sniff, "I'm glad to see you got up and got cooking this morning without being prompted." She looked over the breakfast table. She could find no fault, and so merely called for Vernon and Dudley.

Petunia tossed a few crumbs of bacon on the last slice of unbuttered toast, alone on the crumbly plate, since Vernon had grabbed three slices and Dudley six. "Fold that over and go to Mrs. Figg's," Petunia snapped. "You should already be gone. Couldn't you remember that Vernon is taking Duddikins camping, and we need to outfit him?"

"Sorry, Aunt Petunia," Harry said simply. He had hoped this had been the year Vernon and Dudley had gone camping, but he hadn't been certain if it had been this year or the year before.

"Don't be back before Five or after Six!" Petunia reminded him as he opened the back door.

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Aunt Petunia would be back, he now remembered, by 5:00, and Vernon and Dudley would be gone until the early morning Sunday. They were supposed to stay longer, but Dudley would not be able to stand being away from the television no longer and had wanted his presents, already a day late. Petunia would buy him a few more presents in consolation, which would be why Dudley's 'present count' would be lower the following year.

Harry figured that would give him enough time to get started on what he needed to do.

Harry finished off the dry bacon half-sandwich. He had never dared take extra food before, but this time he had already eaten four eggs, two slices of toast, and three rashers of bacon, and had drunk a third of the bottle of milk out of the bottle, before Aunt Petunia had made it down the stairs.

He knocked on Mrs. Figg's door, and went in when she called. "Good morning, Mrs. Figg," Harry said, wrinkling his nose just a bit at the smell of cats and cabbage.

"Good morning, Harry," his minder replied. "You look chipper this morning."

"I am," Harry answered. "In part, it's because I made myself an extra good breakfast for the first time."

"You made yourself?" she asked.

"You didn't know I've been making breakfast for the Dursleys most mornings for the last few years, even though they wouldn't let me eat much of it?" Harry asked. "Well," he said to the stunned Squib, "I have been. Usually, of course, Uncle Vernon and Dudley grab all the food and just leave me a few scraps. This morning, I made some extra for myself and ate it before Aunt Petunia came done."

Mrs. Figg managed to blink. "But. . . ?"

"But why didn't Aunt Petunia hear me get out of bed? Well, that's because I don't have a bed," Harry answered. "I sleep on an infant's cot in the cupboard under the stairs."

Mrs. Figg stared. Harry cocked his head and looked back. "Did you know any of this, Mrs. Figg?"

She shook her head. Harry, who had been using a light amount of Legilimency, was satisfied. "Some other interesting things happened last night," Harry said. "May I show you something?"

Mrs. Figg, still in shock, managed a nod. Her shock went into overdrive when Harry levitated her fire poker. "I've thought about it, and I believe you knew I would have this ability sooner or later. There must be someone you report to. Perhaps you should report this?" Harry added a mild compulsion spell to this last suggestion.

Mrs. Figg walked over to the empty fireplace and blinked at it blankly. Harry replaced the poker and with a snap of his fingers started a magical fire just as Hermione had once taught him. Mrs. Figg took down a small urn and tossed in the floo powder. "Albus Dumbledore's office."

A few moments later, Harry took a few steps back as Mrs. Figg pulled back.

"Yes, Arabella?" Dumbledore said, stepping out of the fire. "What can I do for. . . ." Dumbledore stopped short, stunned by seeing Harry in front of the sofa.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry said with a smile, which he quickly suppressed. "I have some things I need to tell you." Harry frowned, and he mentally batted away the Legilimency probe. "Please stop whatever it is you're doing Professor."

Dumbledore blinked and then frowned. He was certain he could push past this child's defenses, but the mere fact that there were defenses was shocking.

"Mrs. Figg called you because of this," Harry said, again levitating the poker. "I wanted to tell someone in authority about my life at the Dursleys."

"Then please do so," Dumbledore said, while his mind raced over everything he knew about young Harry.

This was not all that much, but he was not really surprised by what Harry was telling him. He was being sent Harry's grades by some very under the table methods, and he had several times had to intervene with memory charms to prevent the Dursleys from being investigated by the Muggle authorities for emotional child abuse. He really wished he could have used magic on the Dursleys to improve Harry's life, but that would have negated the blood protection.

None of that information, especially the comments his teachers had made on his records, added up to Harry's speaking out as he was, especially with the vocabulary he was using.

It was, Dumbledore realized, too adult. He pushed a Legilimency probe yet again.

This time, Dumbledore found himself pushed back three feet onto the smelly sofa with a minor spell. "I asked you NOT to do that," Harry reproved. "It's rather rude."

Dumbledore turned to his hostess. "Thank you, Mrs. Figg." He turned back and glared at Harry while Mrs. Figg took the hint and left.

Before the end of Harry's Fifth year, such a glare would have made him more than merely nervous. This Harry bore up rather well. "Who are you?" Dumbledore demanded.

"I am Harry James Potter." Harry's eyes narrowed. "And you knew about all this abuse, didn't you? Many of the details, I mean, not just the bare facts."

Dumbledore's eyes went wide as he felt a unique blend of a compulsion spell and Legilimency hit him. He was able to resist it, of course, but not without a slight struggle. He opened his mouth, and then closed it, knowing that despite his resistance to the spell, this person, whomever it was, would be able to detect a lie. Dumbledore's eyes made a slight involuntary movement towards the fireplace.

"Running away?" Harry taunted. "Can't you face the boy you abandoned to be abused?"

Dumbledore frowned. Whoever this was, while he did not talk like a child, he sounded even less like a Death Eater or any sort of Pure Blood, since he had not once mentioned being sent to live with Muggles, even without that name.

"You are NOT Harry Potter," Dumbledore said firmly. "No ten year old boy talks the way you do."

Harry shrugged. "Believe whatever you want. There is no Harry Potter except for me." He lifted his fringe, showing the scar. Dumbledore swallowed as he caught the very faintest hint of Voldemort from the scar. The boy was Harry Potter. "Impossible!" Dumbledore breathed.

"It must be magic," Harry smirked. "My uncle and cousin are away until Sunday. You have until Nine Sunday morning to help me. After that, I start figuring out magical ways to make them behave."

"NO!" Dumbledore shouted, standing. To do so would ruin the wards.

"Why?" Harry asked. "What did I do to deserve being abused every DAY that I can remember?"

"It's difficult to explain to someone your. . . ." Dumbledore stopped, stymied by his own actions and deductions conflicting.

"My age?" Harry asked, smiling. "You just accused me of sounding too old for my age. Why don't you test my mental age?"

"Somehow, you've possessed Harry," Dumbledore accused.

"Wrong answer," Harry said hotly. "You're just avoiding dealing with the truth, as always."

Harry cursed himself, and Dumbledore smiled. "I believe it more likely that you have possessed Harry, but if not . . . no, that's not possible either."

Harry gave partly in. "It is," Harry answered. "A remarkable witch by the married name of Lovegood died this morning helping me get here."

Dumbledore knew her, of course, not just for being the Hogwarts student she had been some fifteen years before, but because of her miniaturization of the time-turner.

"So, you claim to be from the future, do you?" The skepticism was evident.

This had not gone as well as Harry had hoped. "Eight years to the day," Harry answered. "I destroyed the sixth of Voldemort's Horcruxes last spring -- well, to me what was last spring -- and killed Voldemort with the sword of Gryffindor last night just after midnight, in the ruins of the great hall."

"Oh, and where was I?" Dumbledore asked scornfully.

"In your tomb, down by the lake, where your body had been for the last year."

Dumbledore sat down, stunned. It was possible, unlikely but possible, that if Voldemort were the one somehow possessing Harry despite all the safeguards, he might admit to the Horcruxes. But no one could know that Dumbledore planned on updating his will and asking that he be buried near the lake, an unprecedented request.

Having revealed so much, Harry moved to the attack. "So," Harry said, "I know that stupid Prophecy. You told it to me too late to do any good. I ended up getting someone close to me killed because you played your cards too close to the chest. I know now that you didn't care that I was tortured and abused and twisted, because you claimed I needed to stay with those bastards in the next street to stay alive. Well, here I am now, stuck in a ten-year-old body, but with the mind and magic of an eighteen-year-old who defeated Voldemort three or four times between disembodying him as a baby and killing him as an adult, depending on how you count. This time, things are going to be different. You can help me, or you can stand in my way. Now, you can try and ransack my mind, but I got Occlumency instruction from a master, not that traitorous snake Snape. . . ."

"Professor Snape. . . ."

"Murdered you," Harry snapped. "Yes, he hated, and I am sure he hates in this time, Voldemort, but he killed you before you had given me a tenth of the information you should have, because he cared more for his role than he does for you or Light magic. I and my friends had to work damn hard, and through a lot of luck managed to do in one year what you were unable to do in decades. Don't think I'm turning that information over to you on your terms. Since you're going to be your usual stubborn self, here are your choices. One, send me to the Burrow with the key to my vault. Two, set up a household for myself, Alastor Moody, and Remus Lupin. And my key. Three, Sunday I disappear. I bet that idiot Fudge, not to mention Death Eaters like Malfoy, would love to read about your holding me in an abusive household and a Muggle one at that." Harry paused. "That might work. Maybe Lucius would gain custody of me. I could kill him and Draco again and destroy one of the

Horcruxes all at the same time."

Dumbledore looked appalled.

"What?" Harry demanded, exaggerating how dangerous he was more than a bit to shock Dumbledore (and to hopefully prevent his attempting Legilimency again). "Does it sound odd for a ten-year-old 'innocent' to be talking about murdering two people in cold blood? Well, Headmaster, the life you made me lead, both with the Dursleys and after your death, caused by your trusting Snape over EVERYONE'S advice, made me into what I am. Those are your choices. Oh, and I killed Lucius with the knife he was sacrificing two young Muggle-borns with the Halloween before this, and Draco was killed falling sixty feet off his broom while attacking children at play in Hogsmeade. I knocked the little prick off. Now, since I hope I will soon have access to my family vault, could you please ask Mrs. Figg to loan me ten pounds? I intend to have a decent lunch today and tomorrow, since my Aunt will feed me a sardine on an outside lettuce leaf for dinner each night, even if it's slightly off tomorrow."

Chapter II

Saturday, June 23, 1990

"So it's really possible, Dumbledore?" Moody asked again. No one else said anything, because the small group was too shocked to say anything. Besides the Headmaster and Moody, Aberforth Dumbledore, Remus Lupin and Dedalus Diggle were present at the early morning meeting.

"Well, I am certain of several things," Dumbledore answered. "First, a check of the monitors on the house on Privet Drive did not record anything unusual until a short time after dawn two days ago. There was some sort of burst of magical energy, but it was like an afterglow of a powerful spell. This coincides as best we can tell to the death of Laurel Lovegood. A few moments later, a more conventional spell was cast. The best estimate is, I would say, that it was a wandless summoning spell."

"As if Harry were testing to see if he had his magic?" Remus suggested. "Or at least his orner control of it."

"Exactly." Dumbledore turned to his brother, who was not nearly as powerful as Albus himself, but who had a knack of knowing the few obscure types of magic which his brother did not.

"If anyone could send Potter's mind and magic back eight years, it was Laurel," Aberforth stated. "I don't know how she could have done it, but I am not surprised that it took her sacrifice to do so."

"It's a shame the backlash took the daughter, too," Diggle remarked. "I don't think Lovegood will be the same."

"I don't think the backlash took the girl," Aberforth said. "I think Laurel set up the conditions, and the girl performed the spell in the future."

"She was a child!" Remus objected.

"If the final battle took place when Harry said it will, she was a Sixth year, over the age of seventeen," Aberforth pointed out. "Perhaps we should inform him and see his reaction?"

"Perhaps," Albus agreed.

"Has the boy shown any other magic?" Moody asked. "And if so, is he controlling himself?"

"He is controlling himself," Dumbledore answered. His lips quirked. "He did mention that he needed to borrow ten pounds from Mrs. Figg for lunches, because his aunt would only feed him a stale sardine on bad lettuce the next two evenings, which she did."

"How much of this abusive behavior did you know about before this, Dumbledore?" Remus demanded. "No child should live in that type of environment. I'm surprised the Muggle authorities were never called. . . ." Remus was observing Dumbledore closely. He was shocked to realize, ". . . they were called in, weren't they?"

Dumbledore nodded. "They were and we stopped the investigations. On the other hand, there have been six attempts at magical kidnaping since Harry arrived as an infant, the last, I admit, three years ago. If Harry is what he says he now is, we might allow him to live with the two of you. Even though his living conditions were far from normal, let alone ideal, it was better than his death."

"Why me, I wonder," Moody mused.

"Well, if he knows me, he likely knows of my condition," Remus pointed out, only slightly embarrassed. "He would know he couldn't just live with me because of that. His new condition must be kept secret, and the Ministry would not allow me to have formal custody."

"You may be right, but what I wonder is why he even asked for us, since he must be friends with Arthur's children," Diggle said. The group pondered this for a few moments, and then Remus

slapped his head.

"What?" Aberforth asked.

"Even if Harry became best friends with the youngest boy. . . ."

"Ronald," Dumbledore provided.

"Yes. And isn't there a daughter about the same age?"

"Ginevra, a year younger," Dumbledore agreed.

"Let's say they even dated in his future. Right now, they are children, and Harry is a young man in a child's body."

"So, perhaps the question should be, why would he want to go to the Weasleys at all at this point?" Moody suggested.

"It doesn't matter," Remus said. "We'll figure it out later. Look, I'm willing to live with Harry. What about you, Moody?"

"Aye, I'm willing, but where would we live? My place isn't that safe."

"We have a small place," Aberforth said. "Only the five of us, and Harry, would know where it is."

"Aberforth will go ahead and prepare it. I shall fetch Harry," Albus said. "We shall put it under the Fidelius, after consulting with Harry over the secret keeper. Aberforth and I cannot disappear with any regularity. Dedalus, you shall be the contact person."

"Honored," Diggle replied.

In the gathering dusk of the late summer's day, Petunia Dursley sat looking out her kitchen window, a small pair of opera glasses surveying one of her neighbors planting a rose bush at the wrong time of year.

A knock on the front door made the opera glasses come down and the frown on her face deepen. "Keep at the dishes, boy," Petunia ordered.

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Petunia glared at the boy as she passed by her nephew. There was something very different about him these past few days, and she did NOT like the change.

She liked what she saw at the front door even less, and was very glad that the front of the house was in shadows, so that the neighbors could not see.

Dumbledore had taken care in his dress, not because he was worried about the neighbors, for he was disillusioned from their eyes until Petunia opened the front door. He had worn his best Muggle suit to cater to her sensibilities. Unfortunately, it had been purchased in the 1890s and was both of the style of the period and of a pronounced check pattern that had only been in style for country-wear for a few years.

"Mrs. Dursley? I am Albus Dumbledore. You may be pleased to learn that I am here to take Harry away with me a year early."

Petunia was torn. She didn't like the boy, or want him in her home. On the other hand, she felt obligated to try and stop this magic nonsense if she could. "Why?" she prevaricated.

"Because I don't want to stay here unless I can practice my magic," came the small voice behind her.

Petunia twirled around, almost screaming, "You be silent, you fre. . . ." Petunia went mute, and her eyes went wide and her hands flew to her mouth and throat.

"Harry!" Dumbledore scolded. "Stop that!"

Harry's index finger twitched. "I have nothing to take with me," Harry stated. "Did you bring the things I asked for?"

Dumbledore nodded and held out a small package. Harry elbowed past the shocked Petunia and took the package.

"Thank you. Excuse me while I change in my 'room'," Harry spat. He went into the cupboard under the stairs and came out a few minutes later, dressed in what to Petunia looked like a dressing gown but was actually a work robe. "I am ready, Professor," Harry stated. "Where are we apparating to?"

"YOU are not apparating anywhere," Dumbledore reproved. "In any event, it is best we do not mention the location."

Harry shrugged. "Goodbye, Aunt Petunia," Harry said. "Have a wonderful life." He grinned nastily. "I hope, if Dudders ever manages to have kids, they're all witches!"

At that, with a small 'pop', the pair disappeared.

"But what do I tell the neighbors?" Petunia whispered to herself. Then another thought came to her. What would she tell the school, and any authorities the school sent after the Boy?

"This is . . . quaint," Harry said.

"Well," Dumbledore said, looking at the large cottage, "it was quite up to date in 1890."

"No offense, but does it at least have indoor plumbing?"

"It does, and it has five bedrooms. My brother . . . do you know my brother?"

"Not very well," Harry answered. "He rather went into seclusion after your murder."

"Yes, we will talk about that over the next year," Dumbledore said. "My brother and I will be in and out, and we may be using our old rooms. I am uncertain as to what arrangements Alastor and Remus may have made."

"I assume you'll be trying the Fidelius," Harry said.

"Err, yes. Do you have a preference for the secret keeper?"

"Who will be in on this?" Harry asked.

"Myself, my brother, you, Alastor, Remus, and Dedalus Diggle. He. . . ."

"I know him," Harry answered. He smiled. "He ran into me a few times, before Hagrid delivered my Hogwarts letter, and then I met him at the Leaky Cauldron on my eleventh birthday. He also was in on the rescue of me when I left the Dursleys before my Fifth year." The smile faded. "We're going to have to have some hard discussions, Professor. I appreciate that this isn't going to be easy on you."

"Do you have a preference?" Dumbledore again asked.

"Not really, but I expect to be consulted before anyone is added to the group," Harry answered. "I assume Diggle's job will be to act as the liaison between us and you?"

"Yes. Neither my brother nor I can get here often, and I really want at least one person here with you at all times."

"I see," Harry said distrustfully. "How much of the grounds will be covered?"

"Why?"

"Because I want a good broom and the space to fly," Harry answered.

"I see. We'll do what we can."

"You know, if you don't want me to be the secret keeper, I suggest Mad-eye," Harry suggested slyly. He knew that would keep the number of people who knew his location low.

"Very well," Dumbledore agreed, surprised. "We need to do that first. Did you have dinner?"

"I had half a tin of tomato soup," Harry retorted. "I don't really consider that much of a dinner."

"Nor would I," Dumbledore agreed. "Fine. First the Fidelius, then dinner, then we talk."

"Where should we start our talk?" Dumbledore asked after dinner.

"You seem to have something you don't want to tell me," Harry told Dumbledore.

"How can you tell?" Aberforth asked.

"I have six years of experience watching him avoid answering questions," Harry answered.

"Six?" Remus asked. "I thought you went through all seven years at Hogwarts?"

"We can talk about that later. . . ."

"I know the detail you want left out, and I will leave it out . . . for the moment," Harry interrupted.

"Still, I should say that the Headmaster was murdered near the very end of term at the end of my Sixth year. That is why I said six years, not seven." Harry turned to Aberforth. "You were killed in an attack on Hogsmeade the December of my Seventh year. You might be pleased to note that your obituary made no mention of goats." Aberforth flushed, and Harry turned to Diggle. "You died in an attack on Diagon Alley a few weeks later." He moved on to Moody. "You were stunned and kept in the trunk of a Death Eater for ten months during my Fourth year, and you were dying from being hexed during the last battle just before I was sent back." He turned to Remus. "You were alive the last I knew, but your wife died in the last battle."

"My wife?"

"You married in a Muggle registry office right before that last Christmas. I was there. It was a rare happy moment." Harry grimaced. "I probably shouldn't tell you who she is, since you didn't start the relationship until just after the Headmaster's murder, although she'd been after you for over a year."

Remus was stunned. Moody, however, was outraged. "I was kept in a bloody TRUNK!" he finally burst out after failing to contain himself any longer.

"You were. It was a magical multi-compartment trunk, and it was yours I believe." Moody knew which one it was, and vowed to add safeguards to the compartments. "You were supposed to be our Defense teacher that year. You were stunned by two Death Eaters the night before the Autumn term started." Harry again gave the grim smile the group had already seen more than once. It looked very odd on the face of an almost ten-year-old. "I was at the Burrow. Amos Diggory firecalled that morning, asking Mister Weasley to come help get you out of trouble, because your trash cans had made such a racket that the Ministry had been called in."

The group was silent. Harry turned back to Dumbledore. "What do you have to tell me?"

"Laurel Lovegood died, as you seem to have known." Harry nodded. The entire group looked at Harry closely, which clued him that there was bad news coming. "Her daughter died as well."

Harry stood in outrage. "NO! She promised me she would be alright in this life! No!" Harry did not quite collapse, but to the amazement of the group, Harry pulled himself together. The way he did so again reminded the group that Harry was not the just-shy-of-ten he looked, but a prematurely seasoned warrior. "Please excuse me for a few minutes."

"We can do this in the morning. . . ." Remus suggested.

"You won't think so when I'm done," Harry warned, and he stepped from the room.

Harry walked out to the front porch and lost a few tears, but not many. "Thank you, Luna," Harry whispered. "I think I could have loved you." He added silently, 'And if I screw this up, I hope that letter of instructions comes to me.'

Harry came back to the parlor ten minutes after he left. "Right. Mister Diggle, if I remember correctly, you are a magical solicitor?"

"I am, my boy, and I have worked with Muggles as well."

"Well, some of the things I'm about to tell you are going to present legal and especially political problems," Harry said. He sat. "First of all, Sirius Black was not my parents' Secret Keeper."

The group sat stunned.

"My father, Sirius, and Pettigrew became illegal. . . ."

"Harry!" Remus protested.

"No secrets," Harry retorted. "They became illegal animagi, so they could help Remus here. My father became a stag, called Prongs. Sirius is a grim-like dog, called Padfoot. Pettigrew is a rat, named Wormtail."

"Pettigrew is dead," Dumbledore stated.

"Pettigrew is at Hogwarts right now," Harry retorted.

"Where?" Remus demanded. "How?"

"Sirius had the stupid idea of a bluff, substituting Wormtail for himself as the secret keeper. Pettigrew had been working for Voldemort for months. Sirius hunted Pettigrew down, but Pettigrew sliced off a finger and sent a hex into a gas line, blowing up the street. Sirius went hysterical and Pettigrew escaped, finding his way to the Ministry. There he was picked up by a five-year-old Percy Weasley, and he's been Percy's pet ever since. His rat Scabbers is at Hogwarts right now. Sirius is innocent. He recognized a photo of Wormtail on Percy's shoulder that was in The Daily Prophet and escaped Azkaban before the start of my Third year. He was able to do this, and stay sane, because he spends most of his time as Padfoot."

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Your first task is to figure out how to expose Scabbers as Peter Pettigrew and get Sirius freed. You have until Friday, when the students leave Hogwarts. After that, it might be more difficult."

"I must admit, I never expected that!" Remus said. Dumbledore was even more shocked.

"Oh, things have been much more mismanaged than that!" Harry replied, with a dirty look at Dumbledore. He liked and respected the Headmaster, but he was not going to let him off the hook. He turned to Moody. "Pettigrew was one of two supposedly dead Death Eaters to captured you."

"And who was the other?" Moody demanded.

"Barty Crouch Junior."

"WHAT!" all five men shouted.

"His mother begged her husband to save their son," Harry said. "She was dying. They visited their son, bringing along a large supply of Polyjuice. Mother stayed and died looking like Junior. Junior has been held at the Crouch house ever since, looked after by a house elf named Winky. Now getting to HIM will be a lot more difficult than getting to Wormtail."

"To say the least," Aberforth agreed. Barty Crouch was still a power within the Ministry.

"I take it Mrs. Crouch is already dead?" Harry asked.

"Barty Junior was reported dead over eight years ago," Dumbledore agreed. He steeled himself.

"What else?"

"Your current Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, succumbing to the curse Voldemort put on the position which stops anyone from serving two consecutive years, is about to travel to eastern Europe, correct?"

"Correct," Dumbledore agreed.

"He will run into the disembodied Voldemort and agree to be possessed. You, for some reason, will bring the Philosopher's Stone your friend Nicolas Flamel has to Hogwarts. I will kill Quirrell and drive Voldemort back to Albania for a few years." Harry shook his head. "Well, I suppose, since I'm here and I've told you all that, that might not happen now. And I should also tell you at some point about Lucius Malfoy unleashing an avatar of the sixteen-year-old Voldemort, born Tom Marvolo Riddle, on the school my Second year, who possessed an innocent First year who was made to bring back the monster from the Chamber of Secrets. After all, it was Riddle using the basilisk who was responsible for killing Myrtle, the bathroom ghost, back in 1941, not Hagrid. And, by-the-way, you also invited another ex-Death Eater to bring his students to the Tri-Wizard Tournament my Fourth year; you also appointed Gilderoy Lockhart, who it will turn out gained his reputation by superior use of Memory Spells on those who actually did the things he's written about, as Defense teacher one year and your own murderer to the position in another. . . ."

"Yes, Harry, I think we can put all that off," Dumbledore begged. "We have a lot to think about."

"And think about how much this was your fault," Harry stated. He stood. "Since I still have a child's body, I need my sleep. Good night." Harry left.

"Well, I can see why he didn't tell this to you before we were together," Diggle said.

"We need to think out our approach of Pettigrew very carefully," Dumbledore said. "He will likely claim he fled in fear after Sirius attacked him. Crouch will be appalled that he could have been at fault, and may fight Pettigrew being interrogated under truth potions."

"So we might have to wait and take down Crouch first," Aberforth mused.

"No!" Remus protested. "Sirius has been in Azkaban too long as it is!"

The arguments went on for hours.

In his new bedroom, Harry Potter cried himself to sleep, mourning an odd little girl who would never grow up to be his friend.

Chapter III

Harry requested a stack of Muggle legal pads and, except for meals and walking and flying around the protected property, spent Sunday through Thursday morning working on an outline of events. He wanted to make certain he wrote down as many details as he could before they became even more distant. Remus was sent to a Muggle town to buy Harry a decent Muggle wardrobe, while Diggle supplied a new broom and seven years worth of school texts, so that Harry could review over the up-coming year. Harry had also requested the beginning books for Runes and Arithmancy, since he was determined NOT to take Divination.

Just at dawn Tuesday morning, the dementors of Azkaban all felt a horrible brightness, which they both hated and could not explain. Nor could they explain what had happened to one of their prisoners, Sirius Black.

When Percy Weasley woke up a few hours later, his pet rat was missing. Everyone, especially his terror-and-havoc creating twin brothers, denied any knowledge of the theft. His head of House promised an investigation.

Two hours after that, tipped off by Bertha Jorkins, whose memory had suddenly been restored, aurors broke into the house of Barty Crouch.

The Daily Prophet would have huge headlines when the news hit Thursday morning.

Thursday, June 28, 1990

"Harry! Could you fly down here?" Remus shouted.

Harry directed his Nimbus 1920 down to his 'co-guardian'. "What's up?" Harry asked. "It can't be time for lunch yet!" He had more notes to write.

"Actually, we're having a buffet," Remus answered.

"Why?"

Remus merely jerked his thumb towards the house, where a large-but-thin black dog was sitting near the back down, his tongue lolling.

Harry leaned over his broom, sending it shooting off. He braked by doing a combination back-loop and barrel roll, almost falling off the broom and onto the dog. "Sirius!"

Sirius transformed back and hugged Harry. "Hi, Harry," he managed. "Err, nice to see you again." He frowned. "You remember me?"

Harry let Sirius go. "Let me guess, no one explained to you what happened?" he asked with a sigh.

Sirius shrugged. "Two days ago, at dawn, a phoenix appeared in my cell and flew me away. I was dropped in some dingy cell and given a decent meal and a potion to help keep my nerves steady. That afternoon, I appeared at what I had thought might be my trial, so they could send me to the dementors. Instead, it was Wormtail's. . . . He. . . ."

"I know who, and what, he is," Harry said. "Go on."

"Oh." Sirius scratched his head. "I have to admit, I'm more than a bit confused. I gather that old Barty Crouch is in trouble, and that is all mixed in with what is going on. Anyway, the trial lasted through yesterday afternoon, but I ate and slept through most of it. I do know that I'm pardoned, I'm a legal animagus, and that I'm going to be spending time with you and Moony here." Remus had now joined them.

"If you think you're confused now, just wait until Harry here tells you his story," Remus drawled.

"Yeah?" Sirius dared, "prove it!"

Thirty minutes later, Sirius was indeed stunned. "How bad was it for you, Harry?"

"It was bad enough that I'm here," Harry answered.

"And I died?"

"I have a connection to Voldemort," Harry answered. He looked at Dumbledore, who would be leaving after lunch to go back to the Ministry. "Tell them about the Horcruxes," Harry said. "I can't tell what needs to be told without at least referring to them."

Dumbledore frowned, but did so briefly, which still took ten minutes.

"So you think Voldemort split his soul five times?" Remus asked at the end.

"He split it five times intentionally," Harry put in, speaking for the first time since Dumbledore had started. "He doesn't realize that he succeeded the sixth time when he was disembodied. Because of my connection to him, I can easily destroy a Horcrux. When the Professor destroyed one, he nearly lost his wand-hand to a hidden ward, and it was blackened and withered for the last year of his life. We can go into that soon."

Harry drank some pumpkin juice, and then went back to his original story. "Anyway, because of what happened that Halloween night, I have this connection to Voldemort. He realized this during my first welcoming feast at Hogwarts."

"How?" Sirius asked.

"This summer, the Defense professor is going over to eastern Europe on a year's sabbatical," Harry answered. "At some point, he encountered Voldemort and allowed himself to be possessed. So, Voldemort was there that night." He turned back to Dumbledore. "They know about your spy, right?"

"Harry," Dumbledore almost begged.

"Severus Snape was a Death Eater. . . ." Harry started.

"I knew it!" Sirius crowed.

". . . but he betrayed Voldemort to help the Order of the Phoenix," Harry went on. "After Voldemort was reembodyed, he played Snape's ego masterfully. He convinced Snape that he had only learned of our connection right before Christmas my Fifth year. The Headmaster was already afraid of the link, and had been avoiding me for six months, so he sent Snape to teach me Occlumency. Snape had been abusing me. . . ."

"Harry!" Dumbledore protested.

"He was over the line from the first day in class," Harry snapped. "If you wish, bring in your pensieve and I'll be glad to show you the memories of little things, like his deliberately destroying my potions just so he could keep my grade low." He turned back to Sirius. "So, in large part due to Snape, but also partially because of me, I not only failed to learn Occlumency but the lessons made me even more open to Voldemort's mind. You had escaped Azkaban during the summer before my Third year. Your mother had died. . . ."

"She died a few months ago," Aberforth put in.

"So, your house was serving at the Headquarters for the Order. I was sent a vision of your being tortured in the Hall of Prophecies. The Headmaster had been driven out of Hogwarts by the Ministry, and so I and five friends very foolishly went off to rescue you after your mother's house elf had lied to me and said you were gone. In reality, he had injured a pet of yours and you and Moony were simply out of the room when I fire-called."

Harry shrugged. "It was a trap. We managed to get away from the twelve Death Eaters waiting for us, but they were slowly hunting us down. I think it was down to two of us against seven or so of them when you three and few others came to the rescue. You dueled your cousin Bellatrix, and, well. . . ."

"Bellatrix beat me?" Sirius demanded, outraged.

"Well, you had been cooped up and drinking heavily for a year," Harry retorted.

"That won't happen THIS time!" Sirius vowed.

"Hopefully, we can avoid most if not all of those circumstances," Dumbledore agreed. He turned to Harry. "I have managed to divert Professor Quirrell to South America for his research. However, should Voldemort encounter anyone compatible, he will possess them and make an attempt on the Philosopher's Stone. We must beware, and not be misled by your previous experiences."

"Right," Harry said disdainfully, knowing this referred to Snape as much as anyone or anything else.

"Now, Harry, what and where are the Horcruxes," Dumbledore asked, almost begged, for this was the information which mattered most to him.

"We can easily get at three of them," Harry replied. "Voldemort is an heir to Salazar Slytherin. His grandfather was Marvolo Gaunt. One of the Horcruxes is Slytherin's ring, which is in the Gaunt's shack. You know where that is."

Dumbledore played the innocent. "I do?"

"You showed me the memory of it," Harry retorted. "Be careful when you retrieve it. That's what cursed your hand."

"I shall be careful," Dumbledore had to agree.

"The second Slytherin Horcrux is even more available," Harry went on. He turned to Sirius.

"Believe it or not, your brother stole it, and died from the effort. Slytherin's locket is in one of the downstairs rooms of Grimmauld Place."

"Regulus? Really?" Sirius had ready looked stunned, but now the look returned again.

"Really. Regulus turned on Voldemort, stole the locket, and died while hiding it. We didn't know that, and the Headmaster and I went through hell getting what turned out to be a faux Horcrux. The Headmaster was poisoned and I wasn't much better off. That's how he ended up being trapped and murdered."

"Snape did it, didn't he?" Sirius snarled at Dumbledore. "If he wasn't betraying you, then he was sacrificing you to get closer to Voldemort."

"Exactly," Harry said. "It didn't work; Voldemort knew all along what Snape was up to. Given the choice between death and subservience, Snape went along. He and the Lestranges were captured and executed in April. I'm not saying Snape is as bad as, say, Lucius Malfoy," (Sirius snorted) "but he doesn't deserve the trust you gave him, Headmaster, and don't expect me to."

Harry and Dumbledore glared at each other, quite a sight, considering the huge difference in their physical ages.

"Tell us more about the Horcruxes," Remus said quietly.

"Right," Harry said. "The third Horcrux we can easily get at is at Godric's Hollow. My father had a dagger that belonged to Godric Gryffindor. Even though he did not succeed in killing me, Voldemort did make that into a Horcrux. You need to have those three collected so I can destroy them."

"And the other three?" Aberforth asked.

"Helga Hufflepuff's cup is hidden in the mountains outside of Hogwarts. I can get there through the Chamber of Secrets, but that means getting past the basilisk. It will have to be done, but I'd rather do it after taking care of the other three. The remaining two we cannot get at. Voldemort has one with him in Albania. He fed a healing gem owned by Ravenclaw to a viper, which mutated it into quite a nasty, dangerous creature. I don't know if he's done it already, but I suspect he has. The final Horcrux, which was actually the first one he created, was the magical diary he created while at Hogwarts. It possessed a First year, and at the end, the diary had drawn so much life force from her she nearly died. That enabled an avatar to walk in the Chamber of Secrets, until I destroyed it and the diary."

"And who has the diary now?" Moody demanded.

"Lucius Malfoy." The group fell silent.

After a few moments, Harry asked, "Were you able to keep Percy Weasley's name quiet?"

"Yes," Diggle answered. "Fortunately, Arthur had registered the animal as having been found in the Ministry. No one will blame him for taking it home, because it wasn't his responsibility to test it beyond determining it wasn't ill."

"What happened to Wormtail?" Harry asked.

"He has already been Kissed," Dumbledore said.

"You know, you were right about one important thing," Harry told Dumbledore.

"I'm glad to hear it," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling for the first time in some days. "About what?"

"The dementors deserted to Voldemort at the end of my Fifth year. They caused the most problems over the next two years. The few remaining giants joined him as well. You might consider sending personal envoys now. When you sent Hagrid and Madam Maxime from Beauxbatons during the summer after my Fourth year, Voldemort already had envoys make deals with them."

"Certainly an idea worth considering," Aberforth pointed out.

"Is there anything else we should know today?" Moody asked. "Any security risks?"

"Oh, Rita Skeeter," Harry said.

"The hack reporter? How is she particularly a problem?" Diggle asked.

"She's an illegal animagus, a beetle," Harry said. "Not that I should complain about that now."

"I'm not illegal anymore!" Sirius protested. He grimaced. "That cost me a suit for false imprisonment."

"Nonsense," Diggle said. "I told you I got you a settlement. I know money cannot make up for what was done to you, but it is the best I could do."

"I know, Ded," Sirius agreed. "You got me a decent deal."

"Why else can't you complain about illegal animagi, Harry?" Remus asked, drawing everyone's eyes.

Harry smiled, and suddenly there was a large bear cub in Harry's chair. He switched back. "Does that give you a hint?"

The revelations of late June continued to echo. Barty Crouch Junior was returned to Azkaban, and his father was forced into early retirement. Unfortunately, this also meant that Cornelius Fudge was more firmly entrenched as Minister (Crouch had led the major group within the Ministry which had been opposed to Fudge), and Fudge's assistant Umbridge jumped up two levels within the Ministry.

Sirius went and reclaimed his family dwelling, although grumbling loudly the whole time. He agreed to put it under very heavy wards (although he refused to use the Fidelius), and sent Kreacher as a present to his cousin Narcissa (Harry's idea). Also at Harry's suggestion, Sirius also negotiated the purchase of Dobby from Lucius Malfoy in exchange for many of the hereditary heirlooms of the House of Black, which Sirius didn't want anyway (such as his mother's portrait and the family tapestry) and Harry also arranged to purchase Winky from Crouch. Draco Malfoy, however, had to formally change his name to Draco Black-Malfoy, although he was usually still just known as Draco Malfoy. Draco was also named as a co-heir (Harry being the other) to the Black estate, should Sirius never have a child.

On the one hand, this could mean that Draco would again consider Harry his enemy. On the other, it also gave Sirius some parental rights over Draco, and although Sirius quickly decided he did not like his young cousin, he would manage to hide his feelings fairly well over the next year as he made visits at least once a week (often three times) to the boy.

As June moved into July and through the month, Remus underwent his first change since Harry and Sirius had reentered his life while Harry went on a shopping trip to Muggle Taunton and studied. When questioned about his birthday, however, Harry had an unusual request, which, after much debate, Dumbledore and the others decided could be risked.

Tuesday, July 31, 1990

"You're nervous this morning," Remus observed.

Although Sirius was now technically Harry's guardian, Harry, to his surprise, was becoming closer to Remus. In part, this was because Sirius was still very much recovering from his time in Azkaban and was busy overseeing his own and Harry's fortunes (which had been left in trust throughout Harry's previous life) and in working with Draco Malfoy. Remus was able to devote himself to Harry.

"I am," Harry agreed.

"Why?"

"Because I was so close to Neville and especially Ron, and now I don't know if I can make those connections," Harry answered.

"And Ernie and Anthony?"

"I wasn't close to any of the other Full-Blood boys other than Ron and Neville," Harry answered, "but Ernie was a big help at times if pompous. Anthony was always quiet, but always in the background, ready to help. I didn't know the others well." He shrugged. "Too bad we couldn't get to Seamus or Dean."

"Dean hasn't had his letter, of course, and so he knows nothing of the magical world," Remus agreed. "Seamus' family is also living more as Muggles."

"I know."

"Master Harry?" Winky asked coming up to them, "youse clothes is being ready."

"Thank you, Winky," Harry said. "I'll be ready to go on time."

For Harry's birthday, Sirius had arranged for Ron, Neville, Anthony Goldstein, and Ernie Macmillian to come to Grimmauld Place, the premise being since they would all be year mates at Hogwarts, they should meet. Sirius also told their parents (and Neville's grandmother) that it was time to introduce Harry to some of his magical peers.

Sirius had hoped to introduce Draco to Harry, but after his first few meetings realized that his cousin might never be ready to meet anyone his own age as an equal. He certainly wasn't ready yet.

Therefore, he had spent the morning with Harry and Remus, and had left to spend the rest of the day with Draco. While he hoped to influence Draco, Lucius was of course trying to influence Sirius.

Ron, Neville, Anthony, and Ernie arrived at Grimmauld Place by escort around 11:00. Remus met them, and they took a port key to the Dumbledore's without being told where they were going.

The five appeared at the side of the cottage. Harry was there to greet them, and even though he had been dealing with his own age for over a month, it was still a bit of a shock to see Ernie, Ron, and Neville, who had grown very robust and muscular, and in Ron and Anthony's cases very tall as well, as these youngsters. Still, the four had fun playing gob stones and exploding snap with Harry before having a nice lunch followed by huge servings of ice cream and cake. Harry was amused to see that Ron already sported the appetite that had made him famous.

After lunch, Harry suggested flying. Ernie and Ron quickly got involved in a game of flying tag, while Harry ended up coaching Antony as well as Neville on how to fly. This was calculated on Harry's part, who hoped he would be able to coach Neville out of his shell earlier than the end of his Fifth year this time. By the time the children left, Anthony was comfortable on the broom, and Neville was close.

All four boys, especially Neville, had been apprehensive about meeting the legendary Boy-Who-Lived. They went home slightly impressed by Harry, but more they had decided that Harry was, at heart, just a boy like themselves. Each was certain they had made a friend in Harry, and with each other.

Harry was exhausted by the time they had left. It had not been easy acting down to their level, but he was glad he had taken the time and made the effort. Ron and Neville had been his loyal friends the first time around. He knew he would need their friendship this time as well, although hopefully only to help him cover anything Harry might have to do to fight Voldemort and keep that information away from the other students. Ernie and Anthony had grown into the leaders of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, and Harry wanted a friend in those Houses if he could earn them.

He did rather regret that there wasn't a Slytherin he could have invited as well, but he remembered how the Slytherin boys of his year had acted.

Chapter IV

Harry's life stabilized into a fairly set pattern by the first week of August. He was always up early and after jogging around the property he enjoyed making breakfast for whomever was at the house that morning. (Winky cooked lunch and dinner and did all the cleaning, but had stopped fussing about Harry's cooking breakfast when she saw how much he enjoyed doing it.) After breakfast, Harry went flying (weather permitting). The rest of the mornings Harry spent revising his lesson theory from the first six years of the curriculum and mastering the practical lessons without a wand.

After lunch, Harry worked on his Occlumency, exercised or flew again, and then spent the rest of the time before dinner reading Muggle and magical assignments, designed to improve his knowledge of both worlds, and once in a while did some potions work with Moody, Sirius, or even one of the Dumbledores. Harry had decided that Runes and Magical Languages was a more interesting subject than Arithmancy, and Aberforth Dumbledore made arrangements to teach Harry several languages magically. By Christmas, Harry would be fluent in ten new languages and would know an even two dozen languages by the time he left for Hogwarts. While far short of the hundreds which some wizards, such as the Dumbledores or Barty Crouch knew, Harry felt he could be content with twenty-four, six more than the N.E.W.T. standard.

Sirius spent parts of at least three evenings a week at the Dumbledores' plus at least two afternoons, and Harry usually went shopping in different Muggle towns with Sirius and sometimes Remus once a week. Harry also hosted Ron, Neville, Ernie, or Anthony at least one late afternoon per week and had at least one child over on Saturday afternoons. Harry would maintain that general schedule through Christmas, and after then he revised a little less and added at least half an hour of dueling with Remus, Moody, or Sirius each day. To their surprise, Harry usually won, although he tired fairly quickly at first, since his body was channeling far more magic than it normally could. By the end of the following spring, however, Harry had become used to it and his magic started to grow again. In addition, his body also grew faster than it had in his previous life, in large part because of his better eating habits and greater exercise. Harry's reflexes and balance, both exceptional, also started to grow, as his higher level of magic fused more completely with his body than anyone within living memory. Over the course of the next few years, even his eyesight would become normal, and then even better than average.

All that was in the future. As that first August changed into September, Harry's guardians were upset by his insistence that he go to Diagon Alley for the first time on September 29. He would not explain why, but since the group had been expecting Harry to demand to go there sooner or later they could make few objections since he was giving them more than enough time to set up security.

Saturday, September 29, 1990

Harry, disguised with the simple techniques of gray-lense glasses and a brimmed hat worn low over his scar, walked down the Muggle street, Remus and Dedalus on either side of him.

"When do we find out why we're going this way?" Remus asked, curious as to their mission.

"Right now, actually," Harry grinned. He pointed out a trio of figures standing near the Leaky Cauldron. They were obviously parents and their daughter. The mother and daughter had wild, bushy hair, and all three had a bookish air about them as they perused a sheet of parchment. The parents obviously could not see the entrance and the daughter was trying to convince them that it was there.

"Come on," Harry said. "If we don't help them, they'll be there another half hour or so."

"How would you know. . . . Never mind."

"It was one of her favorite stories to tell Muggle-born students who were home-sick," Harry said.

"You talk to them, Moony."

Remus sighed and walked up to the parents. "Excuse us," Remus said politely if quietly, "but I think what you are looking for is right where your daughter sees it."

The couple blinked. Remus pointed at the parchment. "For those of us in the know, it's pretty obvious. I'm Remus Lupin, my friend Dedalus Diggle, and my nephew, Evan Jamison."

"Dan Granger," Hermione's father said, "and my wife Emma and our daughter Hermione."

"If I might suggest," Remus said with a smile, "partially close your eyes and let your daughter lead you in. Evan can guide your wife, I'll run interference, and Ded will guard the rear."

"It won't put you out?" Emma asked.

"Not at all," Remus said. "Evan has been bothering me about this visit for weeks, and Dedalus was available today. Oh, Mister Diggle is both a magical and non-magical solicitor and we have some business to attend to at the bank. You'll need some help getting into Diagon Alley. I take it your daughter just turned eleven?"

"Just over a week ago," Dan said. "She's been excited about this visit ever since."

"Well, you're welcome to come along with us as we make the rounds," Remus said. "We might be a bit longer in the bank than you, but we're in no hurry if you need to spend any extra time anyplace else. Diagon Alley can be a bit overwhelming for first time visitors"

"That's very kind of you," Emma said.

"Not at all," Remus said. "My mother was much like your daughter. My grandparents were often confused by our world, so we're glad to lend a hand."

And with that, the six went into and out of the Leaky Cauldron and into Diagon Alley.

While the vast majority of pedestrians were dressed only in various wizarding garb, a fair percentage also wore something that they, at least, would consider Muggle (such as Diggle's purple top hat). It was enough for the Grangers not to feel totally out of place.

Well, until they entered Gringotts. The goblins ignored them, but it was difficult for the wide-eyed Grangers to ignore the goblins. Remus escorted the Grangers to the exchange desk, while Diggle went with Harry to meet with the goblins (Harry had stated he also wanted to speak with some of the leading goblins, to get to know them) and then to his vault.

Remus took this time to examine Hermione. She was short and skinny for her age, and in fact she appeared to be at first glance mostly hair with extra large front teeth. She had also been very quiet until that point. As Remus watched, however, he noticed that her eyes were missing nothing, not just from her parents discussing exchange rates and the value of having a small vault for their daughter (capable of having money transferred in from their Muggle bank, to the Grangers' surprise), but she also took in the large pile of topaz and amethyst one goblin was weighing to one side and the loud Scots warlock in a kilt arguing about the cost his vault to the other. Remus realized that if Hermione was anything like her parents, she was likely smart as well as observant.

This belief was highlighted when they went next to Flourish and Blotts. Harry explained that he already had the texts and was after other books, and Dan explained that this was one store where Hermione nearly had carte blanche. Harry frowned a little when the clerk persuaded Hermione to take an over-priced edition of Hogwarts: A History with tooled leather covers, but Harry evened things up by pointing out several inexpensive pamphlets and small works about both the wizarding world and wizard-Muggle relations, some of which Hermione had discovered herself over time in Harry's previous life and some Remus had recently found for him as he tried to learn more about wizarding culture this time around, although he hadn't gotten to many of them yet.

Harry next persuaded Remus to allow him to purchase a multi-compartment trunk, and convinced

the Grangers to do the same, so that Hermione could both build a reference library and be able to transport it to and from school easily. By then, it was close to 12:45, and Remus managed to persuade the Grangers that an ice cream parlor was a good place for lunch, as it was a rare treat.

"Hopefully at least once a year," Harry had commented, which made all three Grangers smile and agree. Fortunately Fortescue's served sandwiches and pumpkin juice as well as ice cream. Emma even teased Remus for his obvious addiction to chocolate as they ate the main course -- large sundaes.

Their next stop was Ollivander's. Harry had insisted on Dumbledore sending his old friend a note, and Diggle had gone on ahead to warn the wand maker who his next client was going to be. Therefore, there was no palavering and mismatched wands. Harry picked up his wand and was matched instantly, to his relief.

"Now, Miss Granger," Ollivander went on, "matching wand and witch is an art, not a science. Even if I knew every wand the members of a family had used for many generations, I still could not accurately predict what wand would best match any single person even with the best measurements, although sometimes I can come close. Mister Jamison was quite lucky that I matched him with the first wand we tried. I believe the average number is a little over seven tries. I tell you this so you do not get discouraged."

Hermione merely nodded.

It took Ollivander twenty-one tries to match Hermione with a vine wood and dragon heartstring wand. "Interesting," was his final comment. "You are the first witch under thirty I have ever matched vine wood to. I believe you will do quite brilliantly at practical applications, Miss Granger."

"Well, Princess, what did you think of this new culture of yours?" Dan asked during tea that afternoon.

"I don't know," Hermione answered. "It was very odd, sort of like walking into a television series in the middle -- it was like we were the only ones who did not know their parts. And we got some very odd stares, which I don't think were always friendly."

"I noticed that, too," Emma agreed. "I'm glad we ran into Mister Lupin."

"The boy must be some sort of heir, to have a solicitor dancing attendance like that," Dan mused.

"He seemed very nice," Hermione stated, although with a puzzled look.

"He did, and he was also rather mature for his age," Emma agreed. "Normally, I'd say a boy with that straight-forward a manner is spoiled, but somehow, he didn't seem to be."

"And it's good for you to get to know someone in your year, if you do go," Dan said.

"I would think, after spending all that money, I'd be going," Hermione said.

"We have enough money, Princess," Dan said. "If we didn't think this was right for you, we wouldn't begrudge the expense."

"Thank you, Daddy," Hermione thought. "I think I should start reading those books."

"Which book are you going to start with?" Emma asked.

"Why, the one which will help her turn a frog into a prince, of course," Dan joked.

"No," Hermione said, seriously, "I think I'll start with Hogwarts: A History and move on to that set of pamphlets Evan pointed out. I can't let my regular school work fall behind, after all."

Dan beamed. "That's my girl."

"So, your quest was the intelligent Miss Granger," Sirius teased that evening.

"Hermione always supplied the brains of the outfit," Harry retorted. "We succeeded in winning in one year because I was very lucky and because Hermione is brilliant. She scored ten O's and an E on her O.W.L.s. . . ."

"Pretty good," Sirius agreed.

"And four O's and three E's on her N.E.W.T.s, even though she hadn't taken the Seventh year classes."

"That is impressive," Remus agreed.

"Was she your girlfriend?" Sirius asked bluntly.

"Not really," Harry answered. "I dated Ginny Weasley during the last part of my Sixth year, but we drifted apart that next summer, mostly due to my having to, well, to go to war. Then she was killed. Ron and Hermione had danced around each other for over a year, and dated for about the same length of time as Ginny and I. They were always fighting though. I think once they had sex, they discovered they weren't right for each other."

"But did you two. . . ."

"We never dated," Harry retorted. He looked out into an internal distance. "We did sleep together several times, but that's about all we did."

"About?"

Harry shrugged. "Slept as in slept, not shag. I mean we cuddled, after Ron was killed and we were both in pain. I don't know if she wanted more than that or not. I was torn between her, in part because we were so close, and Luna and even Ginny a bit until she died and her memory after she died. To tell the truth, I really just didn't have a lot of time to think about that. I do know that I want Neville and Ron in my life this time around, and that I'll likely need Hermione." He smiled.

"Fortunately, she's very mature for her age, so it should be easier making friends with her."

"What more do you want to do about her, then?" Remus asked tiredly, since the full moon was less than a week away. "If anything, that is."

"I'm hoping you'll visit the Grangers in two weeks," Harry said. "You can explain a bit more about who I really am without scaring them off, and hopefully get Hermione here to practice some magic under adult supervision -- if I know the Grangers and Hermione, that will be a good selling point. By the New Year, I hope to bring in a couple more girls as well."

"Like who?" Moody asked. He would need to vet them, no matter what Potter said. The boy might know the children, but he didn't know their families.

"Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott, who were both in Hufflepuff and the Patil twins, who split between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw." Harry frowned. "I'd like to ask Tracey Davis, but she was Sorted into Slytherin, and she really didn't come out against the Darker members of her House until the last year. So, I'll just put her name out and you three can decide."

"Just us three?" Remus asked.

"I think the Headmaster would want me to include her, but she could get very hurt, and I don't just mean emotionally," Harry said. "Four of the five Slytherin boys in our year took the Dark Mark between the beginning of the summer of 1996 and the end of summer in 1997, and Zabini stayed officially neutral but hostile. Two of the girls helped get Death Eaters on the grounds, and the others stayed at best neutral, other than Tracey. I don't know if we might not be causing more problems than not."

"Let's see if Draco can be saved," Sirius said. "If we think he might have any chance by Christmas, then he'll need allies in Slytherin."

"I noticed you don't mean we'll see if he can be saved by Christmas, just that we might think he has some remote chance of ever being saved," Harry noted.

"He's been brain-washed," Sirius pointed out. "His mother only agrees with two-thirds of the brain-washing. If we somehow just can get him even to that point, he might be salvageable in the future," Sirius added hopefully. He still didn't like his cousin all that much, but he was going to do his best to save the boy. He hoped to do a better job with Draco than he had with Regulus -- hopefully Draco wouldn't have to die for his mistakes this time.

"Why don't you write down your opinions of all your classmates?" Moody suggested. "I know, we can't judge them now by the acts they might have committed in an alternative future. Still, it will give us a hint."

Harry snorted. "Oh, Mad-eye. I have a list of almost three hundred names I've worked on so far. Now you've ruined your Christmas present."

Saturday, October 13, 1990

Remus had called on the Grangers' surgery during the week and made an appointment to meet with them at their home.

"Good afternoon, Mister Lupin," Hermione said politely as she opened the door, making certain she did not smile too widely, which would reveal her teeth. She looked a little disappointed. "Evan isn't with you?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Remus said with a friendly smile.

"Please come in," Hermione said, swinging the door fully open.

"What can we do for you, Mister Lupin?" Dan asked as his wife poured tea a short while later.

"First of all," Remus said, "Miss Granger, have you been reading your books?"

"I have," Hermione answered simply.

"Have you run across the story of Harry Potter?"

Hermione nodded.

"That's the boy in your year who somehow defeated this wizarding Hitler that you told us about?" Dan asked. Hermione nodded.

"In a nutshell, this Dark Wizard, who was leading a movement for alleged Pure-Blooded supremacy, attacked a family called the Potters," Remus said. "He killed the parents with a curse known simply as the Killing Curse, but for some reason the curse bounced off of Harry. It left a curse scar on his forehead."

"And the evil wizard?" Dan asked.

"This will be a bit more difficult for you to believe," Remus said.

"Harder to believe than magic itself?"

"Sometimes the specifics are difficult to believe even for those of us born into the culture," Remus answered. "As for Voldemort, some believe he is dead. In reality, while his body was destroyed, his essence lives on, looking for a host for shall we say temporary accommodation and also looking for a way to come back into a body of his own."

The Grangers looked at each other. Finally, Dan asked, "And this concerns us how?"

"Ah." Remus knew this was a sticky point. "Should Voldemort actually come back, he does hope to eventually destroy your world and take over ours. More importantly, your daughter will be one of the few Muggle-born in her year, and so those who believe in Voldemort's ideas will give her a hard time." Seeing the look in their eyes, Remus said, "Think South Africa. The believers in Pure-Blood culture want apartheid at the least, and many of us are fighting hard to keep equal rights in place."

"We appreciate your telling us all this, but why?" Emma asked. She wondered if perhaps Remus wasn't actually a 'Pure-Blood' himself, and that this was a way of driving her daughter away from her Gift.

"Ah," Remus said again. "First of all, Miss Granger, where is Harry Potter?"

"According to the books which even have a guess, he's hidden with Muggle relatives, but I'm guessing we met him two weeks ago."

"Very good," Remus answered. "His Muggle relatives hated magic and were emotionally abusing Harry. We therefore removed him from, for lack of a better term, their care this past June. Now Harry could have been very embittered by their treatment of him. What bitterness he has is directed against them, not Muggles or the Muggle world, let alone the world in general. We have been having Harry meet selected peers since July, but they were all boys from magical families. Since our meeting you two weeks ago, well, Harry has hardly stopped talking about it. The boys he's met know the magical world. We don't want him to lose touch with the Muggle world. We're hoping Hermione might be interested in visiting him, and that you might allow it."

"Hermione visit Harry? Not Harry visiting Hermione?" Dan asked.

"We may be overly security conscious," Remus said simply. "I won't say that Harry can't come here, only that it might take a bit more planning."

"How dangerous is this world of yours, Mister Lupin?" Emma asked, still suspicious, if now along slightly different lines.

Lupin grimaced. "There are a lot of ways to answer that. In Muggle terms, we all carry lethal weapons." He pulled his wand. "This allows control of that power, and any power can be abused. If it isn't controlled, Hermione's power will lash out throughout puberty, and cause many problems. After that, if she hasn't exercised it beyond the flare-ups, it will decrease and disappear except in very stressful situations."

"I think Hermione has the potential of being a very powerful witch," Remus went on. "Because of her heritage, she will be disliked by some of her fellow students. If she is friends with Harry, that may also cause some people to dislike her even more. On the other hand, Harry is going to be an incredibly powerful wizard, perhaps the most powerful since Merlin. Harry is also a symbol of Light Magic, and we're making certain he is well-trained in advance of his starting school. And, if Hermione learns with Harry, she will be ahead of the curve."

"How many others in our year is Harry going to be working with?" Hermione asked.

"Damn, Harry was right. She is sharp!" "There are four or five boys from your year, and there might be a few girls later on."

"You're setting Harry up with allies," Hermione stated.

"I'm hoping we're setting up Harry with friends," Remus corrected.

Hermione thought while her stunned parents sat silent. Finally, Hermione looked at Remus and then at her. "I'd like to join Harry."

Dan and Emma looked at each other and silently made their decision. "Then we'll see if we can work out the details," Emma said.

Chapter V

Saturday, November 24, 1990

"How long do you think he can keep up this pace?" Moody asked Remus.

"I don't know," Remus admitted. After spending the morning making two Fourth year potions with Aberforth and attempting wandless Fifth year Transfiguration work with Moody, Harry had spent the early afternoon coaching Neville and Hermione on basic flying techniques. Neville was gaining confidence but Hermione was still more than a little leery. After flying and having a snack, Harry helped them with the first month of the school's Charm work. Neville had left after he and Hermione had gone through the twenty-one basic wand movements which formed the first two months of Charms, shooting sparks to show the paths more clearly. Now, just before dusk, Hermione was again on a broom, floating just three feet off the ground while Harry slowly walked her around, his hand behind her on the broom stick.

"Why is he doing this, anyway?" Moody allowed himself to wonder. "He's so far ahead of these kiddies that he's more of a big brother than a friend."

"But he's having fun," Remus pointed out. "And, compared to what he had at the Dursleys, he's having a childhood."

"Damn shame, that," Moody admitted. "I wonder if he was in love with this one."

"He said that he was attracted to her, but he relied on her mind and her loyalty," Remus said. "And she and the others are going to be months ahead of most of the other students."

After a few moments of watching Harry, Moody asked, "How do you think the tea party will work out in two weeks?"

"I don't know," Remus said. "Sirius agrees that it's time to bring young Malfoy in, but that it's unlikely to be too helpful."

"Well, I'm certain old Lucius is whispering in one ear while Black whispers in the other," Moody pointed out.

"I'm sure," Remus agreed. "Still, while we're not likely to turn Draco, we might be able to put some doubt into his mind."

"You'll notice that Harry didn't want to invite this one once he learned young Malfoy was coming," Moody pointed out.

"Harry is technically a half-blood, and all the others are Full-bloods, if not Pure-bloods," Remus said. "If Draco turns on anyone, it will be Hermione."

"True," Moody admitted.

Saturday, December 8, 1990

Draco Malfoy was nervous. His father had spent years training Draco to have certain opinions and to believe in certain standards. One of those beliefs was the power of money, second only to the power of ancestry.

His cousin Sirius had an ancestry at least equal to Father, and a fortune which was not far behind. Draco had a chance of claiming half that fortune in the distant future, and that underlying greed which he was just starting to see in his father (plus a desire to hedge his bets) had compelled his father to let Draco spend time with Sirius.

Sirius had a much different set of values, although he acted (at least around Draco) with manners

even superior to Father's, except when they were having fun -- and Father NEVER had 'fun' with Draco. Draco was confused by this quiet conflict between the mores he had been raised with and those of his fascinating and at times flamboyant cousin.

Mother was of little help, merely saying he must find his own way, which at least meant she did not openly disapprove of her cousin.

Father insisted that he pretend to be friends with his rival for the Black fortune, Harry Potter. Sirius was obviously hoping that Draco would become friends with Potter. This also confused Draco, especially because he wasn't certain what 'being friends' meant. He thought of young Crabbe and Goyle as his friends, but he easily dominated them. Even Draco had quickly realized when he met Harry the month before that he was NOT going to dominate Harry Potter. On the other hand, while Harry had made certain that Draco was nice to the other two boys present (Anthony and Ernie), Harry was not trying to dominate him either.

It was all very confusing.

Draco could not realize this, of course, but he was six years ahead of his previous self. That Draco had only had started having doubts after he had first met Voldemort, and by then it was far too late for Draco to turn back. He had mostly buried his doubts during his Sixth year, only to have them thrown in his face by the helpless Albus Dumbledore right before Snape murdered the Headmaster.

Again, that Draco had run from his doubts. This time, he would have to work through them.

The ancient house elf Sirius had given his parents to start the negotiations between the branches of the family shambled into the parlor. "Master Draco is wanted at the fireplace," Kreacher announced, and then shambled off. Draco swallowed nervously and hurried to the one fireplace connected to the floo system (although it was well warded). "Twelve Grimmauld Place," Draco said.

Draco was the last guest to arrive. Harry welcomed him and directed him to the parlor where the tea was being held. "Since not everyone knows everyone else, this is Draco Malfoy. From the tea table over, Ron Weasley, Ernie Macmillan, Tracey Davis, Padma and Parvati Patil, Neville Longbottom, Anthony Goldstein, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, and Hermione Granger." Harry smiled. "All of us will be starting Hogwarts next September." Harry had debated on if he should invite Ginny or not. He decided when everyone else had accepted that he would not risk any silliness about the number thirteen. "Happy holidays!"

The group enjoyed tea, cakes, ice cream, and games. Sirius and Remus provided the 'adult' supervision, which consisted mostly of making certain that everyone had enough to eat, that anything damaged by the wizarding games was repaired, and that everyone had at least something of a good time.

It was quickly clear that Ron and Draco had to be kept far apart, which, considering their fathers' antipathy, was hardly surprising. Most of the group looked upon Hermione's background with slightly vulgar curiosity, which made Draco's pointed ignoring of her slightly less obvious.

When the party broke up four hours later, Harry showed most of the children to the floo, until only he, Hermione, and Draco were left. Harry and Hermione said goodbye to Draco, who rather stiffly returned the sentiment and then Remus drove Hermione back to her parents', with Harry going along for the ride.

"So, what did you think of your yearmates?" Sirius asked after the trio had left the room.

"Well. . . ." Draco hesitated.

"Go ahead, I won't spread it," Sirius encouraged.

Draco had learned enough to know that any criticism of Harry Potter would not be included in that pronouncement, and that since this party had been hosted by Sirius, negative comments -- if any -- should be thought out more than was usual before being spoken. So where to start? "Well, they are

a smart group," Draco said. This could not be said of Crabbe and Goyle. The few other children he had met his own age, like Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott, were not quite up to this group either.

"Yes, and I expect you will all be leaders of your Houses, whatever they are," Sirius agreed. He had some doubts about Parvati Patil, but one never knew for certain.

"Do you think any of them will be in Slytherin?" Draco asked.

"Any of them except for Hermione could be," Sirius said. "I think any of you could be in Ravenclaw, for that matter, especially Hermione."

Draco thought about that. "How many will end up in Hufflepuff, do you think?"

Sirius smiled. "Despite what the other Houses think, Hufflepuff isn't primarily a dumping ground for those rejected from the other Houses. One could say that Slytherin is a dumping ground for any Full-blood who isn't up to the other Houses, but that wouldn't be true of most Slytherins."

"I hadn't thought of that," Draco admitted. "What House were you in?"

"I was Sorted into Gryffindor, but I could have just as easily been Sorted into Slytherin or Ravenclaw." He smiled. "I was never enough of a team-player to be in Hufflepuff." 'Thank Merlin I wasn't put in Slytherin,' Sirius thought. 'I'd be just like this little prick became according to Harry.'

"Why was the Mu, err, Muggle-born girl here?"

"Harry met her and her family in Diagon Alley. She's smart, and remember, Harry was raised by Muggles for a while. It's a good thing to be able to pass through Muggle society without standing out. Now Harry's father and I knew nothing about Muggle culture when we were your age, but Remus can operate easily in both worlds. One September First, he correctly identified every Full-and-Pure-Blood family and most of the half-bloods we didn't know who took the Muggle way into Diagon Alley. To James and me, most of them looked Muggle. To Remus, they stood out more than Hermione ever will to you."

"But we're superior to Muggles!" Draco protested.

"We have an ability Muggles don't," Sirius corrected. "They outnumber us, and they are more innovative because they don't have magic. There has never been a case where the magical population controlled any large society for more than a few generations, and that was only true back when the magical population had nearly the abilities we do now and the Muggles had little more than pointed sticks - and it certainly is not true now. Over the last few hundred years, we've learned how to make the Muggles ignore us, and how to make money from them. Remember, our fortunes come mostly from Muggle sources." Sirius gestured around him. "This house is set in an area owned by the Black Trust. I own the land all twenty-two houses are on. Now, my parents let the area go down, because they ignored the Muggles who live in the other twenty-one houses. I've already started upgrading the tenants, which means in the long-run I'll be making more money. Compared to the Muggles, we pay almost no taxes, so we can easily hoard the money, as almost all of us do. We can't conquer or control the Muggles, Draco. It's failed every time it's been tried these last three thousand years or so. We can exploit them, we can fool them, but only if we mostly ignore them and get them to totally ignore us."

"So, you aren't a Muggle-lover?" Draco immediately wished he hadn't asked that.

Sirius managed not to respond to the remark with anger. "I enjoy aspects of Muggle culture, just as your father does, if not as many as I do. He drinks their wine, eats their food, and spends their money."

"Then why. . . ?" Draco was not certain how to finish that sentence.

Sirius, however, did know how to answer it. "The Muggle world has exploded these last two hundred years. We have to try a bit harder to hide from them, which also means we have to get

along with each other a bit better. That means the Ministries and the International run things, instead of semi-independent families, like the Malfoys, Blacks, and Potters did say four hundred years ago. We aren't doing as good a job as we should in training the Muggle-born to our ways, and as our world grows a bit as well, it means there are more people with talent pushing for recognition. That means if you're a person of family but no talent, it's harder to get ahead than it was a hundred years ago. Those people look to people like your father, who has family, money, and talent, and if they give your father their support, it gives him more power than trying to work with those of talent and no family."

"I'm confused," Draco admitted.

"It is confusing," Sirius agreed. "Don't let either your father or me talk you into deciding your life now, Draco. You want to be a Slytherin. Be one. That means watching and learning."

"So, what did you think of your future yearmates?" Remus asked Hermione.

Hermione looked at Harry nervously.

"Say what you think," Harry urged. "You're my best friend, Hermione, and I never want you anything but honest with me."

"I am? Really?" Hermione asked, clearly pleased. Harry was sure she was blushing in the darkness of the autumnal early evening.

"Really to both," Harry said. "I think you have a knack for truth."

"You don't think I could tell a lie?"

"I'm sure you could," Harry said in a tone that told Remus Harry could tell stories if he chose, "but I'm sure it would only be for the greater good."

"I hope you're right," Hermione said. After a moment of silence, she said, "Well, everyone seemed pretty smart. Susan, Hannah, and Padma are very nice, although Parvati seems a bit too obsessed by fashion when she wasn't jumping about and giggling. I mean, I know most girls like fashion more than I do, but she seemed really into it. Tracey and Neville both seemed very shy."

"All very true, although I'm taking your word about Parvati," Remus said.

"Anthony is shy, too, but not compared to those two. He's really bright, and was the most interesting to talk to. Ernie was nice but, well. . . ."

"Kind of full of himself?" Harry suggested.

"Exactly."

"I think he's also very shy," Harry said. "He talks like that to try and show he's not shy."

"That could be," Hermione agreed.

"Should I ask about Ron and Draco?" Harry asked with a smile.

"They certainly don't like each other," Hermione said flatly.

"Their fathers are on the opposite sides of both ideological and class divides," Harry explained.

"Draco's mother is distant and his father is one of the richest, nastiest, and most bigoted Pure-Blood wizards in Europe. Ron's mother is almost smotheringly loving and dominating, and his father is nice and very liberal-minded, but regards Muggles as a truly fascinating sub-species." Remus winced at that. "His job is to protect Muggles from harmful magical objects, which rather gives him a biased views of Muggles, since he really doesn't know much about them in reality."

"They are both immature, and Draco was, well, condescending to say the least. And Ron had the worst manners."

"True, but then Ron has had to fight five elder brothers at the table," Harry said with a jovial tone. "Just think how we might be if we had elder siblings."

"I have an excellent imagination," Hermione retorted, "but not that good. Draco is torn between disliking me and fearing me, isn't he?"

"That's true of most of the magical world," Harry answered. "Muggles outnumber us in Britain over 2000 to 1 and about the same in most of the world. Many want to believe we're superior because we have the talent to do magic, live longer, and often have better memories, and you can see why they would think so."

"Then why aren't we running things?" Hermione asked. "All the books I've managed to read so far have said that Muggles hate and fear the magical when they learn of it, but it seems like it is the magical world which hates and fears the Muggles. Why? Why not conquer the Muggle world and just take and train children like me when we pop out, if they can't replace their own numbers? Polygamy is a disgusting idea, but it was common enough in the past. Wizards could create magical children all over their domains if they wanted to."

"And what is your answer to that, Harry?" Remus teased. It was a question that had been debated for generations, and Remus wondered what Harry thought of it all, with his experiences.

"There is a very simple set of answers," Harry said. "Hermione would see it easily enough given a year or so."

"And that is?" Remus challenged.

"Magic makes most of us lazy," Harry answered. "I don't really mean physically. I see more overweight Muggles on any High Street than I've seen in Diagon Alley. I mean we're intellectually and imaginatively lazy. If I've read through my History of Magic texts correctly, almost every innovation in the last six hundred years or so has either come from a Muggle-born or a Half-blood, or someone otherwise in close contact with the Muggle world, and that seems to be especially true of the last hundred and fifty years or so. That's another reason why Pure-bloods fear the Muggle-raised -- we're the innovators, and magical society is very conservative."

"Brilliantly deduced," Remus had to admit. There was more to the argument than that, of course, but Harry had hit the main points Remus himself subscribed to.

"But you and I will never fall into that trap," Hermione vowed.

"Add in how much Muggle society has changed in the last two hundred year, since say the steam engine and the industrial revolution, and you can see why the more ignorant Pure-bloods are terrified of the modern world," Harry went on. "Imagine living in the world of at best the Restoration or Georgian England and then walking out of the Leaky Cauldron into modern London? I bet a Mini or even a Vespa terrifies any isolated Pure-Blood as much as a dragon would a Muggle."

Remus shook his head as Harry and Hermione discussed the cultural shortcomings of their new world, even though Hermione only knew it from books.

"Did you have a good time, Ronnie?" Ginny asked wistfully, since she had not been asked to the holiday party.

"Mostly," Ron said. "The food was really good, and we had fun."

"What wasn't?"

"Well, that git Malfoy," Ron said with an air of distaste. "It was like he was sneering at me the whole day."

"Just you?"

"Well, no," Ron admitted. "There's this know-it-all Muggle-born witch Harry picked up somewhere. She's always trying to show off what she knows about us, as if any of the stuff she spouts off is all that new, and the few times it is new, it's boring."

"Maybe she's just trying to fit in," Ginny pointed out.

"Maybe, but I hope she's Sorted into Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. I don't want to put up with her every night in a common room for seven years."

Ginny wondered what Hermione thought of Ron.

An hour later, Remus pulled the car up in front of the Grangers' home. Harry walked Hermione to the door, and Hermione blushed again as Harry took her hand to say goodbye.

"Tell me, Harry," Remus teased, "how much of that inspired analysis was yours and how much of it was Hermione's?"

"It was about sixty percent Hermione, ten percent me, and the rest we came up with together, with some help from Dean," Harry answered. "Everything we said is true, isn't it?"

"I think so, although you wouldn't get someone like Lucius Malfoy or even Cornelius Fudge to understand that. And you also can't forget that Muggles are dangerous to us. The Muggle world would destroy us."

"I understand that," Harry agreed. "That doesn't excuse Pure-bloods from believing that Muggles are totally inferior, and equally bad that the Muggle-born are as well."

"I don't disagree, Harry. How could I?"

"That reminds me," Harry said. "Did you read yesterday's Prophet?"

"That Wolfsbane Potion? It's been rumored for years."

"It's real, Remus," Harry said. "You hate it, and I don't blame you, but it's better than the alternative."

Remus said nothing.

"Let Sirius and me help," Harry asked.

"I'll think about it," Remus said.

"You'd better."

Chapter VI

Monday, December 24, 1990

"Sirius, you must be joking!"

"Harry. . . ."

"Might look ten or eleven, but he's nineteen," Remus said firmly. "He does not want a 'stocking hung by the chimney with care'."

"Trust me, he will," Sirius said firmly.

"Did it have to just be a regular sock?"

"Yes," Sirius replied simply. At that point, Harry rolled out of the fireplace.

"I hate the floo," Harry grumbled, picking himself up.

"I know you can't stay long," Sirius said. "So, Dobby!"

Dobby popped into the room. "Master Sirius?"

"I want you to see my godson receive his biggest present." Sirius unhooked the sock from the mantle and handed it to Dobby.

"Dobby . . . Dobby does not understand. . . ."

"I want you to keep working for me," Sirius said. "You are the best elf I've ever known. But Harry has convinced me that owning an elf is wrong. He's trying to figure out how to get Winky to accept freedom. Maybe you can show her it's not a bad thing."

"Master Sirius . . . Mister Harry . . . thank you both," Dobby said, tearing up.

"Congratulations, Dobby," Harry said. "I'll bring you some more socks tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mister Harry," Dobby said, bowing. "Thank you Master. . . ."

"Mister," Sirius corrected.

"Mister Sirius. Dobby is pleased to still work for you. Dobby is still keeping all of Mister Sirius' secrets."

"I know you will," Sirius agreed. "We can work out pay and such later."

Tuesday, December 26, 1990

"It was nice of your parents to let me come over all afternoon," Harry told Hermione. "Mrs. Weasley certainly wouldn't leave us unsupervised, let alone build a fire!"

"I wouldn't allow a Weasley to be unsupervised, either," Hermione said archly, watching Harry roast chestnuts in the fireplace. She had met the twins briefly. "And Mum and Dad trust me, and they trust you even more, especially Mum."

"Why is that?" Harry asked absently, keeping a eye on the chestnuts.

"Because they might not be magical, but they are as smart as I am, and I think my mother has some very minor empathic magic."

That caught a bit of Harry's attention. "Really?"

"Really. I don't seem to have any myself," Hermione said, a bit sadly. "That's one reason why you didn't want me getting interested in Divination; you know I wouldn't be good at that."

"You'd be good at anything you put your mind to," Harry said loyally, "but I think you'd enjoy Arithmancy or Runes more."

"Thanks. Could you tell me something? Or two or three things, actually."

Harry shrugged. "If I can."

"Why did you come back from the future; how far did you travel back; and how did you do it?"

Harry stared at her, and then pulled his chestnuts from the fire so they wouldn't burn.

Hermione sighed in a way which was very familiar to Harry. "Harry, did you read those magical developmental books you recommended to me?"

"No. . . ."

"Harry, you are so far outside the magical power curve. . . ." She shook her head. "You don't even register, Harry. We develop our magical powers starting between the ages of nine and eleven, and it increases along our development through about age twenty-one or so. After the age of twenty-one, it might increase slowly over time, but at a very very slow rate. Harry, I've seen you do things in front of me that no wizard under the age of sixteen should be able to do, and I've caught you doing things when you thought we weren't looking, and seen you do things better, than any wizard should be able to do, period. Even not counting the wandless magic I've seen, you must already be as powerful as, say, Dumbledore or Voldemort were by the time they left Hogwarts, and they topped out the known curve in Britain."

"It's not really that measurable. . . ."

Hermione shook her head. "No, Harry. I've been told I talk like a miniature adult, but you talk more like an adult than I do. I've seen how Mister Lupin, Mister Black, and especially how Mister Moody treat you. They treated you like a junior partner in October, and now they treat you like an equal. You must have just come back in time last summer." She looked in Harry's eyes. "Don't lie to me Harry. I'll keep your secret."

"I know you wouldn't lie to me, Hermione. Could you lie for me?"

Hermione's breath caught. She thought hard. "I can't take an oath to you, Harry. At least not until we're at Hogwarts."

"And would you promise to take one then if I asked you to?" Harry asked.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Tell me, have you come across the term 'Occlumency' at all?"

Hermione frowned. "It was something . . . just in passing. It's the magic of hiding your mind?"

"Hiding your thoughts," Harry agreed. "There's a magic called 'Legilimency,' which means reading thoughts and emotions, although it takes a huge amount of skill to dig out anything other than surface thoughts. Occlumency blocks Legilimency, and it also blocks certain types of what is called 'Second Sight' and related magics."

"And for you to tell me things, I need to learn this Occlumency first," Hermione stated.

"Yes." Harry thought. "Is there any place where you can learn meditation? Some yoga place or such that teaches it?"

"There is a place in town that teaches yoga and meditation, why?"

"Both would be a good place for you to start. It would also help you concentrate your magic a bit, and you can probably convince your parents that the yoga is good physical exercise as well."

Hermione smiled. "Lovely idea!"

"Ye shoulda just Obliviated her, lad," Moody said, his burr showing.

"No," Harry said firmly. "First of all, I wouldn't Obliviate Hermione, and second, I've never actually done it. I certainly wouldn't experiment on a friend."

"Then there's another thing we add to your tutorials," Remus agreed.

"I hadn't thought we were at all sloppy," Sirius complained.

"Hermione is smarter than we are," Harry said simply.

"If anyone else learns about this, I'm taking the knowledge right out of their heads," Moody growled.

"Alright," Harry said simply. "I won't argue." He turned back to Remus. "So, memory spells, dueling, more languages, and general brushing up? Anything else?"

"No," Remus said, looking at Sirius and Moody. "If there's anything else you need to know, Dumbledore can bring it up with you tonight."

"Oh," Harry said, "he's showing up tonight?"

"So he said," Remus said.

"Tell me, Harry, was there anything which suggested to you that Professor Quirrell was allied with Dark forces before he went to Albania in your time?"

Harry thought hard about that, and finally said, "No, sir. My impression has always been that he was long on theory but short on experience, and that he was overwhelmed by Voldemort's personality." He frowned. "That does seem sort of weak in retrospect, doesn't it?"

"It does, but it's not unheard of," Dumbledore agreed.

"Let me guess, he's not in South America any more," Harry said. "He's in Albania after all."

"Exactly, and he has been since early this month, if not before."

"So, he was searching Voldemort out, either to bring him back or to join him, or to inflate his standing by tracking him down and exposing him," Harry said. He frowned. "Voldemort told his Death Eaters after being brought back than no one, well, none of his Death Eaters at least, had sought him out until Wormtail showed up." Harry frowned some more, trying to remember. "He called Quirrell . . . 'young, foolish, and gullible', who 'wandered' across his path," Harry said.

"If he was not seeking Voldemort, he was seeking something else near by, although I cannot think what." Dumbledore thought a bit and then said, "It is very possible that he overheard a conversation I had, and knows that Voldemort's essence has been reported in that area, and he sought to capture him." Dumbledore nodded to himself. "That certainly does lie within his theoretical expertise and would have made him famous. Finding Voldemort in better condition than expected, however, Professor Quirrell will instead fall in with his plans."

Harry shrugged. "So, you don't think Professor Snape told him of the conversation?"

"Harry, you must not judge. . . ."

"I must not judge Snape?" Harry demanded. "Look, if you want him to kill you, fine. Just don't expect me to applaud the idea."

"Professor Snape. . . ."

"**Cannot** be trusted," Harry stated firmly. "His cover is blown, and you both should have known that once you admitted helping him in court! And yes, I know about that and a lot more. When will you get it through your head that this time I know a lot more than you want me to, and that you screwed up royally last time? He is worthless as a spy, and he never managed to stop any Slytherin from

going Dark in the six years I was a student. He failed on every count. If he is going to have ANY value, other than making potions for you, his roles have to totally change."

"He is a professor. . . ."

"He is one of the worst teachers on staff," Harry snapped. 'He is certainly the most biased. The first time he abuses me this time, I'm filing a complaint. The first time he uses passive Legilimency on me in class, I'll shred his ego. If he keeps at me, I'll shred his mind.'" Dumbledore winced. "I'm damned if I'm going to struggle against his bigoted incompetence on top of everything else this time. You're the one who treats him as your favorite son, YOU figure out a way to deal with him. Don't even try to foist him off onto me this time!"

"Harry. . . ."

"Do something, anything. If you really feel you have to, tell him the truth about what happened, and then let him shape up or ship out!"

Dumbledore blinked. "Where did that phrase come from!"

Harry shrugged. "Watching Muggle television with Sirius, no doubt," he answered. Harry glared at Dumbledore. "'Professor' Snape may have his uses, but they aren't in being a spy or a role model for junior Death Eaters. And either he changes or I do, and you might love him more than you do me, but I'm the one who has to fight and destroy this monster that HE helped create and that YOU failed to deal with back when he was an abused orphan, then a bullying student, and then finally a would-be Dark Lord. So, turn that brilliant mind of yours on the right tasks, not on getting me to tolerate abuse. I had my fill of it the last time!"

Harry stood. "Now, if there are any other things you believe I might need to learn other than masochism, please talk with Alastor or Remus before you leave." Harry stalked from the room.

Dumbledore stood there, stunned until Aberforth came in. "Forceful young man, isn't he?"

"You heard that?" Dumbledore said incredulously, still smarting from the dressing down he had received.

"All three of us did," Aberforth stated. "And you might as well face facts, Albus, all three of us agree with Harry, four if you count Black, and I'm sure Diggle would agree, too, if he knew all the details. Snape as he is now is a luxury we cannot afford to keep. He must either change, or at least mask, his attitude towards Harry and bring a more positive face towards his Slytherin students or he will drag them and you down. As he acts now, young Draco will have both his father and his godfather pushing against the lessons Sirius is trying to teach him. Or, to put it in another way, either the leopard Snape must change his spots, or Harry will have a leopard-skin rug."

Dumbledore sighed in confusion. He had to face something he had been putting off for months. His dilemma was if he could go through with things.

Saturday, December 30, 1990

Severus Snape was torn. He was partly just stunned. He was confused. Mostly, he was outraged.

It had been bad enough the previous summer when that bastard Black had been revealed to have been innocent and Pettigrew had been revealed to have been alive and guilty. For one horrible moment, Snape's ego had crumbled. He had known there had been a traitor close to the Potters; he had reported that to Dumbledore in mid-September of 1981. He had thought it was likely Lupin, but had no proof.

When Black had been arrested, Snape had consoled himself with the knowledge that with all his nearly infinite faults, Sirius Black was a clever and tricky wizard, and he had known that Black was both ruthless and dangerous long before Black had tried to kill him in their Sixth year. It stung a

little to have been fooled by Black, but so had everyone else.

But to have been fooled by Peter Pettigrew? Even the fact that everyone had again been fooled was of no comfort. Still, Snape had been able to put those feelings aside.

But now. . . .

Snape had been wary since the evening before, when the Headmaster had requested Snape to be prepared to spend the next day in conference with him. He had always been worried that the key to the Headmaster's plans to prevent the Dark Lord's return seemed to depend on Harry Potter for some reason. Despite what the Headmaster had just spent the first half hour of their meeting telling him, it was difficult to believe that Potter had, apparently, succeeded in stopping the Dark Lord in another life, but had been sent back simply because this boy had seen too much suffering and two silly witches had decided the cost of victory had been too high.

Victory was the important thing, was it not?

Dumbledore had sighed at that point, and had gone on to explain more of what had happened.

Snape had not believed it.

Dumbledore had therefore taken Snape on a tour of some memories which Potter had put into a pensieve. He had seen for himself the Dark Lord being re-embodied, and a number of firefights and battles.

Snape had had to believe it. "But why tell me this?" Snape had demanded. "Obviously, this timeline is now corrupt. Pettigrew is gone. The Dark Lord may find someone else to help him, but we at least will be more on our guard." He had then sneered and said, "Perhaps we will not have to depend on that boy. After all, it was likely his foolishness which led to that Dark ceremony."

"Was it indeed, Severus?" Dumbledore had asked. The old man had sighed, and then showed Snape another set of memories. The first had been the most shocking of all, for it had shown Snape killing Albus Dumbledore himself. A memory of Dumbledore's had then showed Snape Harry's opinion of why Snape had done it. Three more memories had shown Snape leading units of Death Eaters in firefights where Potter's group had defeated them, although narrowly in two cases. The third time he had been out-duelled by Potter and captured. One final memory showed Snape's execution, along with the Lestranges.

And so, Severus Snape was torn. He was partly just stunned. He was confused. Mostly, he was outraged.

He was outraged at these images of James Potter with Lily Evans' eyes, especially the one where he had witnessed the death of another Severus Snape and seen the grim satisfaction on Potter's face.

Then had come yet another series of memories, and while Snape was well-prepared to believe that he disliked the child of Potter and Evans, even he was surprised by the spite he had apparently inflicted on the boy, although he believed, hoped, that these were the low-lights, and not as typical of his behavior as Potter claimed. There followed a recitation of the Slytherins Snape had mentored who had turned Death Eater. Nearly all the Hogwarts students who had left school after 1985 who had turned to Voldemort in his Second Rising had been Slytherin, as opposed to the 40% who had supported Grindelwald's last war and the 60% who had supported Voldemort's first attempt. Either Snape was doing something wrong, or he was not doing enough which was right. This was followed by an explanation of why Snape could never return to being a spy. He had failed to fool the Dark Lord in that alternate universe. Even forewarned, he would have only a slightly better chance this time.

And so Snape was outraged at fate, and outraged at his own behavior.

"What do you want me to do, Headmaster?" Snape demanded finally. "I do not want that monster to win, and I am disgusted by the idea that I gave in to him a second time."

"Do you honestly accept this as truth, Severus?" Dumbledore asked compassionately.

Snape glared for all he was worth for a few moments, and then collapsed back into his chair. "Even allowing for the hyperbole of an exhibitionist like James Potter, that would not influence the memories to a great enough a degree to disprove the thesis." He looked up at Dumbledore, great agony in his eyes. "Should I tender my resignation now, so that you may start the search soon?"

"If that is what you truly desire, Severus, I will accept your resignation at the end of March." Snape nodded and started to stand. Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "I apparently never understood how hurt you were by James Potter and his friends. Yes, I valued James, Lily, Sirius, and Remus. Never think I valued you any less than any one of them, Severus. I have lost many fine wizards and witches to Darkness. I was partially responsible for not helping a young Slytherin by the name of Tom Riddle, and then not stopping him before he could turn himself into Voldemort." Snape winced. "I lost you, and you came back. I apparently lost you a second time. I would not lose you a third time."

"You have three paths to follow, Severus. I can not make the choice for you. The hardest path, at least over the next few years, would be for you to stay here. You would have to change your interactions with the Slytherin students. You must openly take a path which pushes against the absolute Pure-Blood agenda espoused by Voldemort's supporters. We must come up with an alternative, a positive message of wizarding culture, not one based on hatred of others."

"Oh?" Snape asked, "and you would push that new agenda, instead of seeking to bring us closer to Muggle culture while staying apart?"

"I no longer believe that will work," Dumbledore said sadly.

"Potter did this?"

"He has mentioned it to myself and his attendants, but with no solution. One of them has come up with some ideas, which I would like you to look at without prejudice."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I shall just give you a copy of the proposals, and I want your opinion of it."

"To sum these 'ideas' up, what might the gist be?" Snape asked, willing to be led in another direction.

"Starting next year, we start two new courses for students in their First and Second years. For those primarily Muggle-raised, a course on Magical traditions. We certainly have to stop relying on Professor Binns' lectures to give them this information. We would need to find a Pure-blood of sufficient knowledge and tolerance to make it both worth-while and reasonable. For the children raised primarily in our world, a course on 'Living with Muggles'. It is time to remind them of some home-truths as well."

"What truths? And what truths are you trying to teach the Muggle-born?" Snape demanded.

"For the Muggle-raised, that being magical is a way of life as well as a talent," Dumbledore said simply. "For the magical, a reminder that new blood is needed for us to survive, that our wealth and innovations come from the Muggle world, and just some idea of how large that Muggle world is. Remember, what started your own thoughts in leading you away from Voldemort?"

was undercover in the Muggle world, and I saw how powerful and large it is. We're outnumbered more than two thousand to one, and they have machines I cannot even begin to understand what they do, let alone how they work, with power beyond what I can understand." Snape's eyes clouded. "I really do despise that world, Headmaster."

"I understand," Dumbledore said. "We took a path, and it failed. We have been given what I would imagine is a fairly unique opportunity to try a different path, and I intend to do so. I hope you will help me."

"Perhaps," Snape said, forcing himself to be a true Slytherin and consider not what he wanted, but what would be the best deal he could make. After some thought, he stated, "If I do, both your Traditions and Muggle professors needs one other qualification besides being tolerant and knowledgeable. Something which our current Muggle Studies certainly instructor does not have."

"And that would be?"

"Ancestry," Snape answered. "It must be someone that even someone like Lucius Malfoy would have to respect." He glared. "If you were thinking of Black, forget it."

"I was thinking he might teach the 'Living with Muggles' course, actually."

Snape groaned.

"You need not associate with him beyond nodding to him at meals," Dumbledore said, having had to say much to same to Sirius. These ideas had primarily been Remus Lupin's. It was a shame that Remus could not easily come and teach either course.

"What are my other available 'paths'?" Snape asked, his trade-mark sneer now long gone.

"You can simply walk away from everything, or you could be doing research for me outside of Hogwarts," Dumbledore said.

Now Snape did stand. "I shall inform you of my decision, Headmaster." He hesitated. "May I ask one more thing?"

"Yes."

"Potter . . . he came back and joined his ten year-old-body. . . ."

"First of all, his guardians were abusing him, and under feeding him. Harry says he is already the same height he was at the end of his First year. Second, to answer your real question, his eighteen year-old magical ability came with him along with the knowledge of how to use it -- and I would judge his power when I first met him equal to what mine was when I left Hogwarts, and nearly equal to Tom Riddle's. It has grown as the usual rate for a ten year old."

"Is there any chance of his becoming Dark?" Snape demanded.

"No," Dumbledore answered. "He will leave, just as Merlin did, should that temptation come to him."

Chapter VII

Saturday, February 9, 1991

"I wonder what they do in there every week," Sirius muttered. Every weekend, after Harry's other young friends left, he and Hermione spent time in his room.

Moody's eye swung over from Sirius up towards Harry's room and back to Sirius. "They sit an' stare at each other," Moody answered. "Doing what, I can not say, but except for a hug at the end of each session, that's all. Get your mind out of the gutter, Black. She's eleven."

Sirius flushed.

'Legilimens!' Harry thought. Instantly, a view of Hermione crying as she was teased by two schoolmates a few days before flashed into Harry's mind. Within three seconds, however, it was replaced by the image of a candle flame, Hermione's metal focus. Once Harry had been given proper instruction, he had quickly learned that while Snape's demand of a blank mind was a sign of basic mastery of Occlumency, few if any achieved it as a first goal. Hermione could now detect even a secret attack and deflect it to this mental image.

"Do I pass, Harry, or do I need to learn more?"

"You need to learn more, but you pass." Harry frowned. "You've been hinting at weeks that there is some secret you want to share. You don't have to; you don't owe it to me for learning my basic secret."

"I want to learn more about your secret, Harry," Hermione replied. "May I now ask some questions?"

Harry thought about that, and then nodded. "I may not be able to answer them, you know, at least not yet."

"I know. My secret will come out as I ask you about yours," Hermione said. "First, did you arrive on the Twenty-first of June?"

Harry merely nodded, too shocked to do more.

"Was there some thin young woman with dark blonde hair involved in sending you back?"

"How did you know?" Harry demanded hoarsely.

"Harry . . . was I dead when you came back?"

Harry merely nodded, then said, "How?"

"Do ghosts exist?"

Harry looked up, shocked. "You. . . ?"

"I think I was a ghost," Hermione said, looking into her memories. "I was in a room, and an older version of you was in a bed, and you were very bruised and injured." She looked directly at Harry. "I didn't realize that it was you or start putting any of this together until around after Mister Lupin came in October."

Harry merely nodded, and Hermione went back deep into her memories. "This blonde woman. . . ."

"Luna," Harry supplied.

Hermione nodded. "She was saying she could send you back. She kissed you and then started moving her lips. I came closer, and she looked at me. She nodded and her eyes went from my hand

to where she was holding yours. I added my hand, and then I was awake in my bed. I was ten, and felt like I had always been ten." She looked at Harry. "I thought it was a dream. But since I met you, I've remembered a few other things, and almost every time you teach me something, I get a sense of déjà vu."

Harry nodded. "What else do you remember?"

"Little things, but disturbing things," she said, her eyes going down.

"Such as?"

"Did you and Ron Weasley fight a troll while I watched?" Her voice was getting softer.

"Halloween our First year," Harry supplied. "It surprised you, which is why you didn't fight it."

"Two huge yellow-green eyes and then blackness?"

"You were petrified by a basilisk," Harry supplied.

"Flying on something big with wings?"

"You flew with me on a hippogriff, and a group of us once flew on Thestrals, although those were invisible to you at the time."

"And did I meet giants and centaurs?"

"And goblins, merpeople, vampires, werewolves, and house elves," Harry said. "Not to mention we're friends with a half-giant and one of the staff is a quarter-goblin."

"And I killed people, didn't I?" Hermione asked sadly, and barely audible.

"I'm afraid we both did," Harry agreed.

Hermione's eyes went down, and she asked in a small voice that Harry had to strain to hear, "And Ron Weasley raped me, didn't he?"

"WHAT! No!" Harry stated firmly.

"How can you be so sure?" Hermione challenged.

"The two of you danced around each other for well over a year," Harry said. "I never saw why, since you were always arguing with each other. Still, you did come together towards the end of our Sixth year, although you didn't actually tell me until early July. You, well, you and Ron. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Ron's oldest brother got married at the end of July. The two of you went away together from Saturday night through Monday morning. You broke up about a week later, right after the actual wedding, where there had been a big battle. You and Ron were out of the battle because you had left just before hand. Ron later told me that the two of you realized that you were more like brother and sister, and that the whole thing had been very awkward afterwards. You told me that he was clumsy and that the whole experience was interesting but unsatisfying."

Both Harry and Hermione were bright red.

"Is that when we became lovers, Harry?"

Harry looked at the little girl. "We weren't lovers, as such."

"So I don't remember sleeping with you?"

"Sleeping? Yes, we did, as in sleep. Let's put off any further discussion of this subject until at least after our Third year?" Harry was desperate to get away from this topic, as his ten-year old body wasn't up to it. "Alright?"

"That might be a good idea," Hermione agreed, relieved. "But about Ron. . . ."

"The two of you shared plenty of affectionate hugs after you broke up, even when you didn't know I was around, and Luna found the two of you snogging away a few times," Harry said. "I'm sure that while Ron might have hurt you, he didn't assault you."

"That's good to know," Hermione said. "Have you made contact with Luna?"

Harry's head now went down, his eyes searching the floor. "The spell . . . she sacrificed herself." He looked at Hermione, his face torn with emotion. "If I had known, I wouldn't have agreed."

"I understand, Harry," Hermione said, leaning towards him. Harry felt just a little of the burden lift from him.

Harry looked up and the mood fell away from them. "So, are you ready to keep up and improve your Occlumency?" Harry asked.

"I am," Hermione answered.

"Here," Harry said, handing Hermione a notebook. "This is charmed so that while I'm alive, only you can read it. Now remember, just because people did things the last time around. . . ."

"They might make different choices this time," Hermione finished.

"Exactly. In fact," Harry added, "I've already greatly changed the time-line. Sirius was in Azkaban until the summer of 1993 and Pettigrew was at large through early 1998. Professor Dumbledore has sent an envoy to the giants four years earlier, and others to the werewolves and vampires, which he hadn't done the last time."

"What else?"

"Voldemort enjoyed the protection of six magical objects called Horcruxes. That's all explained in the notes. Three have already been destroyed, which we hadn't managed the last time until August, 1997, plus I have a good idea of where the other three are, which we didn't have last time until Christmas, 1997. Last time, Dumbledore was killed in June, 1997, and it was mostly you, me, and Ron, with some help from Alastor, Remus, an auror named Tonks, Luna, Neville, and Ron's family who finished Voldemort and his gang off. This time, I hope I have more friends to draw on. Last time, Draco was against us. This time, Sirius might be able to at least keep him neutral, and if he's neutral a lot of information and gossip might not leak out of the school. Speaking of which, there was an annoying reporter buzzing around last time. I mean that literally, because she was an illegal beetle animagus. You unmasked her, and this time she's been banned from reporting, and she's being employed by Sirius as sort of a public relations person, planting stories."

"So, we're ahead of the curve, even without adding the changes to you," Hermione pointed out.

"I had hoped you'd forgotten that," Harry said.

"Not a chance," Hermione stated flatly. "If your power makes the same quantitative jump as most wizards' do between the age of ten and twenty, you're going to be the most powerful wizard since Merlin," Hermione pointed out. "If it doesn't, it will likely still increase slowly over time, and put you at least even with Voldemort, if not ahead."

"Either might be true, but you probably know what 'hubris' means," Harry pointed out.

"I do."

Harry shrugged. "Worst case scenario, I'll have seven years more experience now than the first time I face Voldemort and the same amount of power that I had when I killed him." Harry's face hardened. "We'll get him at a lower cost this time."

"My job will be to keep your head level, won't it?"

"Part of it," Harry agreed. He smiled, "But you were always pretty good at it."

Wednesday, February 27, 1991

"You wished to see me, Severus?"

Snape, looking much paler than usual, nodded and sat heavily in the chair offered to him.

"May I take it that you have reached a decision?"

"I have a proposal to make, Headmaster," Snape suggested.

"Oh?" Dumbledore had not expected this, and so had no idea what Snape might be suggesting.

"Please, go ahead."

"First, have you found someone to teach the Wizarding Traditions course?"

"No," Dumbledore said, "I have not. I have several possibilities in mind. I have until the April meeting of the Governors to suggest all of this. I have the agreement of five of the twelve already, and have not consulted with any of the remaining seven."

Snape nodded his understanding. "As I thought. While my opinion of Black has not changed, I find that his coming here might be to your advantage." Snape had a very bad taste in his mouth, but he was determined to do what was right this time.

Dumbledore looked very curious. "Go on."

"The man took seven N.E.W.T.s, six of them Os," Snape pointed out with a look of distaste.

Dumbledore nodded. "Charms, Potions, Defense, Transfiguration, History, and Arithmancy, with the E in Runes."

"So, have Black teach both the Muggle and Tradition classes, plus teach the First years Potions, Defense, Transfiguration, and Charms. The next year, have him teach the new First years plus the two extra courses for the Second years."

Dumbledore sat back and steepled his fingers. "Interesting. Why?"

"I must admit, I do not know if I can treat Potter differently than I have seen in his memories," Snape managed to admit, although he hated saying so nearly as much as he hated saying anything about Black. "I would not have thought I would have treated him like that unless he were as. . . ." He stopped himself. "Never mind. It would be best if I did not interact with him until we have a chance to know each other outside the class room. Second, would I be right in believing that that idiot Quirrell is likely to be involved with whatever happens next year?"

"He was the last time around, and despite my attempts at moving him away from temptation, he has been reported exactly where he was not supposed to be."

"Albania?"

"Exactly," Dumbledore said.

"Might it not be best to keep him away from Potter as well?"

"It might be best," Dumbledore agreed. "It is worth considering."

"Also, I had dinner with Lucius last Saturday. He confided something to me. You tell me if this is different in this time-stream." He took a deep breath. "Narcissa Malfoy is expecting a child in seven months. Lucius is confident that this will increase the odds of Black leaving more of his fortune to the Malfoys."

"It is a significant departure, so far as I know," Dumbledore admitted.

"So, Lucius will want to butter Black up, and giving him this assignment will do so. Since Lucius controls his own vote and at least influences three others, he will think it will look good to Black to back him. As much as I despise Black, he is qualified. In addition, he will, I would hope, have the brains to mask Potter's abilities."

"He will have to be warned about that," Dumbledore agreed.

"I shall be encouraging my students to listen closely to what Black has to say," Snape said.

"There is just one more thing," Dumbledore said.

"And that is?"

"You have seen the announcement of the Wolfsbane potion?"

Snape's lip curled. "I see. Black will bring his animal with him." 'How much worse is this going to get?' he wondered.

"I admit I have just thought of this, but it will be useful," Dumbledore said. "Lupin will assist Sirius as needed, which, I will admit, means keeping an eye on Sirius and Harry, especially Sirius."

"I hope he does a better job of it than he did as a prefect," Snape said bitterly.

"He will," Dumbledore assured Snape. "Sirius has become something of Harry's older brother. It is Remus who has become the father figure. And Remus will stand up to anyone, even Sirius, when Harry's welfare is at stake."

"Oh, very well," Snape said in disgust.

"Remus may also be helping Professor Kettleburn."

Snape snorted. "He should retire, and Binns should be removed as well. But that is up to you, Headmaster."

"So it is," Dumbledore said.

Thursday, February 28, 1991

"I don't understand," Harry said.

"You don't understand what?" Sirius asked as the pair sat in the parlor at the Dumbledores' that evening.

"Why Lucius Malfoy wants another child, or wouldn't want one for that matter. It can't be about money; he's rich!"

"You don't understand how someone like Malfoy regards money and property," Sirius pointed out.

"Then teach me," Harry asked simply.

Sirius thought about that, and then simply said, "Power comes from wealth. True?"

Harry shrugged. "Power of a sort, I suppose."

"Right. Lucius has that power because he controls that wealth. If he can pass all that wealth on to Draco, Draco will have that same sort of power."

"Alright," Harry said. "What if Draco had been born a girl?"

Sirius shook his head. "A test was developed for that in the 1960s. Not a chance; Lucius would have had a girl aborted. This time, he apparently didn't check, figuring perhaps I might be a sucker for a girl, outbalancing the need for a second son."

Harry wrinkled his nose at that. "What about the concept of 'an heir and a spare'?" he asked instead.

"Now there I would agree with you, and so did my family," Sirius said. "Regulus and I came from a long line of families with two sons. Lucius is gambling on Draco more than most families would. Now that he thinks he has a chance at my money, though, he figures having the spare is a better risk. And, if it's a girl, well, Narcissa has enough money of her own to cover any dowry. Lucius would pay it, and then Draco would get the money from his mother when she dies."

"And that's all there is to it?" Harry asked. It all sounded very cold-blooded to him.

"More or less," Sirius answered. "I might become godfather to the child, and so might be persuaded to split my inheritance three ways."

"So that two-thirds would go to the Malfoys."

"Exactly," Sirius said. "If I do marry and have a son, well, Lucius loses the gamble. If I have a daughter, well, maybe she would get half and Draco and Child X might split a third and you get a sixth."

"H'mm," Harry thought. After a moment, he asked, "Why wouldn't this make Lucius, and Draco, want to kill me?"

"Oh, Lucius certainly wants to kill both of us," Sirius retorted with a grin."

"But if he kills you first, I get half," Harry said, nodding.

"Right, and he also knows that if you die under any questionable circumstances, the deal is off. I made certain he knows that," Sirius said firmly. "Again, what if he has another child and I stand godfather? If you die under suspicious circumstances then, I would disinherit Draco, but I might not disinherit a baby." He grinned again. "Actually, I would, because then old Lucius would have me killed, but since I officially don't know about the child. . . ."

"One more thing," Harry went on. His eyes bore into Sirius'. "Could this child have been conceived and perhaps born in my time line?"

Sirius sat back, puzzled. "Conceived? Possibly. But if it were born, I can't see even Lucius killing it."

"Not even if it were born a Squib?" Harry asked. "Malfoy is on the Board of Governors. Wouldn't he know if a child of his wasn't registered as a magical child?"

Sirius bit his lip over that one. "It's possible," he had to admit. "There are always rumors when an infant dies. Sometimes, they might be true. I would hope not."

"I guess we'll know in seven months," Harry said.

"I suppose we will," Sirius agreed.

"Did my parents mess about with any of this stuff?" Harry asked.

Sirius snorted. "No. Your grandparents, the Potters I mean, would not normally have been thrilled to have a Muggle-born witch in the family. They had heard a lot about your Mum over the years, though, and knew that she was special. When they actually met her, she won them over easily."

"Meaning what? They wouldn't have liked most Muggle-borns?"

"Exactly," Sirius agreed. "This idea of yours and Remus, these courses, they are a good idea. Being magical means more than just waving a wand about. Nearly all the Pure-blood ranting is pure bullshit, of course, but not all of it. If I do my job right, the Muggle-raised will be able to fit in better, and the magically raised won't hate you lot as much." Sirius' face fell. "A tall order. I'm glad Moony will be there to help out."

"And I'm glad Alastor managed to find that cottage in Hogsmeade," Harry said, "even if we did have to lend him the money." Harry scowled.

"Now, be glad he accepted an interest-free loan," Sirius said. "The man doesn't like charity."

"If he's helping us out, why would it be charity to pay him for it?" Harry asked.

Sirius shrugged. "Ask him, not me."

"I will," Harry retorted.

Chapter VIII

Saturday, March 16, 1991

The three men were gathered in a small, smoky cottage on the very edge of the Malfoy estate. "I don't understand what you're playing at," Macnair growled.

Lucius Malfoy shrugged. "I am doing what is necessary, Macnair." He shifted his glare to the third man. "Do you have something to say, Nott?"

Nott thought a few more moments, then said, "You are taking many gambles, Malfoy, not just with yourself, but with your son, my son, and us." They were not happy about the time Sirius Black was taking with young Draco, and had just heard about the purposed curriculum changes at Hogwarts.

Malfoy said nothing, but when the silence stretched too long he had to say, "I can see why you might think so."

"Think, nothing," Nott stated. "If the Master returns, you will suffer, and so will we."

"Exactly," Macnair agreed. "Not to mention Crabbe and Goyle."

Malfoy shrugged, for he could care less for Crabbe or Goyle so long as they did as they were told. "What do you two suggest?" Malfoy sneered. "You are both doing the same thing, if on more inefficient scales."

"That may be true," Nott agreed. "Still, you were high in the Master's confidence. Surely there must be some way, some thing you could do, to give us all some insurance. Something which would give the Master some sign that you tried, and that we backed you when everyone else was against us."

The image of a small Muggle day diary flashed in Malfoy's mind. "There is one thing," Malfoy said slowly. "However, if I involved any of our sons, even Crabbe or Goyle's, and the plan fails, we will all lose everything. And I do mean everything." He turned on Macnair. "And we will take you down with us, too."

"So get some other child," Nott sneered.

"I plan to," Lucius lied. He had been undecided until that very moment.

"And this plan will go into effect when?" Macnair asked.

"When I can find an appropriate pawn," Malfoy retorted. "It may be before the next school year starts; it may take longer. If it succeeds, then the Master may return. If it does not, and he does return some other way, he will be angry with all of us." He glared at them. "And I mean very angry. Are you certain you want to risk this?"

Nott and Macnair looked at each other for a moment, and then looked at Malfoy. "We have to risk it," Nott said. He and Malfoy now both looked at Macnair.

"Very well," Macnair said. "We take the risk together."

Tuesday, April 2, 1991

"Damn, Harry," Sirius said panting, "you don't know how humiliating this is!"

"What's the matter, old man?" Harry teased. "Your ego can't stand being whupped by a ten-year-old?"

"Maybe, if . . . no," Sirius said, "I can't think of any circumstances, other than these, where anyone's ego could handle it."

"Don't get too cocky, Harry," Moody warned. "Yes, you're slightly more powerful than any of us, but you're mostly winning because you're so small and because you have the best. . . ."

"Reflexes you've ever seen," Harry, Remus, and Sirius chorused. It was a constant refrain.

"Well," Moody snapped, "It's true." He glowered. "You know more shields than anyone I know except perhaps for Dumbledore, and more offense than any new auror. I expect you could take any Death Eater one-on-one." He smiled nastily. "So, starting tomorrow morning, we'll see how you do against Black and Lupin at the same time."

Harry sighed.

Saturday, April 27, 1991

"May I ask what you're staring at?" Harry asked Hermione. He was glad that she was finally getting more comfortable around Ron. Over the previous months, most of his classmates who had been meeting with him had gradually come together as friends. One exception had been Draco Malfoy. Compared to what Harry remembered of his behavior from his previous life, however, Draco was at least becoming civil. Draco was at least polite to everyone other than Ron and Hermione, and he was no longer openly nasty to Hermione.

The other exception was Hermione. She was shy around Parvati, who was much more of a playful tomboy than Harry had ever realized, although she was also already very interested in fashion when she wasn't romping in the fields with the other children. Hermione was also as disdainful of Draco as he was of her, although she was rigidly polite to his face.

"I was thinking that you're not looking nearly as exhausted as you have been," she answered. As always, after a day of play, she and Harry went to his room to 'talk adult' and to test her Occlumency. "Can you tell me what you've been up to, or is it still a secret?"

"It wasn't so much of a secret," Harry admitted. "I just felt uncomfortable talking about it while I was dealing with it."

"With what? Or are you still uncomfortable?"

"I've been spending an hour every morning dueling with both Sirius and Remus," Harry said.

"Together or in sequence?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, together," Harry said.

"And the fact that you aren't exhausted means that you can hold your own now?" Hermione asked.

"No, it means I can beat them two out of three times," Harry said proudly, then his face fell. "When I get it up to four out of five, Moody will join them. Then, this summer, Dumbledore will be dueling with me."

"I am sorry you have to go through this," Hermione said.

Harry shrugged. "Compared to the first time around, this is actually fun."

"Really?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"Tiring, but fun," Harry amended.

"That I will believe," Hermione said. "You really have looked awful," she added in a worried tone.

"I know," Harry admitted. "I certainly can't add any more to what I've been doing, other than changing who I'm dueling."

"What are you going to do at school?" Hermione asked. "I mean, you really won't need to study as hard as the rest of us."

"The review won't hurt," Harry agreed. "I'll be working out by my self when the rest of you are studying the regular curriculum."

"That makes some sense," Hermione admitted. "What else?"

"I'll be working with the Headmaster in trying to keep a step ahead of Voldemort," Harry answered reluctantly.

"It doesn't sound like you're terrible thrilled by the idea," Hermione pointed out.

"It's more like I don't trust Dumbledore," Harry answered. "He kept so much to himself the last time around that I can't believe he'll tell me everything I'll need to know."

"I hope you're wrong, that he'll change," Hermione said hopefully, for this Hermione might still be as respectful of authority as the original Hermione, but for this one, that authority was Harry, not Dumbledore. She frowned as a thought hit her. "How are you practicing your Legilimency, other than with me?"

"I practice on the boys," Harry admitted. "I don't try to direct their memories, but I can see what they're thinking."

"Food and flying?" Hermione suggested.

"Pretty much," Harry admitted.

Sunday, April 28, 1991

Two hooded figures approach the ancient stone building. Despite the fact that it was a bright day, the building seemed to be covered in shadows. "But, Master," one figure said, "is this necessary?"

"I had hoped not," the other figure stated, "but I see no alternative. Now, knock!"

The first figure sighed, but did as he was told.

A wizened figure opened the door and asked in Old Slavic, "Who seeks my master?" From the posture and voice, it was impossible to even guess at the gender of the being.

"You should know who is supposed to be here at this time!" the second figure tried to bellow, but it came out more as a bleat.

The being nodded. "Yes, I remember you." It swung the door wide.

"Your soul is already forfeit." It looked at the first figure. "And you? Do you give up your soul?" The second figure forced his way in, dragging the first with him. "Ah, well," the being at the door said, "your soul is forfeit now."

"Of course I know what to do," the grizzled sorcerer growled. "And yes, I am prepared to do the ceremony for you. Are you certain that is what you want?"

"What choice do I have?" the second figure growled back. The two were in what could almost pass for a large, old-fashioned comfortable room -- a fireplace, numerous comfortable chairs -- where it not for the 'hunting trophies' -- mounted and stuffed goblins, elves, people, and even a centaur. The third figure huddled in a corner, looking into the small fire in the huge fireplace.

"You could wait, you know. Once you return to Britain, you might have access to unicorns. Their blood would be more effective in the medium-term."

"I know, that was my original plan," the second figure, who was Voldemort in possession of a Muggle, agreed. When he had lost that tiny trickle of power from Harry Potter, he had had to come up with a whole new set of plans. He needed a long-term host, and this young fool from Hogwarts was perfect, but he would have to join with him before going to Britain now, rather than after.

"You know what I am about to do? what you will have to do afterwards?"

"What, yes. What I need to know is how much," Voldemort retorted.

"You won't need much, but you must drink at least three fluid ounces ever two weeks. You may go as early as every nine days, you must not delay more than fifteen days, or else you have only thirty-six hours to redo the ceremony."

Voldemort nodded.

The sorcerer looked over at the first figure, Quirrell, and lowered his voice. "Does the fool realize what will happen if this fails?"

"He understands enough," Voldemort replied. "I hope I do not have to do this for long."

The sorcerer shrugged. "At least it does not matter if it is a Pure or even non-magical girl. It is just important she has never bled."

"I know," Voldemort snapped. He stood. "You have one for the ceremony?"

"I do," the sorcerer said. "Would you care to see her?"

"Of course," Voldemort answered. He stood and followed the sorcerer as he moved around to the corridor. The sorcerer opened what looked like a closet door -- which is what it was.

Inside, petrified so she wouldn't damage herself and hanging from the ceiling, was a naked blonde girl, perhaps twelve. "H'mm," Voldemort said, considering, "she isn't too old?"

The sorcerer glared at Voldemort for a moment before he leered at the girl. "I know my chattel. Do not tell me how to do my magic, and I shall not tell you how to do yours." He turned to Voldemort. "Now, let me see you."

Voldemort let the robe and cloak drop to the floor. The sorcerer walked around and observed. "This was a Muggle, before you possessed it, I take it."

"It was," Voldemort agreed.

"It's looking like it will last until the full moon, but not beyond tomorrow," the sorcerer observed.

"Just as well we can do it soon. You do realize that once you are joined with your host, you cannot escape except through the death of the host unless you have a true body, one of your own, to go to? You cannot simply take another host."

Voldemort shrugged.

"This joining is different than the incomplete one you have now," the sorcerer warned. "You must take over and be visible for at least three hours out of every twenty-four, and no more than twelve."

"I am well aware of the necessities," Voldemort declared with a glare. "Now, can we get on with this?"

The sorcerer shrugged. "Very well." He reached in and pulled the nude girl off the hook she had been hanging from by her tied wrists. "We might as well get started," the sorcerer said. "We have less than six hours before the full moon. It will take some time to prep her so that she both bleeds out quickly but does not die too fast."

"True," Voldemort agreed. "Which technique do you prefer?" He was glad to have someone knowledgeable to talk with.

The full moon would be at 8:58 pm. Therefore, at 8:35, Harry and Sirius sat with Remus Lupin on the back stairs of the Dumbledore cottage. Remus was rather woozy, in part because his condition made him tired, achy, and confused, but mostly because he was on the wolfsbane potion, which was extremely powerful. Remus was stripped down to nothing, but swathed in blankets to keep in warm

in the chilly evening air. Harry and Sirius could assume their animagus forms fully clothed.

"What's wrong, Proglet?" Sirius teased. "You've looked a little off all day."

Remus turned a bleary eye on Harry, and saw that the young wizard did indeed look nearly as awful as Remus felt. "You okay?" he croaked.

"Actually, no," Harry answered. "I'm not. Remus, I hate to say this. . . ."

"Go inside and rest," Remus said. "We can run next month." Remus then groaned as the moon, nearly full, came out from behind a cloud.

Harry leaned over and hugged the ailing werewolf tightly. "Take care tonight, Moony," Harry said. He gave Sirius a brief hug as well. "You take care of him and don't be foolish, old man," Harry told his godfather.

"Don't worry," Sirius said with a smile. After Harry went in, Sirius turned to Remus and said, "That boy never ceases to amaze me."

"I'm glad it doesn't bother you. . . ." Remus trailed off as a spasm hit.

"No, I know he loves us both," Sirius replied.

"Change . . . now. . . ." Remus begged. Sirius complied.

"I thought you were running with the wolf and the mongrel tonight?" Moody said to Harry. His magic eye went spinning as Harry fell to his knees. "What is it?"

"It's Voldemort. . . ." Harry gasped. "I don't know what he's doing, but it's forcing open the connection between us for the first time since I've been back." Harry's body was whacked with agony for several seconds. "Get Dumbledore . . . if you can."

Harry collapsed, his scar oozing a film of blood.

Monday, April 29, 1991

"Can you tell us what happened?" Dumbledore asked Harry as soon as he awoke the next morning.

"No, I don't think I should," Harry answered after taking the time to see where he was and who was with him. "There was pain and blood, and a feeling of triumph, and as for the rest . . . I really don't want to talk about it." He looked at Dumbledore. "Now do you know why I asked you for two penseives, not just one?"

"One was to explore the memories of your other life," Remus said thoughtfully. "So, the other was to be used for experiences like last night?"

Harry nodded. "They are powerful, nasty, and possibly even dangerous. I've created a base, some of the memories from the other life where the connections were especially powerful. It's in that cabinet, on the lowest shelf."

It was Sirius who fetched it, and held the bowl steady while Harry drew out the thick memory of the previous night's vision. Harry's body relaxed as the memory left. He still had the memory, but it was no longer raw, the details no longer easily remembered. "Moony, I don't think you should watch it today," Harry said as he dropped it into the bowl.

"It's that bad?"

"And you look tired."

Remus shook his head. "No, no I think I should see it, too. That way I'll know what's going on."

Harry didn't argue. "Fine. You won't thank yourself, but go ahead."

Sirius set the bowl on a table while Harry laid back on his bed. Sirius, Remus, Moody, and the Dumbledores leaned over and their bodies went still as their minds entered the memory.

Time passes faster in a memory than it does in the 'real world'. Still, it was some fifteen minutes before the five men emerged from the horrific scene. All five looked sickened.

It was Moody who spoke first. "That was not the worst you've ever seen, was it, lad?"

"I wish I could say it was," Harry answered. "I didn't remember all the details, but I also remembered enough not to want to see those details."

"In case you hadn't realized it, Voldemort has joined himself with Professor Quirrell," Dumbledore, looking very pale, said. "It was a different process for some reason than the one he must have used last time, although I am not certain of the exact variant. It was most likely one that allows Voldemort to see through Quirrell's eyes. They can only communicate as if two people are talking; that is, Voldemort cannot control Quirrell while Quirrell is awake. It may be possible for Voldemort to take control of the body whenever Quirrell is asleep, however."

"And killing Quirrell won't hurt the bastard, right?" Sirius demanded.

"That is correct," Dumbledore said. "He was very difficult, almost impossible, to track disembodied. As part of Quirrell, at least it will be slightly easier to keep tabs on him."

"I wish we knew why he did things differently this time," Aberforth said thoughtfully.

"I know," Harry agreed fretfully. "And if he's totally inside Quirrell, it's not like we can rip his turban off and expose Voldemort on the back of his head this time."

The group sat in silence for a moment, and then Harry snorted.

"What?" Sirius asked.

"I was just remembering something," Harry said with a sad smile. "The last time around the Weasley twins enchanted snow balls to follow Quirrell around and hit the back of Quirrell's turban, meaning they were hitting Voldemort in the face. It's a shame they can't do it again."

Saturday, May 4, 1991

"Why won't you tell me any details?" Hermione asked. "Were they that disturbing?" Harry looked at Hermione, and her little heart sank. "So, it was horrible, wasn't it?"

"Very, although I saw even worse things in my other life," Harry answered.

"I knew something awful had happened as soon as I saw you weren't having much fun flying," Hermione declared. "But what exactly did Voldemort do?"

"Well, the last time he came back with Quirrell, remember, and joined with him sometime in August."

Hermione nodded, saying, "And this joining was kept stable by the use of unicorn blood."

"Exactly. This time, the two were joined last night, and to seal them, the combination was bathed with the life's blood of a virgin."

Hermione's mouth dropped for a moment. "You mean. . . ."

"I mean they joined and then Quirrell lay in something like a stone sarcophagus. There was a girl, she looked a little older than you. She was petrified by a spell and suspended nude over Quirrell's naked body, and then she was split open, from just under her throat all the way down to her pubic bone, and then the person performing the sacrifice cut down the front of each shoulder, down her arms to her ring fingers, and then from the end of the cut down her thighs to her second toes, and

then he canceled the petrification spell. She dripped and screamed until she died, maybe twenty minutes later. Now," Harry asked Hermione, "do you really want to see that?"

"No," Hermione said in a small voice, tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

"No," Hermione said, "I'm sorry. But don't feel you have to overly protect me, either, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "It's a fine line, I guess. We'll keep working on this."

Chapter IX

Wednesday, June 5, 1991

"Are you lost, Lupin?"

Remus regarded Snape with a mild eye and said in the nicest tones he could muster, "Of course not, Severus." Remus would never admit it to anyone else, but he just loved to see the little muscle twitch over Snape's left eye every time he answered the Potion Master's hostile tone with the polite use of his name. "This is the way to the Headmaster's Office, unless I have forgotten more than I had thought."

Snape tried to formulate a response, failed, and stalked away. 'Arse,' Remus said to himself, and made the last turn that brought him to the entrance to the Headmaster's domain.

"Should you be here, Remus?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes," Remus answered simply. "I can travel faster than an owl, and I wouldn't trust the floo network with this."

"And what news is there?" Dumbledore asked.

"If a short twinge of Harry's is to be believed, Voldemort returned to England just after dawn."

Dumbledore nodded. "Professor Quirrell came through magical customs just before Eight. He left legally, and he did not draw attention to himself by returning otherwise."

Remus blinked. "You knew?"

"Of course," Dumbledore answered. "We know they are joined. I am not going to forego tracking him when possible. And, in case Harry expresses any doubts, I would have let you know of the return when Diggle comes to visit you tomorrow."

"So, you're still tracking him?" Remus asked.

"Alas, my agents lost contact," Dumbledore said.

"Oh," Remus said, standing. "You might wish to stake out Malfoy Manor. Harry said that just about the first thing Voldemort did once he was back was to summons Lucius Malfoy through his Dark Mark, although perhaps it would be better to call it a notification that he would be receiving a visitor. It was only then that the contact totally faded."

Dumbledore looked troubled. "That is unexpected."

"Voldemort wants the Philosopher's Stone. Malfoy might be able to help him locate it. Harry said that he sent two other notifications at the same time, but he wasn't sure who they went to."

"I'll move the Stone from Gringotts in the morning," Dumbledore said. "I will not be using Quirrell or even Severus in protecting it this time, either."

"And what brings the most junior staff member to see a governor of the school?" Lucius Malfoy asked in his most aristocratic drawl.

John Quirinus Quirrell looked around the huge parlor and then looked at Malfoy behind a large ornate desk, both designed to make the supplicant on the wrong side of the desk feel small. Quirrell smiled at Malfoy, and then his face seemed to melt and transform.

Malfoy watched, first in anger, and then in terror. He promptly fell out of his chair and onto his

knees. "Master?"

"Yes, Lucius. It is very wise for you to accept me so quickly," Voldemort said. "I cannot make my true self be seen easily or often, but never doubt I am in here."

Malfoy nodded.

"Now, I have two plans to bring my self fully back. You may be useful in the first. Should it not succeed . . . tell me, do you still have the objects I left with you?"

"Yes, master."

"You have not used the diary I warned you to protect?"

"Not yet Master," Lucius hedged.

"Meaning?"

Voldemort's voice was giving Malfoy no clue, so he told the truth. More-or-less. "If I had not heard from you by the tenth anniversary of your disappearance, I was going to search out a foolish First year at Hogwarts, as you instructed. However, Nott and Macnair were anxious, Master, and instead of waiting until next year, I agreed to look for someone suitable this year, someone lonely and foolish. So far, I have not found anyone.

Voldemort thought this through for a moment. It was a shame that he had created a Horcrux with conditions for the soul fragment being released, but he could work around that, if needs be. On the one hand, exposing one of the five Horcruxes he had created was a risk. On the other, he doubted anyone suspected what he had done. The risk should be rather minimal. He would be at Hogwarts, and could help things along. Along with releasing the basilisk to create chaos if necessary, his avatar could be released in several different ways. If the Philosopher's Stone remained elusive, he could then be joined with his younger self and retake a body in that manner, although he was uncertain of how that might work out in detail. Still, the diary was the one Horcrux which could be used in making a new body. Once that rejoining was stable, he could split himself twice more, instead of once. Should he come across any clues to the Philosopher's Stone, so much the better. "Tell me, instead of someone lonely, is there some girl going to Hogwarts next year who would be loyal?" Voldemort finally asked.

"Perhaps, my lord," Malfoy said thoughtfully. "What other qualifications should she have, if any?"

"Stubbornness and lack of imagination, and the ability to follow orders. And, if there is no such girl, any girl who will be in her Fifth year or lower may do."

"We have not formally affianced my son," Lucius said after thinking about this for several minutes. "However, there is an informal arrangement with the Parkinsons. Their daughter Pansy may do. There is also Pandora Nott, who will almost certainly be named a Fifth year prefect.

"Do they know each other?" Voldemort demanded.

"They are first cousins," Malfoy replied.

"Could they work together? The older girl covering for the younger?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then bring me the pocket diary." Voldemort smiled. "I have many things to write into it." He would search out the Philosopher's Stone, he could either use Parkinson's blood or use her to gain the blood of others to stabilize his joining with Quirrell, he would again have the chance to search Hogwarts for any useful old magic, he could study the Old Man and the Boy (and hopefully he would discover how the toddler Harry Potter had set him back), and if nothing else worked, he would use the life-force of Parkinson to bring his avatar back to a full life and combine with him.

Voldemort smiled and let Quirrell's form come back to the forefront. Having multiple plans was

better than having just one.

Draco Malfoy had for ten years been a very obedient, if otherwise spoiled, child. Over the last eleven months, however, he had been exposed to Sirius Black and his ideas. More, he had been treated for the first time in his life as an equal -- not someone superior, not someone entitled to anything he hadn't earned, and not as an enemy either. He had also listened to many of Sirius' stories about sneaking around Hogwarts.

He had gone exploring Malfoy Manor, and had found many interesting passages, hidden rooms, and other places, some of which even his father did not know of.

He had watched the entire encounter between his father and the combined Quirrell/Voldemort. He had been amazed, and then disgusted by the being his father had always spoke of as a golden prince.

This Voldemort was not even human.

This version of Draco also saw something he had not seen in the version Harry had lived through. Draco saw that his father was afraid of Voldemort. His other self had never seen his father interact with the Dark Lord until after the death of Dumbledore. He now saw that his father was not the Dark Lord's chief of staff or chief lieutenant -- he saw that his father was Voldemort's servant, who treated his father much as his father treated the house elves. His father was, in a sense, the Dark Lord's elf.

What would that make Draco, in the Dark Lord's New Order? A slave who controlled other slaves was still a slave.

Even at eleven, Draco could see this, even if he would never have believed it if he had been told.

The question therefore arose, what should he do about this information? When Voldemort and his father had left the parlor, Draco had snuck back to his room to think.

If he told Sirius, what would that mean to the House of Malfoy? If he didn't, what would that mean for him? Well, in the long run, it would mean slavery or death, although at eleven, Draco did not understand death. The question was, could he play a waiting game?

That quickly was answered 'no' -- he could not play that sort of game unsupported and he now knew himself well enough to find his way to that conclusion after a few hours of mental and emotional groping.

His father had sworn Draco not to reveal any of the inner workings of the family to Sirius when he had agreed to let Draco spend time with his charismatic cousin. Draco would not go back on his exact word. He could not confide to Sirius, even though he had come to idolize his exuberant cousin.

That left Harry. The boy his father had told him was his rival. Harry, whose best friend was a Muggle-born, who was friends with that pest Ron Weasley.

The boy who was also a leader who had, over the previous months, treated Draco not as a slave, but as a friend, albeit not a close friend.

An ally?

Draco's head and back went up and straight as he realized that those were his choices: to be a slave controlling other slaves -- or an ally who controlled no one but himself, but who might still have influence over others, who **would** have influence over others, if the next head of the wealthy House of Malfoy was a friend and ally of the Boy who Lived.

The original Draco Malfoy could not imagine Harry Potter beating the glorious Dark Lord painted by his father. This Draco Malfoy could imagine his friend Harry Potter, who was doing things he could not do himself, destroying the monster he had seen lording over his father that afternoon.

"Do you think I should go and destroy the Hufflepuff Horcrux, and the basilisk for that matter, before Quirrell comes back to Hogwarts?" Harry asked Dumbledore that evening.

"Do you think either of those tasks would be easy, lad?" Moody asked.

"I found out an interesting fact long after I killed the basilisk," Harry said.

"And what is that, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Parselmouths are immune to the stare of a basilisk."

Sirius, Remus, Moody, Aberforth, and Albus all stared at Harry. Finally, Remus said, "You've never mentioned that you were a parselmouth, Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes. "None of you read very carefully," Harry accused. "If I didn't explicitly spell that out in the narrative which I wrote and which all of you read, it was certainly implicit. You've all read it more than once, and you've all had access to it for over nine months. Hermione read it once, and has asked me about snake dialects and accents, and if you missed it three weeks ago, brought me a grass snake to talk to."

Harry looked at the stunned wizards with disgust. "You know, I know destroying Voldemort is the right thing to do. I am not so certain that the magical world, considered by itself, is worth saving. Now, I think we should destroy the basilisk and the fourth Horcrux, unless one of you can come up with some good reasons not to. The positives should be obvious, but if they need to be spelled out, doing so takes a powerful weapon away from Voldemort and brings him one step closer to his final destruction. The downside is that he will likely go looking for the basilisk at some point, and finding it killed or better yet missing will set him on his guard. He will then almost certainly check on the Hufflepuff Horcrux. I don't know what the knowledge that he is down to two will do. I . . ."

"How will he know he's down to two?" Remus asked.

"We'll leave him a note," Harry said. He grinned. "We can claim your brother did all of them, if you want to, Sirius. We should certainly leave him the broken Horcruxes, so he knows we're not bluffing."

"And we give him this information because. . . ?" Moody asked.

"How many times can a wizard split his soul before his body just doesn't have enough left to work?" Harry asked. "Voldemort planned on making six and thinks he only made five. That should make him pause before trying to create any more. We don't need him going into hibernation for a few hundred years before his soul gathers enough power to animate a body again and begins attacking our descendants."

Harry's eyes drilled into Dumbledore's. "You need to organize a search of the Dark places in Albania now that Voldemort is in Britain. The Muggle parts of the country will be falling into chaos. Either he already fed the Horcrux to the snake or it's still hidden there. I can't see it being anything more than theoretically possible that it could be anywhere else. With Voldemort here, you need to scour the country and see if the Horcrux can be found and destroyed."

"And just who do you think should go?" Aberforth demanded.

"What funds do you have?" Harry asked.

"They are limited," Dumbledore admitted.

"Can you trust the goblins at Gringotts?" Harry asked. "I can't go to them yet on this."

"They will want to see some profit somewhere along the line," Remus pointed out.

"As I said, I need to destroy the basilisk. How much would it be worth, processed as potions ingredients?" Harry asked.

"A fortune," Remus said simply.

"Enough for them to pay for one of their curse breakers and a young man skilled in dealing with magical and dangerous animals to search Albania for an object for you? With anything else they find to be split between Gringotts and the two wizards?"

"Who are they?" Remus asked, since Dumbledore was speechless.

"Bill and Charlie Weasley," Harry answered simply. "Bill has just qualified as an independent curse breaker for Gringotts, and will be on his way to Egypt next month. Charlie has just finished his year of training and will off to Romania next month as well to work with dragons. They having the training, the brains, and the guts, plus we can trust the Weasleys."

"So they do and so we can," Dumbledore agreed. "The question then is, can we wait until the end of the school term to deal with the basilisk?"

Harry shrugged. "O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s started today, didn't they?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"In that case, would anyone notice us coming in through one of the secret passages, slipping into Myrtle's toilets, and going through to the Chamber?"

"I suppose not," Dumbledore said reluctantly.

Harry turned to Remus and Sirius. "Friday morning, like around Seven?"

Sirius grimaced. He had never been a morning person. He sighed and nodded.

"We'll need to get you some goggles," Harry said. "That way, if you slip up and it manages to look into your eyes, you'll just be petrified."

"Joy," Sirius complained.

"How do you plan to kill it?" Aberforth asked.

"I can trot out my bow," Sirius offered.

Harry smiled. "Can we borrow a few school roosters?"

"Wot?" Sirius demanded.

"Eh?" Aberforth demanded.

"The crow of a rooster will kill a basilisk," Remus supplied.

"KISS," Harry said.

"What?" the Dumbledores and Sirius all demanded.

"A basic Muggle precept," Harry said. "K-I-S-S -- Keep it Simple, Stupid. It may not be heroic or anything, but why take unnecessary risks?"

"What's your problem, Sirius?" Remus asked late that night. Sirius was sitting up in the kitchen, nursing his fifth firewhiskey.

"Sometimes, it's difficult to listen to Harry," Sirius said, his speech slightly slurred. Sirius often wanted to think of Harry as James or James Junior. He looked a lot like James, but he certainly was not. Sirius loved the boy, but still. . . .

"Was he wrong?" Remus asked. "You know as well as I do that the magical world is stuffy, stupid, prejudiced, and many other negative things. That doesn't mean Harry hates it. He knows that Muggles can be just as bad in their own way as we are."

"Maybe, but he wasn't tearing Muggles down tonight," Sirius retorted. "Don't misunderstand me.

You're about the only person I know who knows the faults and prejudices of the magical world even better than I do. I hate parts of our world, Moony. I just don't see Harry's attitude leading to anything better."

"Probably not, except for the idea of thinking about the world around us," Remus pointed out. "Society can't work that way, but we can as individuals. And you are about to become the most important teacher at Hogwarts because of that."

"Eh?"

"You're going to teach the Muggle-raised the value of the magical world, and the magical world the necessity of the Muggles and their wealth and ideas. If you succeed, the attitudes that bred Voldemort, that bred your family's bigotry, will in time be undermined. What you are about to do is what we're really fighting for, Padfoot."

"You're right, and I of course already knew all that, I'd just rather be going to Albania," Sirius growled.

"So would I," Remus agreed. "Maybe we can spend most of July there, getting the Weasley boys started at least."

"That's a good idea," Sirius mused.

"Harry also spoke to me about something interesting right before you and the Dumbledores showed up."

"And that is?" Sirius asked. He considered pouring another drink, but corked the bottle instead.

"Do you remember the two Weasley twins Harry has mentioned?"

Sirius smiled. "The ones he called 'the heirs to the Marauders?'"

"Those are the ones." Sirius gestured his understanding. "Harry says they have the Map."

Sirius' eyes went bright. "I'd forgotten about that!"

"Harry hasn't," Remus said simply. "I will not officially be a teacher. I will approach them, let them know who the Marauders were, borrow the Map and finally do that copying spell we always meant to do and never did."

"And who will have copies?" Sirius asked.

"I need to make certain that whichever copy the twins get doesn't show Voldemort," Remus replied. "We give them one back, you or I keep the original, the other takes a copy. Harry gets a copy."

"And Dumbledore?" Sirius asked.

"Do you really feel he's going to tell us everything?" Remus asked.

"No, and that bothers me," Sirius admitted. "I spent the first few months in Azkaban thinking he would figure things out. And from everything Harry has said. . . ." Sirius finished his last drink. "Dumbledore . . . it's still difficult to remember that as powerful and brilliant as he is, he is so fallible."

"He is," Remus agreed. "We have to remember that Harry is fallible now, too."

"The timeline has radically changed," Sirius agreed. "Do you think Harry has realized that?"

"I think so," Remus said. "Somehow, I think Hermione will make certain he doesn't suffer from hubris."

"He wants to go on vacation with them," Sirius said grumpily.

"Harry's powerful enough to protect them wandlessly for two weeks," Remus pointed out. "They should be safe enough, since the Grangers won't give out their travel plans if Harry goes with

them."

"I know, I know, but it still bothers me. Somehow, I see the pair of them thirty years from now in a Muggle semi-detached, in some boring Muggle place like Little Whinging with their three perfect children, barely doing magic," Sirius said, eyeing the bottle.

"Really? I see them in a rebuilt cottage at Godric's Hollow, living the sort of mixed life Lily had in mind," Remus said. "I do feel sorry for any children they might have, if they do get together, though."

Sirius frowned. "Why?"

"Just imagine what any kid's hair would look like with those two as parents!"

Sirius snorted and then laughed until he fell out of his chair.

Chapter X

Friday, June 7, 1991

"Who's there!" Myrtle screeched coming out of her toilet with a squelch. "Who's here?" she demanded. Myrtle glared at the intruders, "Who are you?"

"We're three people investigating how you died, Myrtle," Harry said.

"You are?" Myrtle asked, impressed for a moment. Then she frowned. "Then why do you have a crate of chickens?"

"Roosters, actually," Harry said, going over to the dead tap with the snake on it. "We know what killed you, and are off to destroy it." He looked down at the tap. "*Open.*" The sink disappeared into the wall and the floor opened. "*Stairs.*" Harry commanded. He turned to Sirius and Remus, who was the one levitating the crate of roosters. Sirius was carrying a shoulder bag with the broken Horcruxes. "Let's go."

It was a long walk down the stairs, but within half an hour, the trio was in front of the closed door, the floor littered with bones left from little creatures killed by the basilisk's glare but not eaten.

"You and the Weasley boy were down here when you were Second years?" Remus asked softly as he looked at the collapsed remains of a shed basilisk skin. "I'm impressed."

"This must have been shed a long time ago," Harry answered. "There was a more recent one when we came down." Harry gave the two men a wan smile. "Maybe that means the snake is in some sort of hibernation."

"Possibly," Remus allowed. "More likely, it's just slowed down and would be more active once it's commanded."

Harry merely nodded and stood in front of the door decorated by snakes. "*Open,*" he commanded. The snakes moved, and the door slowly opened. The three stood there for a few moments, listening.

All three exchanged looks and shrugged. Sirius and Harry transformed into their animagus forms and sniffed the air more carefully. Finally, Harry transformed back and peeked around the corner.

Still nothing, except the distant smell of snake. Harry waved his wand, and magical torches ignited around the Chamber.

Harry motioned the two to follow and eased slowly into the Chamber itself. Sirius transformed back and he and Remus put on pairs of magical goggles and then followed Harry in, Remus still levitating the crate of roosters, which were becoming agitated. Remus had placed a silencing spell on the cage before entering Hogwarts, however, so no sounds escaped.

"*Creature of Slytherin!*" Harry called out, "*Come forth!*"

There was silence.

"*Creature of Slytherin!*" Harry called out a second time. "*I command you to come forth!*"

A few seconds later, Harry heard off in the distance, "*Who commands me?*"

Harry thought a moment, and then called, "*Does it matter, servant of Slytherin? Come forth!*"

"*Is it time to feed again?*" the voice called. Then, a bit louder, "*I hunger for human flesh! I was promised humans last time, and was sent away too soon!*" Now all three heard the soft sounds of the approaching basilisk. "*I taste the air and taste living creatures! I taste human flesh! I hunger!*"

"*Come and take what you may!*" Harry called. He turned to Remus and Sirius. "Heads down!" Harry pointed his wand at the roosters and took over command of the cage.

"*Who dares enter my Master's Chamber?*" Harry looked up and saw the basilisk starting to emerge from the mouth of Salazar Slytherin's statue. Before the creature was even a quarter of the way out, Harry flung the cage filled with roosters at the basilisk's head with a flick of his wand. The cage struck the basilisk, and that broke both the cage and the silencing spell. The roosters started squawking and crowing -- and of course, the crowing of a cock kills a basilisk.

The basilisk hissed and roared, and in its death throes tried to strike at the wailing roosters. Harry backed up, pushing Remus and Sirius behind him. The basilisk managed to kill four of the roosters, but as it sank to the floor, there were still five others running around the Chamber of Secrets, crowing and squawking in terror.

Harry closed the monster's eyes with two flicks of his wand. "It's safe," he told the other two. He turned to the two men. "Now, while I do the easy job of retrieving and destroying the Hufflepuff Horcrux, you two get to turn all that into potions ingredients."

Remus and Sirius both wrinkled their noses at the prospect. "Why didn't you bring Snape?" Sirius complained.

"Because he's going to be playing a dangerous enough game with Voldemort and Quirrell," Harry retorted. "The less he has to hide, the better off all of us will be."

"Are you sure you want to leave the broken Horcruxes here?" Remus asked.

"I can see both sides of the argument," Harry admitted. "On the one hand, Voldemort will be even more defensive of the remaining two Horcruxes. But the point I want to make to him is that he's created his six Horcruxes, and we've destroyed four of them. Does he dare even try and create a seventh? He's done his planning, and dividing, for six. A seventh might place him in an eternal, or at least long-term coma. . . ."

"And that's bad because?" Sirius asked.

Harry sighed and explained yet again, "And if he's somehow revived in two or three hundred years? We might be gone, but do we really want to leaving that kind of time bomb behind? If it happens, fine, but I would prefer to get rid of him."

"Quite right," Remus said, giving Sirius a dirty look.

"And what if he comes back when I'm still here, but older than Dumbledore?" Harry asked. "Either way, the magical world would be in serious trouble."

"True," Sirius admitted.

"I just worry about him taking even more precautions to keep those final Horcruxes out of reach," Remus reminded Harry.

"If we can get the diary, destroy it, and drive Voldemort out of the country, that will satisfy me in the short-term," Harry retorted. "We have to keep him out of his avatar's body."

"Because then he'll not only split that off again, or at least split himself again, and we won't know what it is," Remus mused, "he'll be in a totally restored body."

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "We need to put Voldemort on the defensive," Harry stated. "He had the initiative the last time. This time, we're being proactive."

"And, from what you've told us, it's not like he's going to be any more likely to come after you," Sirius had to admit.

"True," Harry agreed. "He might target my friends more this time, though. I hope you folks are looking into ways to protect Hermione's family. I don't want her losing her parents again."

"We've got it covered," Remus said. "Even Privet Drive is well-protected."

"Are you sure you aren't in love with her?" Sirius teased. "I mean, you do want to go on vacation

with her and her family."

Harry smiled. "She's too young to be in love with," Harry said, but then again gave in and answered honestly. "Remember, I dated Ginny Weasley until just before she was killed. After Hermione broke things off with Ron, we became close and I could have dated her, although I suspect we would have made an uncomfortable couple."

"She is a show-off know-it-all," Sirius agreed.

"And a bossy one at that," Harry agreed. "I'm hoping I can file some of the edges off. That could mean we'll finally date, or it could mean that she and Ron will get along even better this time." He gave the pair a crooked smile. "We took to rating their squabbles towards the end."

"I knew you liked her," Sirius bragged.

"It wasn't difficult to figure out," Remus said.

"Now enough about me," Harry said with a smile much like his father's. "You two had best get to the prep work." With that, Harry ducked into the mouth of the statue and disappeared.

When Harry returned just over an hour later, the now-broken cup of Helga Hufflepuff in his hand, the basilisk had been reduced to ingredients and the two older wizards were exhausted from the hard magic they had been performing. Harry unstopped one of the flask of basilisk blood, this one only half filled to begin with. Harry conjured a brush and painted on the wall where anyone entering the Chamber would see it, "**LET THE HEIR BEWARE!**" By then, the brush was dissolving from the acidity of the blood. Harry destroyed it.

With that, the trio exited.

Saturday, June 8, 1991

"So, to sum up," Hermione said, "you've destroyed four of the six Horcruxes. One is in the possession of Mister Malfoy, the other may be in Albania. Bill and Charlie Weasley leave in early July to search for that one, which may or may not be in the belly of a viper."

"Exactly," Harry agreed.

"You cannot destroy what's left of Voldemort until those last Horcruxes are destroyed," Hermione went on. She looked at Harry. "Is there any chance you could get Draco to find the one his father has?"

"If he still has it, you mean," Harry pointed out. "Voldemort/Quirrell is back in the country and may have claimed it. If not . . . no, no we can't risk it. I don't really trust Draco, and even if we could totally trust him, it would be too dangerous to have him search for it. I don't know if his father would kill him, but I know Voldemort would. Sirius and I have both been dropping subtle hints to Draco to clue us in if anything out of the way happens. The most we can expect is some indirect information which could help. Anything more is a bonus." Harry looked at her. "I thought you didn't like Draco?"

"I don't," Hermione agreed. "I certainly don't trust him. Still, I had to ask."

"True," Harry agreed. He was glad he could again use Hermione as a sounding board and source of ideas.

"We know Voldemort is somehow fused to Professor Quirrell, but don't know how that will affect the up-coming year," Hermione went on. "The First year students are being separated from him, so that should at least keep the people around you somewhat safe from him, and help prevent him from realizing how powerful and knowledgeable you actually are." Harry nodded. "The Stone has been

moved from Gringotts to some location inside Hogwarts, but neither Professor Snape nor Professor Quirrell will know where or what is protecting it."

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "I have a plan for a quick resolution, but we want Quirrell to rely on Snape, at least a little, if that doesn't work and the less Snape knows, the easier it will be for him to play the game. He knows that talking to Quirrell is like talking to Voldemort. Keeping Snape's knowledge about me secret will be strain enough."

"And Quirrell can't get at the Stone this summer, right?"

"Right," Harry answered. "Quirrell originally told Dumbledore he would be absent from Hogwarts until the end of August, so, coming back sooner would be suspicious." Harry sighed. "He's off in Cornwall most of the time, and is haunting Diagon Alley the rest of the time. I wish I knew what he was up to, but we don't."

"We'll figure things out," Hermione said.

Thursday, June 20, 1991

Quirrell had a splitting headache. Had Voldemort stayed disembodied, he could have infiltrated Gringotts and searched out the Philosopher's Stone. Instead, he had been spending weeks trying to get through the defenses without setting them off. None had been set off, but neither could Voldemort get into the lower vaults, where his information had placed the Stone.

Now Voldemort had decided on a different course, which meant, Quirrell hoped, there would be less stress on him.

Saturday, June 22, 1991

"You're sure about all this, Draco?" Harry asked, surprised. When Harry had been at Draco's birthday party earlier that month, Draco had said he needed to talk privately with Harry. This was their first real chance to do so, and Harry was glad he had not turned down the opportunity.

Draco, looking very nervous, even scared, nodded. "He . . . he's not really human, is he, Harry?"

"Not really," Harry answered. "Do you want to know the truth about him?" Draco nodded.

"There was a family named Gaunt, who were direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin," Harry said, determined to keep the story as basic as he could. "Although very pure in blood, they refused to work. Over many generations, the family spent their inheritance until by the 1920s the last three Gaunts lived in a shack so squalid it made the Weasleys' home look like a palace." Harry prayed that none of the Weasleys ever heard that line, but he knew that the Weasleys were held up to Draco as the bottom of the Pure-Blooded world and that Lucius had kept up his mocking attitude despite the fact that Draco and Ron now had at least stopped actively antagonizing each other. "There was the father, a proud man named Marvolo and two children, Morfin and his sister Merope. Both the children were . . . odd," Harry said, unable to come up with a better word. "They rather looked like, well, do you know why even the noblest Pure-Bloods don't marry their first cousins, or even closer relatives?"

Draco made a face. "I've heard stories," he admitted.

"Yes, if there is any hereditary abnormality, no matter if it doesn't show, if two people with the same trait have children, the child is more likely to have the abnormality, and have it in a more . . . pronounced way. Well, the Gaunts seem to have married cousins for several hundred years, and Morfin and Merope looked like walking genetic defects. . . ."

"You saw them?"

"I saw images of them," Harry answered. "Morfin was also, as the saying goes, a bit touched in the head. Merope fell in love with a handsome, wealthy man who often rode past their shack -- a Muggle."

Draco winced.

"She seduced him with a love potion, and had his son. While she was pregnant, however, the potion wore off, and he rejected her. She died soon after the child was born and her father had also died. Her brother was in Azkaban when the child was born, who was therefore raised in a Muggle orphanage. His name was Tom Marvolo Riddle." Harry raised his wand and wrote the name in fiery letters, and rearranged them into 'I am Lord Voldemort'.

"He . . . he's a half-blood?" Draco asked, stunned.

Harry nodded. "And I can't tell you how I know this, but your father almost certainly knows," Harry said. "I don't know if any of the other followers know, but he probably does."

"He would almost have to, if he has the Dark Lord's personal effects," Draco had to agree. He looked Harry in the eye. "Will you be able to keep Father out of this, when it comes out?"

"Is that a condition, or a preference?" Harry asked.

Draco had to think about that. "I . . . I guess it would be a strong preference," Draco said, not having thought that point through before.

"Or would you prefer he be found out, and you be credited with being on my side," Harry asked softly.

Draco flushed. "I can't do that to him," Draco said.

"I understand. I'll try and keep his name out of things," Harry said. "If I can't, I will see to it you get the credit, and that your family doesn't suffer."

Draco nodded. There was one lesson his father had taught him which Draco still held firmly to. The future of the family was everything.

Draco was the future.

Harry had been reading Draco. He held out his hand. "Allies?"

Draco shook it. "Allies." He looked at Harry. "This means I need to work to support cousin Sirius, doesn't it?"

"It does," Harry agreed. "If you and I work together, especially with you in the 'Muggles' course and me in the 'Traditions' course -- that means we should get together once a week or so and compare notes and go back and tell the people in the classes what the other students are studying -- then it will enhance both of our standing." 'No wonder the Sorting Hat considered me for Slytherin,' Harry thought.

"So, you're taking the 'Traditions' class?" Draco said speculatively.

Harry shrugged. "I lived for almost nine years as a Muggle," Harry answered. "I need to know the traditions. If you work to undermine Sirius like your father will probably want you to, even if it's only outside of class, Sirius will find out sooner or later, and it will only make you look good to the students who he's trying to help the most. The others will be against you. You'll just have to be clever enough not to get students like Ted Nott against you, and I know you can do that."

Draco of course agreed with that assessment, and he knew that Sirius probably would find out if he was fighting against the lessons being taught in class. He could always tell his father that he was just doing otherwise to suck up to Sirius, which he was also supposed to do.

Still, that left one big problem. "Can you and Sirius and Dumbledore really defeat the Dark Lord?" Draco asked.

"We can, and we will," Harry answered. "I want you to be on the winning side. Look, there is room for more than one leader in our class, Draco. Someone in our class has to be the politician, the person who moves into the Ministry and moves up the rungs of authority. That person isn't going to be me. That person can be you."

'Draco Malfoy, Minister of Magic,' Draco thought with a smile. His family had had great influence over the years, but none had ever had formal power. Maybe he could change that. "I think we can work things out," Draco said.

Harry, seeing this play out in Draco's mind, merely smiled and again hoped that this Draco would turn out better than the other version.

To those very few who knew enough to follow Harry Potter on those rare times he was seen in public, it seemed that the boy was traveling with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin someplace before the lad's eleventh birthday. That at least was what Lucius Malfoy and Voldemort both thought. Remus and especially Sirius were both known as powerful wizards, and it was likely that there would be other watchers guarding young Harry as well. Therefore, they asked their agents to be on the look-out, but took no special pains to have the trio tracked.

In reality, Sirius and Remus were with Bill and Charlie Weasley, who were starting the search for the Horcrux and Nagini in Albania. Remus and Sirius would be gone from Saturday July 6 through Sunday July 21 -- they would have liked to have been out of the country longer, but the full moon was July 26. The pair was again out of the country from August 3 through the 18, again from a Saturday through a Sunday, on the same mission. The difference was, Harry would also be out of the country the second time, with the Grangers on a Muggle vacation.

This had caused a great deal of discussion. Had Harry not been the powerful wizard he actually was, there would have been no chance he would have been allowed to go.

In between all of this, Harry celebrated his official eleventh birthday. Harry only had fleetingly wondered where the Dursleys were, and had a momentary fantasy of showing up and giving Dudley a pig's tail just for fun, but he had quickly turned back to his guests, as Harry had entertained two dozen of his future yearmates at Hogwarts (Draco, Pansy, Tracey, Daphne Greengrass, Ted Nott, Blaise, Ernie, Susan, Mandy, Ron, Padma and Parvati, Lavender, Seamus, Dean, Neville, Anthony Goldstein, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah, Terry Boot, Lisa Turpin, Morag McDougal, Su Li, and of course Hermione). Harry was thankful that the Muggle-born and raised he wanted to have there had received their letters and could be invited. He would have invited a few more, but that would have meant inviting Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode, and it was bad enough he had had to invite Parkinson, Zabini, and Nott.

Still, this allowed Draco to show a little leadership and to establish his dominance over that trio, and to show them that Harry was not to be trifled with, and yet still the group managed to have a good time. Even Pansy, the most disposed to be hostile, admitted to her parents that she had had a good time. She was not to know that the following month, she would be meeting the Dark Lord himself.

Chapter XI

Friday, August 2, 1991

"And don't forget. . . ."

"Remus!" Harry nearly snapped, "you're as bad as Sirius. I think I've proven I can pretend to be eleven. In reality, I'm nineteen and unlike the pair of you, I'm housebroken. I speak more than enough languages, and I think I can take care of myself, even if two or three Death Eaters wander into our path, which we all know is extraordinarily unlikely. Now, you two, be careful." Harry's young face almost crumbled. "I don't want to lose either of you."

"We'll be careful," Sirius promised.

"Or at least I will, and I'll keep an eye on the mutt," Remus said.

"Hey!" Sirius protested.

Harry rolled his eyes as Sirius and Remus started bickering. "Old married couple," Harry grumbled. He walked over to Moody. The four of them were in the basement of Grimmauld Place. "I'll see you in just over two weeks," he said. "Try and get the comedy team off on time."

"Have a good time, Potter, and remember. . . ."

"Constant Vigilance?" Harry suggested.

"Of course, but I was going to say, if you mess things up, we won't be letting you out on your own again until your body turns seventeen," Moody teased.

"Touché," Harry said with a grin. He tossed floo powder into the fire. Moody had arranged things with an old friend of his to have the Grangers' fireplace connected for that evening only, and just to Grimmauld Place. "The Grangers," Harry said, and ducked out.

"Harry?" Sirius asked.

"Right on the ball as always, Black," Moody taunted. "Now you two get over here! The pair of you obviously need some advice on helping the Weasley boys."

Sirius and Remus sighed and did as they were told.

Harry tumbled out of the fireplace and into the Grangers' sitting room, landing on his face. Harry coughed and, hearing soft giggles, opened his eyes. He realized his forehead was on a pair of bare feet. "Hi, Hermione," he managed to say.

Hermione helped him to his feet and brushed Harry off. Harry stared at Hermione. "What is it?" she asked, stepping back.

Harry looked over the young girl, dressed only in the top of a swim suit and short denim cut-offs.

"I never saw you so relaxed before," Harry realized.

"Really?" Hermione said. "Not even in my other life? And no," she added, "my parents aren't home yet, so we can talk about that."

"Then no, not really, not even then." Harry said. He considered. "Of course, we really weren't close friends the first two months of school, and I never saw you at home before this time around. And the other times, we were having deep discussions and all that."

"And this time, we're going to travel and have fun and romp on the beach and I'll have you all to myself," Hermione said joyfully and all in one breath.

"And yes, we're going to do all that," Harry agreed.

"And thank you for having me taught Italian and Latin magically," Hermione said, still bouncing. She already knew French.

Harry shrugged. He wasn't used to a bouncy, happy Hermione, but this was a good change. He spared a stray thought on how prettily Hermione might bounce once she went through puberty, but killed it quickly. "If we're going to Italy and France, you might as well know the languages, and it was just as easy to arrange two languages as one, and knowing Latin will help us in school."

"Harry," Hermione stated, "learn how to accept someone's thanks, okay?"

Harry smiled and Hermione grinned back. "Okay. In that case, you are very welcome."

"Now, let's get your suitcase up to the guest room," Hermione instructed. "Mum and Dad will be home with take-out soon, and we have to get up early to make the trip to the airport."

"What time is the flight tomorrow?" Harry asked, straining a bit at lifting his suitcase, while Hermione picked up his backpack.

"Eight-fifteen," Hermione replied. "It's just about a two hour flight to Nice, plus there's an hour's time change. We still have to be up before Five in order to drive to the airport and check in."

"Hermione?" Harry asked as he set his suitcase down in the Grangers' guest bedroom.

"Yes?"

"May I talk to you about a subject which I know is a very sensitive one to you?"

Hermione's smile faded into a frown out of confusion. "Sure," she finally said. "What about?" She became more nervous when Harry sat her on the edge of the bed, took her hands, and looked deep into her eyes. Hermione's heart fluttered.

Harry sighed, and said, "I know you're sensitive about your teeth."

Hermione flushed, but nodded slightly.

"They can be magically shrunken," Harry said. "You did it during our Fourth year, and your parents were very upset with you. If you want, I could shrink them a tiny bit several times over the years, and by the time we get to, say, Christmas our Fourth year, you'll have them where you want them."

"Really?" Hermione said eagerly.

"Really," Harry confirmed. "If we do them a little at a time, perhaps your parents won't really notice the changes."

"Maybe," Hermione agreed. "When?"

"I thought I could narrow them just a tiny bit now, and again before we get to Hogwarts," Harry answered. "Then not again until we get back from the Yule break."

"Alright," Hermione answered. "Every little bit is a help."

Saturday, August 3, 1991

Sirius Black flopped down in the kitchen chair, and managed to reopen one eye. "You're a brilliant house elf," he told Dobby, who was already standing next to chair with a large cup of strong black coffee.

"Thank you, Mister Sirius," Dobby said happily.

Sirius winced. It was 6:15, which was too early for him to really tolerate a happy house elf. He therefore looked at Remus, who seemed to be at best slightly only more alert than he was. "Wonder where Harry is?" Sirius mumbled.

"Mister Harry is with the Grangers, traveling just past the outskirts of London," Dobby supplied.

Sirius and Remus stared at Dobby. Finally, Remus said, "Dobby, you were freed of service to Sirius, but aren't you still pledged to him?"

Dobby looked very frightened.

"No need to look like that," Sirius said gruffly. "Are you bound to, or at least working for, Harry or for me?"

"Dobby works for Mister Sirius," Dobby answered.

"Go on," Sirius said.

"But . . . Dobby and Winky are close, and Winky is bound to Mister Harry, and . . . and Dobby feels somewhat bound to Mister Harry, too, although Dobby does not know why. However, Dobby must put his service to Mister Sirius and the House of Black ahead of service to Mister Harry. There will be no conflict."

"I'm sure there wouldn't be," Remus said, in order to calm the elf down.

Sirius managed to pick up the cue despite the early hour and only one sip of the strong coffee. "I can't say I understand, but I fully trust you, Dobby. And if something happens to me, never mind this house or the House of Black or anything like that. You get yourself to Harry."

Dobby happily nodded, and went off to polish silver.

"It's amazing how Harry attracts just about anyone who hasn't made up their mind to dislike him ahead of time," Remus said lightly.

"True," Sirius had to agree. He sighed and gulped down his coffee. "Shall we see to that portkey and get moving?"

Remus stretched. "We might as well."

That evening, Harry and Hermione sat in the lobby of the hotel they were staying in, people watching and listening to the French conversations. Nice was, well, nice, but not terribly interesting to two bright young magical children. Still, they were only staying there at the very beginning and end of the trip. Nice was merely a convenient central location to fly into. The Grangers had rented a car, and the next morning they would be off. Over the next eight days, they would hit Florence, Bologna, Parma, Milan, and Genoa. A week from Monday, they would drive from Genoa back past Nice and along the Mediterranean coast to a beach resort just past Narbonne-Plage, where they would stay from Monday afternoon until Saturday morning. Then they would go back to Nice and fly back to London on the Sunday.

The oddest thing about the vacation for Harry occurred when he finally arrived at the beach and he realized that the 'clothing optional' French private resort really meant 'no clothing'. It was slightly embarrassing at first walking around starkers, but he managed not to let it show. The most fun thing, other than spending time with Hermione and having the first real vacation in his life (unless he counted the time he had spent in Diagon Alley the weeks before his Third year), was discovering some gilly weed. He and Hermione had thereafter spent several hours swimming deep just off the resort's beaches, playing like seals and even finding 'treasure' (bits of ancient Greek and Roman amphora). The Grangers had been very disappointed when Harry had regretfully told them that the weed was mildly poisonous to Muggles.

"That is one of the hardest things for the Muggle parents of magical children to accept," Harry had told them that evening.

"What's that?" Emma Granger asked.

"That magical people are different than Muggles in some important physical aspects," Harry answered. "The vast majority of potions and such which affect us often just poison Muggles and

when they don't, they just taste bad and have no effect."

"So, you think you're superior to us?" Dan asked.

"I suppose that depends on what you mean by 'superior'," Harry answered thoughtfully. "If you mean superior in terms of basic rights, then no, of course not. We have some superior abilities, in addition to the magic. We live longer, and tend to have better memories and much better health on average. On the other hand, wizards tend to be lazy, mentally and especially culturally. We're so out-numbered that if everyone knew about us, we'd be exploited."

"Which is why these so-called 'Pure-Bloods' Mister Lupin told us about hate us," Dan mused.

"That's one reason," Harry said. "And just think about things from a traditionalist's point of view. First of all, they want to stay hidden from the Muggle world, but because of Hermione, two more Muggles have learned that the magical world exists."

"I hadn't thought things that way," Emma admitted.

"Just think of a family where, say, there are five children, the parents, the grandparents, and aunts and uncles and cousins all living if not together then all near each other, and only one of the children is magical. Just think of all those possible security leaks."

"According to Hogwarts: A History, those children weren't even automatically contacted until the 1950s," Hermione put in. "In fact, when they were taken to Hogwarts, their family's memories were often modified to believe the child had died, or their memories might even be erased!"

"I can understand that," Dan admitted unhappily. "I'd hate for it to happen, but I can understand it."

"On top of that," Harry went on, "here we Muggle-raised are, coming into Hogwarts, talking about Muggle culture -- movies, television, music that's strange to them, football and rugby and cricket, slang, habits, and cars, messing up everyday Magical references, asking questions about things they've known for years and yet also making them feel ignorant by not knowing anything about the vast majority of people all around them. In short, they see us diluting their culture, and in some ways, we do."

Hermione spoke up. "We're immigrants, who keep going home every summer instead of becoming completely . . . what the word?"

"Acculturated?" Emma suggested.

"Exactly," Harry agreed.

"And why else do they hate us?" Dan demanded.

"As I said, wizards age more slowly than Muggles," Harry said. "Even a Muggle-born like Hermione will likely live until at least the age of a hundred to a hundred and twenty as often as a Muggle makes it to seventy-five. Professor Dumbledore is somewhere around a hundred and forty-six, and a few of his teachers still work as Ministry testers for the Fifth and Seventh years taking the standard exams." The three Grangers nodded, already knowing about O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T's, at least in general terms. "The current Minister was born around 1900 and is one of the younger ones in Europe. When he first worked in the Ministry around 1920, he worked with some people who had been in the Ministry before Queen Victoria took the throne." Harry changed subjects slightly. "How well have you adapted to computers?"

"We still can't get the silly thing to do the records right," Emma conceded, wondering about the switch. Most offices and smaller businesses were just moving towards computers in the early 1990s.

"And your oldest co-workers?" Harry asked.

"Most of the others in the building won't have anything to do with them," Dan agreed.

"Well, that's how people of Fudge's generation feel about cars and planes, and the older generation feels about electricity, and how their grandparents felt about steam engines and the industrial revolution. There are Pure-Bloods our age who have never tried to cross a busy Muggle street," Harry pointed out, thinking of Draco, "and who would likely get run over if they tried. The Muggle world is an alien world to them, and it's a very dangerous place." Harry grinned, but then frowned. "And just think, how can these aristocrats play the part if they come out into the everyday world, when every lorry terrifies them? They can only come out at night, dressed in masks and dark robes and terrify families they catch by surprise."

"Well, with the modifications that Mister Moody made to our alarm systems, they won't be catching us easily," Dan stated. "Tell me, if you know. How many wizards can stand up to a nine millimeter slug?"

"If you catch them by surprise, very few," Harry answered. "Give them more than a second or so, though, and about one out of a hundred could set up shield which could deflect it. Give them five or six seconds, and they can rip the gun out of your hand or hex you."

The Muggle dentist glared at Harry, who looked back calmly. Finally, he said, "Do you think there's a war coming in your world, Harry?"

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. "Voldemort is going to try and come back. If he succeeds, there may be a war. If he fails, there won't be one, at least not for a while."

"He is such an odd boy, isn't he?" Emma said that night as she and her husband settled into bed.

"He is," Dan agreed. "We always knew that, as brilliant as we both were as children, Hermione is a real prodigy. And yet Harry outshines her."

"He does," Emma agreed. "I've really read through some of Hermione's books, you know."

"I know," Dan agreed. The pair had split her books between them, trying to understand the world their daughter was going to. He had tried reading the potions and transfiguration books, and they had really made no sense to him. He was glad that at least the astronomy text had made sense.

"Merlin really is the gold standard as far as they are concerned," Emma said. "Even this Voldemort never claimed to be greater than Merlin."

"And what was it Lupin said? That Harry could be the greatest wizard since Merlin?" Dan shook his head. "I can believe it. As much as I hate sending our little girl into a world where she's something of a despised minority, it feels like the right thing to do, doesn't it?"

"It does," Emma agreed. "I just hope she sticks close to Harry."

"I'm not so sure we'll feel that way in a few years," Dan complained. "If they were even a year older, I'd say they were too close now!"

"That's why I wanted him to come with us now," Emma said. Like a fair number of naturists, Emma believed that the exposure of children to the nudist lifestyle would actually make them slightly less preoccupied with the opposite gender as teens, as they weren't as mysterious.

Unlike Emma, whose family had been naturists for three generations, Dan had only embraced the lifestyle when he had met Emma. He was a bit more uncertain of the theory, especially where his daughter was concerned. Still, he had agreed that it seemed to be true of most of the nudist families they had known over the years.

He hoped it was true of Harry and Hermione.

"Nothing," Bill Weasley said in disgust. Albania is not a particularly large country, about 50%

larger than the American state of New Jersey or twice as large as Northern Ireland. Bill and Charlie had now spent over seven weeks searching the country, and Remus and Sirius had spent four of those weeks helping. There were few places that neither the Muggles nor the remnants of the magical community frequented, and those had been well-searched.

They had found a few traces of Voldemort's presence in some forested hills, and some reports of quite a few missing people, some of whom had turned up dead with traces of Dark Magic having been performed on them.

Beyond that, nothing.

The four were sitting in some of those hills, camping out under the stars (although they had two magical tents to retreat into). They had a small camp fire going.

"Well, while we had hoped that it would be easy we never thought it was likely to be," Remus pointed out.

"And remember, Voldemort claims to be a descendent of old Slytherin himself," Sirius added. "We know that Slytherin fled this way after he was driven from Hogwarts, before he headed north to help found the school that later evolved into Durmstrang. If there is magic that old at work, it might be hidden to most types of detection."

"I know that, Sirius," Bill retorted. "That is what I've been training to detect the last few years, you know."

"Sorry," Sirius said.

"So am I," Charlie complained. "I might just as well have gone on to Romania for all the good I'm doing here."

"But then who would be working with me?" Bill asked. "I can do most things, but I don't know if I'd want to tackle a lair created by Slytherin himself, occupied by You-Know-Who, and possibly with a magically-enhanced viper inside, all by myself."

"I think the important thing is, we've managed to at least superficially hit all the likely spots and basically drawn a blank, other than identifying a few places where Voldemort frequented these last nine and a half years," Remus said. "That gives you the most likely spots to get into with more detail, and hopefully you can do so before the snow sets in."

"Do we know for sure what we're looking for?" Charlie asked.

"We do," Remus answered. "We can't give you all the details or tell you how we know, but that magical emerald is important to the final defeat of Voldemort. We know he was planning on feeding it to a viper, we just don't know if he did or not. For what it's worth, I think either he has, or he left it in the viper's nest. Either way, the Dark magic would slowly mutate the beast, especially if it's inside him."

"You-Know-Who turned it into a Horcrux for himself, didn't he?" Bill asked.

Remus and Sirius stared at him, but Bill and Charlie stared back. Neither Weasley was stupid, and Bill was well-read and well-trained.

Sirius and Remus looked at each other, then Remus looked back at Bill and said, "It was one of six he created."

Bill was shocked. "How was there enough of a soul left to be split that many times!"

"There barely was," Remus said. "Voldemort isn't really human anymore. If he takes form again, 'humanoid' would be as close as words could describe what he is now."

"How many have you found?" Charlie asked.

"Four have been found and destroyed," Remus answered. "Voldemort is likely to discover that at

some point over the next six months. That's why we warned you to be ready to clear out on a moment's notice."

"We knew your uncles, your mother's two brothers, and we don't want her to lose you two as well," Sirius told them. The two brave Weasley boys nodded nervously.

They almost wish they hadn't brought the subject up.

Chapter XII

"Why is Sirius so upset?" Harry asked.

Remus sighed and looked at the door Sirius had slammed behind him. "As much as we had all hope to track down that Sixth Horcrux before September, I think Sirius wanted it the most."

"Why?" Harry asked, curious.

"Because he thinks he's letting you down again," Remus answered. "He should have gone to Dumbledore when your parents were killed, not gone after Peter. You rescued him from Azkaban -- he was rather chuffed to realize that he could probably have escaped as Padfoot, like his other self did. He should be taking care of you; not the other way around." Remus held up his hand to ward off any of the protests Harry was about to make. "He knows, your appearance notwithstanding, that you don't need him fathering you. But he should have been there to do it. He wanted to discover that Horcrux as an act of atonement."

Harry smiled grimly. "Sounds like the way I think," he said warily.

"He and I are also afraid that Voldemort is going to go down to the Chamber of Secrets the night of the Thirty-first, discover the basilisk is gone, then see the Horcrux-shells, and because of that grab the diary the next night and disappear."

"He might," Harry agreed. "In many ways, that would even be the smart thing to do. I don't think Voldemort will do that, though."

"Why not?" Remus asked.

"Because Voldemort's ego is too big," Harry answered simply, before explaining, since Remus seemed to expect more. "He will not be able to believe, despite the evidence that four of his other plans have failed, that anyone could possibly twig to what he's doing. If Voldemort had come back joined to Quirrell the same way he did last time, I wouldn't have said there was more than one chance in ten of his doing a scarper."

"And now?" Remus asked.

"One in three, maybe?" Harry said with a shrug. "Or do you think I'm suffering from a dose of hubris, just as Voldemort does?"

"You could have a mild dose, but I don't think so," Remus answered. Remus suddenly went silent and looked at Harry with grave consideration.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Harry, why aren't you more worried about the upcoming year?" Remus asked. "You may have to confront Voldemort."

Harry snorted. "Let's see, I confronted him as a baby and won. In my other life, I confronted him on the back of Quirrell's head and won. I defeated his avatar and his basilisk. I dueled him after the Third Task. I drove him from my mind at the end of my Fifth year. I had two skirmishes with him in that final year, and then killed him. Now, I know perfectly well that I won most of those confrontations because of luck and because of a lot of help from other people. I know he's incredibly dangerous and will kill me if he gets the chance, but I also know I can destroy him. I am not afraid of him."

"Maybe you should be, at least a little."

"You might be right, but I know that I can beat him and I know that it might not be done in one quick fight," Harry agreed. "I think I'm better off being wary than afraid. Still, that gets us away from the subject, which is Padfoot's moodiness, and yours, to a lesser degree."

Remus frowned. Harry frowned back at him, and the pair laughed. "Seriously," Harry said, "I had an idea, to make certain it doesn't matter of Voldie tries to run or not. I would have mentioned it before, but I wasn't sure if I could pull it off."

"And what is that?" Remus replied, interested.

"We know how the diary is coming into the castle, right?"

"Correct," Remus agreed.

"Then we need you and Padfoot to get it away from her luggage, assuming she doesn't carry it into the great hall for the Sorting."

"The house elves move the luggage to the dorms," Remus said, "leaving the First years' until they are Sorted."

"And can two Marauders take care of a little searching between the time everyone goes into the great hall and the actual start of the Sorting?" Harry asked.

Remus shrugged. "That shouldn't be too difficult," he said. "But. . . ."

"Ah, but we don't want her to miss it too soon," Harry jumped in. He grinned evilly and pulled out a small leather-bound booklet.

"Harry. . . ." Remus breathed, shocked.

Harry nodded. "This is an exact duplicate of Riddle's diary. I've also already charmed it to absorb ink. I thought you and Padfoot might have some fun with it, for when Voldemort tries to access it." Harry shrugged. "As long as he doesn't know you two did it, it might be fun for the pair of you." Harry then smiled grimly. "Acutally, I think I know of a way we can get him out of the school quickly if he does grab it. We'll talk it over with the Headmaster."

"Good," Remus replied. He held up the faux diary. "I'm sure this will keep Sirius' mind off of things."

"Like pranking the Dark Lord might allow him to realize that pranking Snape is beneath him?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Do you really think that's likely?" Remus asked.

"Maybe," Harry hedged. "I was also wondering if you and Sirius might be up for a bit of grave robbing."

"Oh, you mean Voldemort's father?" Remus asked. When Harry nodded, Remus smiled. "Oh, we took care of that months ago."

Sunday, September 1, 1991

3:05 am

Voldemort had chaffed at waiting, but something or someone had always stood in his way of accessing the opening of the outer accessway way to the Chamber the night before as well as the day before. Finally, he was inside the girls lavatory, a quick spell having banished the ghost before she could understand what was going on.

'Typical,' he thought, 'she's just as much a minor annoyance now as she was in life.' He glared at the tap. "*Open*," he hissed. "*Platform*." A stone platform formed over the opening, which Voldemort stood on. "*Down*," he commanded, and the platform sank down the tube, the opening closing behind him.

In less than ten minutes, Voldemort stood before the actual portal to the Chamber of Secrets. He was filled with pride over what he had managed to do as a mere student, and evilly anticipated what

he might accomplish as a teacher over the next year. He should have been the defense teacher for decades, building his organization, choosing his acolytes with even greater care and precision than old Slughorn had.

Still, the various plans and variations he had in mind for the next year would have to wait. For now, he had to call forth the great beast his ancestor had created. After giving the command to open, he strode into the large Chamber, and a wave of his hand set the torches alight.

Voldemort frowned. Something was wrong. The feel of the Chamber was wrong.

As if, somehow, it had been cleansed of its Dark magic.

Looking around, Voldemort saw something marked on one of the far walls, and a sack underneath the markings. Walking forward, Voldemort halted, shocked. There, burnt into in the wall with the acidic blood of a basilisk, were the words, **LET THE HEIR BEWARE!**

Voldemort stood there stunned, for several minutes, and then came the increasingly frantic search, which lasted over an hour, for his ancestor's creature. In the end, Voldemort had to admit to himself that the Chamber had been entered, and the creature destroyed or taken. Worse, Hufflepuff's cup was missing.

Voldemort knew he should not stay in this form for much longer. Still, he had not tried to make Quirrell use Parseltongue and now had not been a good time to experiment. With a wave of his wand, the sack under the words was upended, and the shock Voldemort had felt when he had seen the words was now many times more powerful.

After he recovered from his surprise, a few simple spells confirmed what he had not before conceived as even being possible. Not only were three of the items his precious Horcruxes, so was a fourth. His spell creating it must have been completed when he had tried to kill the Potter toddler.

Could that be true? If so, that would explain why his appearance now looked somewhat different than it had before he had attacked the Potters. The creation of a Horcrux did cause physical changes, after all. So if it was true that the Sixth Horcrux had been created, as it appeared to be, he could not create another Horcrux. He would not be able to animate a body with what little soul he would have left, despite his great magic. That meant the connections to his diary and the Ravenclaw emerald were all that were left keeping him immortal.

For a moment he felt just a small amount of relief, for he was certain the emerald was safe . . . and then he wondered, was anything actually safe? for he would have sworn the locket and the Hufflepuff cup were impregnable. His pet was well-hidden, and would be magically growing into an additional safe-guard, but he could not leave it past the Yule break.

The diary, however, was coming to Hogwarts later that very day, in the luggage of a very silly if loyal eleven-year-old girl. 'I shall have to have her bring me the diary tonight,' Voldemort decided. 'I shall erase her memory and that of the other girl and then decide if I should keep chasing after the Philosopher's Stone or use my diary-self to restore myself fully. Then I can split myself afterwards, and still have two Horcruxes.'

And with that, Voldemort withdrew from the Chamber, angry but determined.

"They're on their way?" Sirius asked Dumbledore in the Headmaster's office just before lunch.

"They are aboard the train, and the Hogwarts Express left on-time," Dumbledore agreed.

"And has Quirrell been seen yet this morning?" Remus asked.

"Not this morning," Dumbledore answered, a slight twinkle in his eye. "He seems to have been out pacing the corridors until nearly Five o'clock." He smiled. "Now, let us have a hearty meal. After all, the feast is a bit later than dinner normally is."

"It will be interesting to see how the Sorting goes," Remus said.

"You mean, how close it is to Harry's list?" Sirius asked.

"Exactly. After all, a group of students have been exposed to him who weren't before. That may bring out different qualities," Remus pointed out.

"Ah," Dumbledore said, "nature as opposed to nurture. It could indeed be different, but considering the small amount of time they were exposed to Harry, I doubt it."

"Really?" Sirius asked. "Counting Harry, there are twenty-five students involved. Thirteen, again counting Harry, have been heavily influenced by all this. Shall we place bets on how things go?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Shall we say a Galleon on any change versus no change of the thirteen heavily influenced, and three Galleons on the other twelve?"

"Only if they change," Sirius answered. "A Galleon to you if they don't."

"Very well," Dumbledore agreed. "Deal?"

"Deal," Sirius said. Sirius turned on Remus, who was chuckling. "What?"

"Even though I agree there will be some changes, I think you're going to come out on the short end of this bet," Remus pointed out.

"You might be right," Sirius agreed. "It will be worth it if Draco changes over to Ravenclaw."

That night, as the noise filled the great hall, Sirius and Remus made certain they sat down at the far end of the table, with Hagrid's chair between themselves and the rest of the staff, when they came in a bit later than the rest of the staff. Quirrell, they were thankful to see, was at the far end of the table, and a very unhappy Snape sitting next to him.

Hagrid came in from bringing the First years and the three indulged in idle chit-chat until McGonagall brought the forty-two First years in.

"Quiet group," Hagrid observed. "Quietest group I've seen in years."

"They're following Harry's lead," Remus pointed out.

Harry was indeed quietly and happily lining everyone up. To his satisfaction, this time he was much taller than the original time. That time, he had been the shortest boy and fourth shortest student overall but a year of good nutrition had helped him grow. This time, only Dean, Goyle, Bulstrode, and Ron were taller than he was.

The first to the Sorting Hat was Hannah Abbott. She again was Sorted into Hufflepuff.

There were three B's in the group Sirius was betting on. The first two, Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst, were again Sorted into Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw respectively.

The Sorting Hat seemed to have a difficult time Susan Bones, however. After nearly two minutes, the Hat shouted "Gryffindor!" rather than Hufflepuff.

Lavender Brown was again Sorted into Gryffindor. Tracey Davis, however, was sent into Ravenclaw rather than Slytherin. Justin Finch-Fletchley, Seamus Finnigan, and Anthony Goldstein were each sent into their expected Houses.

"Harry will be heartbroken if Hermione is Sorted into a different House," Sirius mumbled.

"So will Hermione," Remus agreed.

"So," the Hat whispered in Hermione's ear, "where shall I Sort you, young lady?"

"You ask?" Hermione whispered back, surprised.

"As Occluded as your mind is, I have little choice, so yes," the Hat answered.

"Oh," Hermione said, a bit embarrassed. "I forgot about that. Gryffindor, please."

"Are you certain?"

"I am," Hermione answered firmly.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the Hat called.

Daphne Greengrass was still Sorted into Slytherin and Su Li into Ravenclaw. Harry was pleased that this time it only took the Hat a few moments to sort Neville into Gryffindor. Ernie Macmillan still went into Hufflepuff (Harry was pleased about that -- Ernie was something of a friend but he was still somewhat pompous). Harry, Sirius, and Remus were all wondering where Draco might be Sorted.

"H'mmm," the Hat murmured, "interesting."

"You mean I won't be automatically sent to Slytherin?" Draco asked in a scared whisper.

"No, no I can send you there or to Ravenclaw. Either would be a good choice, if for different reasons. Where do you want to be Sorted, young man? Perhaps that will give me a lead."

Draco thought about that, and not for the first time over the previous few months. Slytherin was family tradition, but he was uncertain about that tradition any more. Slytherin also meant being able to keep an eye out on Nott, whom he suspected was closer to Nott's Death Eater father than Draco was to Lucius Malfoy these days.

On the other hand, Draco was not certain he wanted to be Harry Potter's spy either. He wanted to be on the winning side, and things might be safer in Ravenclaw.

"You might be right," the Hat answered that thought. "However, your thinking is certainly SLYTHERIN!" Draco scowled slightly, but went where he was directed.

Morag McDougal, Ted Nott, Pansy Parkinson, and Padma and Parvati Patel were all directed to their expected Houses, just as every student not on 'the list' had been, although Harry thought Padma's Sorting might have taken a bit longer than it before. Finally, it was Harry's turn.

"And here we have the center of this odd proceeding," the Hat whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"As I told your friend, it is not easy to read an Occluded mind. Actually, you are even more difficult to read than the Headmaster or your werewolf friend are these days. I could have broken into your friend's mind, but it did not seem worth the trouble, as I read where I had sent her before in Black's mind and she also asked for it."

"Ah," Harry thought back using Legilimency, "you can read Sirius?"

"Yes, although not with ease. Plus, of course, I overheard many conversations in the Headmaster's office. So, I cannot read Severus Snape from this distance, and I suspect I would have as much difficulty reading Tom Riddle's mind as I would yours. His host is nervous, but the sections of his mind connected to his parasite cannot be read at this distance." The Hat paused and then said, "Poor Quirrell is tired and frightened. I had higher hopes for him back when he sat on this stool."

"I don't think he can be saved," Harry said simply.

"He cannot," the Hat agreed. "If his parasite does not kill him when he leaves, Quirrell will likely die sooner or later in any event. He will have lost too much of himself, in every meaningful way."

Harry merely nodded at that.

"So," the Hat went on, "I take it you still wish to be a Gryffindor?"

"Yes, please," Harry answered.

"Then you shall. GRYFFINDOR!"

The remaining four students who had known Harry -- Dean Thomas, Lisa Turpin, Ron, and Blaise Zabini -- all went to their respective slots. Sirius was therefore out 19 Galleons.

Shortly before midnight, two Slytherin girls made their way back to their dorms, uncertain why they were out in the corridor. Pandora Nott was tempted to take points from her cousin Pansy, or apply some of the other penalties Slytherin used on its own students, but decided to direct the girl back to the First year dorm.

Neither noticed a shadow slipping away down the corridor.

Back in his chambers a few moments later, Quirrell stopped breathing so hard. With painful concentration, his form was submerged, and his Master's form took shape.

Voldemort frowned at the pocket diary. It felt different. He had not noticed it through Quirrell's senses, but his own were more closely tied to the Horcrux it contained.

Voldemort walked over Quirrell's desk, opened the diary, inked a quill, and wrote, 'I am Lord Voldemort.'

The ink disappeared, and then wrote back in a handwriting Voldemort did not recognize, 'I am Moldifart, Lord of Flatulence.'

Voldemort could not, would not, believe what he read. Under his stunned eyes, the ink faded and then wrote, 'Dear Tom, five down and one to go. If you are wise, you will close this booklet and flee Hogwarts. If you are a dumbass, you will open any other page of this diary.'

Furius, Voldemort hurled the book against the far wall, which had the effect of opening another page. Peeves leapt out of the book, where Sirius and Remus had imprisoned him that morning, and screamed "Boo!" in Voldemort's face.

Before Voldemort could react, however, Peeves' brain realized exactly who Remus and Sirius had sent him to confront. "AAAAAAARRRRRGGHHH!" Peeves screamed, zooming through the door. "Dark Lord in the Castle! Dark Lord in the Castle!" screamed the receding voice.

There was nothing for Voldemort to do except flee before the alarm was fully raised. He rushed out the door and straight into the arms of Harry Potter.

Harry used Voldemort's momentum to trip the sorcerer up, sending him crashing to the floor. While Harry's overall blood protection had been negated by leaving the Dursleys, its original state remained intact, and that had been intended by his mother to protect him from Voldemort.

Voldemort's body quickly dissolved under Harry's assault. 'Nooo!' Voldemort mentally screamed as his spirit was ripped from his host's body. Quirrell put up no fight to stay alive -- living as part of Voldemort had been too much for his fragile ego.

Voldemort's attention was caught as a spell just missed his essence. He realized that Dumbledore and Lupin had their wands raised against him. He forced himself to flee through the ceiling, avoiding three more hexes. It would take him most of the night to work his ways out from under the Hogwarts' defenses. It would take him days to retreat back to Albania.

Dumbledore looked down at Harry, laying in the ashes that had once been Professor Quirrell. He sighed. "Come, Sirius. Bring him to the Infirmary."

Sirius lifted Harry gently in his arms. "Are you coming, Headmaster?" Remus asked.

"No," Dumbledore answered. "I must contact the Weasley brothers, to warn them. I also have contacts who will send forces to back the Weasleys up. With luck, we will track Voldemort whenever he returns to Albania. He still cannot be finally destroyed until the final Horcrux is broken."

"At least he cannot restore himself with the remaining Horcrux," Snape said, approaching the group. He looked down at Harry. Then he just turned and walked away.

Chapter XIII

Monday, September 2, 1991

Morning

Harry was more than tired that morning, but compared to his run-in with the combo-Voldemort/Quirrell the first time around, he was in excellent shape, other than being very tired. Still, he figured he could make it through the morning's classes with Sirius without falling asleep.

It was because of this state of near-exhaustion that it took Harry a moment at breakfast to understand that Professor McGonagall was actually directing him to go to the Headmaster's office instead of class that morning. Harry merely nodded and did as he was told without any questions.

Harry perked up quite a bit when he saw that Bill and Charlie Weasley were in the Headmaster's office, along with the Headmaster. Harry had to remind himself that he had never really met these versions of the oldest Weasley brothers, and that they knew nothing of his status.

In turn, the Weasley brothers were stunned to see that they had been waiting for a First year, even if that First year was Harry Potter.

"I'm glad to see the two of you made it back without having any problems," Harry said cautiously, for on reflection he wondered why they had been able to return so quickly.

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "The reason they have been able to return so quickly is that I was unable to contact them last night, which worried me at the time. I was very pleased that they were here first thing this morning. I have been filling them in on what happened last night."

Harry's face showed mixed emotions. "Does that mean that you found it?" Harry asked Bill.

Bill looked at Dumbledore, who nodded. Bill shrugged and turned to the young boy. "Yes. We were able to break into Slytherin's lair yesterday afternoon. It's only real defenses, other than that blasted snake, were all the charms hiding the blasted thing. We had all actually walked past it at least four or five times before and not realized it was there. Still, the important thing is, we found it, we got in, Charlie killed that snake. . . ."

"And a nasty big bugger it was, too," Charlie muttered. "Almost seven feet long and just barely recognizable as a common viper, it was so mutated."

Bill nodded. "Anyway, there's the jewel," he said, pointing at a box.

"Shall we adjourn outside?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "That would be safer."

Twenty minutes later, the Weasley brothers, Harry, Remus, and Dumbledore and his brother were assembled on a side lawn near the castle, where no one could easily observe them.

As the Dumbledores, Remus, and Harry made their preparations, Charlie leaned over to Bill and whispered, "Why is that kid even here, let alone taking charge?"

Bill shrugged. "I haven't a clue, other than the fact that he is The-Boy-who-Lived. Maybe that made some sort of connection with You-Know-Who, which means he can destroy these things more safely than even Dumbledore can."

That seemed to satisfy both brothers as they watched the group set up a hard flat rock and anchor it magically to the ground. Harry then took the jewel from the box, and it glittered in the sun, despite the flecks of gore left on it from its having been inside Nagini.

Harry set the jewel on the rock. A quick, sharp 'whack' with a bronze hammer shattered the jewel, and a sickly green mist flowed upwards for a brief moment, and then it dissipated.

Early Evening

"Why have I been summonsed?" Lucius Malfoy snarled, glaring at Dumbledore and Sirius Black.

"Quite simply, because last night we destroyed Lord Voldemort's host and the magical diary you helped plant on Pansy Parkinson," Dumbledore answered. "Lord Voldemort did put memory charms on Miss Parkinson and her cousin Miss Nott, but I could break them if I wished, exposing their and your involvement. You have three choices, Lucius. First, you may attempt to bluster your way out of this. We will break the memory charms and you will be convicted in the end. You will lose your freedom for many years and your family will lose most of your personal share of your family's fortune. That would be what? Some thirty percent?"

Malfoy's face was turning many interesting colors.

"Second, you may leave the country, and Europe for that matter, by the end of the week. You will stay as far away from your former Master and his followers as possible. Before you go, you will attend an emergency meeting of the Board of Governors tonight, appointing Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody as emergency Defense teachers for this year. You will resign from the Board at the end of the meeting. You will also arrange for the Malfoy Family Trust to pay a reasonable deposit into Draco Malfoy's personal vault, and then sever your ties with the Trust." There was a moment of silence, for the third option, suicide, did not have to be spoken.

"Think of what's best for your son and unborn child, not just yourself," Sirius said, managing to keep his voice quiet and with no hint of triumph. Actually, they were giving Lucius Malfoy the second choice only because Draco and Harry had made a deal back when Draco had given Harry the information about the diary. Sirius would have preferred destroying Lucius.

"Unborn daughter," Lucius muttered. Narcissa was expecting before the end of the month. He straightened up in his chair. "If you had real evidence. . . ."

"We could destroy your family as well as you," Sirius stated, "and we can do both. We would spare Draco and your daughter if we can, but that is up to you."

"And Narcissa?" Lucius asked, putting off the choice.

"That is up to you and her," Dumbledore said. "We are not asking you to live in some remote hut, Lucius. We are giving you the choice of disgrace and prison or leaving Europe and leaving your influence behind as well, until Voldemort is defeated. And have no doubts about this, Lucius, he will be destroyed."

There was a long pause, and then, "I find that unlikely," Lucius stated.

"Is that why you, of all people, would follow an insane Muggle-raised Half-blood?" Sirius demanded. "You always claimed that the only thing worse than a Muggle-born was a Muggle-raised Half-blood, and you abased yourself to one."

"He was Muggle-raised, yes, because his family's enemies placed him there when his family was destroyed," Lucius snapped.

A moment of disbelieving silence met that claim. Then, Dumbledore said, quietly and assuredly, "His mother was a physically and perhaps mentally handicapped witch named Merope Gaunt, his father a Muggle named Tom Riddle. She seduced him with a love potion and he abandoned her when it wore off. I assure you, Lucius, that while Tom Riddle was of course descended from Salazar Slytherin through Marvolo Gaunt and his daughter Merope, his father was a Muggle." Lucius said nothing. "If it would help, I could show you some memories I collected," Dumbledore suggested, wondering if Malfoy truly did not know Riddle's background, or if he had simply ignored the evidence.

In fact, Lucius had heard this story before, but had preferred believing the alternative story. In the

original time-line, Lucius had not believed the truth until Voldemort had regained his body, and by then he was in too deep to stop.

"What protections will I have?" Lucius finally said. "The Dark Lord will be after any who do not come when they are called, leaving aside the pain of the signal itself."

"Go ahead and find a place you believe will be safe," Dumbledore said. "You have extensive holdings in southern Africa and the Argentine, then send for your wife and daughter when it is safe for them to travel. As for the Dark Mark, I can teach you ways of minimizing its effects, but you are correct, there will be discomfort."

"I will keep Draco safe," Sirius pledged.

Lucius looked up sharply at that and scowled. "You would steal my son, Black?"

"I would train your son to rise to the heights his background and talent would carry him," Sirius retorted.

"Nonsense," Lucius stated with contempt. "That place is reserved for Potter."

Sirius shook his head. "Harry will be at the top of the wizarding world in many ways, but he would make a worse politician than you or I would -- if for very different reasons in both cases -- while Draco could be very good at it. Harry will bring the fragments of the wizarding world together and they will admire him for it while he will dislike the attention. He cannot be the one who makes the fragments function together. That person could be Draco. In his lifetime, he would have more influence than any Minister in western European history, and if he does the job well, he will be the Minister all future ministers will be measured against, not just in Britain, but in Europe and perhaps the world. And," Sirius concluded, "under these circumstances, I think Draco could do it far younger than any other person who became a Minister in history, anywhere."

"As Potter's lickspittle?" Lucius asked, lip curled.

"As Harry's most important ally," Dumbledore stated firmly.

Lucius sat stiffly for over two long minutes, and then his shoulders drooped. "Very well. I do expect to be allowed back for the birth of my daughter, and to escort them to Argentina or perhaps South Africa."

"The first, very well," Dumbledore broke in before Sirius could. "I shall send escorts to bring them to you."

"I shall leave Thursday morning," Lucius stated, standing. He glared at Sirius. "I hold you to your pledges."

"This I swear," Sirius acknowledged.

Late Evening

"You look very unhappy," Sirius remarked to Harry. The two of them were in the Headmaster's office, along with Remus, Mad-eye, and Aberforth.

"I'm not VERY unhappy," Harry retorted. "I am still very tired, and it would have been nice if we had been able to destroy the final Horcrux eight hours before I killed Quirrell and sent Voldemort off instead of eight hours afterwards. Then we would have won and we could all have gotten on with our lives. Instead, while Voldemort is more vulnerable to attack than he has been since the early 1940s, we have no lead on him, and no real clue as to what he might do."

"The 1940s?" Sirius asked, but then corrected himself. "That's right. That's when he made the first Horcrux."

"Exactly," Harry said. "So, on the one hand, he's fully mortal; on the other he could do anything."

He thought and said, "If the first time was any indication, he may want the Prophecy even more than he did before." Harry shrugged and sighed. "I think I need some sleep." He stood and stretched.

"Goodnight, Harry," Dumbledore said, and the others echoed.

When Harry had left, Aberforth turned to his brother and said, "Do not think it, let alone say it."

"Say what?" Dumbledore asked.

"That you could have come up with a better plan," Remus broke in. "Maybe it was a mistake for Harry to have confronted Voldemort so early in the term, but we'll never know. Having that monster roaming about, even under observation, just as easily could have meant injury or even death to some of the students. And let's face it, it wasn't just Bill who missed Slytherin's lair four or five times. Sirius and I searched that area three times. We should just be happy that all the Horcruxes have been destroyed, and stop whining that we almost managed to end the war so quickly."

"You're right, of course," Dumbledore agreed. "And whatever qualms I had about Harry's plans, I did not voice or oppose them very strongly, now did I? They were certainly reasonable in light of what happened before. So, no recriminations over the past, or the now-altered future. I hope," Dumbledore stated firmly, looking at both Remus and Sirius, "the two of you will make certain that Harry does not load himself with any guilt on these issues, either. Reading between what he has said of his past life, I believe that such was a common response of his."

"Aye," Moody said from his cozy corner. "The lad bore a very heavy burden, especially for a student. We must make certain that this time, he manages to get some enjoyment out of life."

"You know, Mad-eye," Sirius said, "if I had come into this situation cold, I would not have believed that it was you saying that."

"I'm an old hound, Black," Moody stated with a growl. "I've lost a lot in this life. I don't trust many people, and the few I do trust, I tend not to trust very far. That doesn't mean I'm a fool. I've seen generations of aurors come and go. I've seen good people crack under pressures a great deal less than what was put on that boy in his last life. Without passing judgement on how justified that might have been, I do say we can do better this time around. That means we do the best intelligence work we can and we share that intelligence with the boy, without asking him to do anything about the situation as it develops. He'll decide if he needs to do something."

The group was silent for a moment, then Aberforth said, "We need to let the Ministry know what happened, at least in some form. Rumors will already be reaching them from the students." How the gossip had gotten started, no one knew, but it had. And, of course, the Board of Governors would be meeting in just a few minutes. The absence of the Defense teacher needed to be explained to them, and they would tell the tale to the Ministry as well.

The group sighed as one, and went to work concocting a story.

A highly edited and fictionalized account of what had happened with Voldemort was released to the press on the afternoon of September 3. Minister Fudge did not like it, but there was little he or his group of supporters could do about it, so he accepted it and went on.

The start of the cover story, and the part which Fudge fought hardest against, was that Voldemort himself had made an attempt to come back. That the Dark Lord had been disembodied when he had attacked toddler Harry Potter had been hard for Fudge to swallow, but he had tried to balk at the release of the events. Still, while The Daily Prophet sought close ties with the Minister, the story was too juicy to bypass.

Dumbledore refused to speculate as to why or how Voldemort had been disembodied, only that it

had been the result of the rebounding Killing Curse. The second point was that Professor Quirrell had met Voldemort somewhere, at some time. Again, this was left vague. Most readers came away from reading that part of the story believing that Quirrell had encountered Voldemort either just before he had returned from Albania or just before he had come back to Hogwarts in late August.

Both ideas were troublesome. If the former, Quirrell had been possessed for weeks and had wondered freely about the country. If the latter, Voldemort had been roaming about the country and anyone could have been possessed. Both spelled trouble for Fudge, which was why he had attempted to kill the story. With his major ally (Lucius Malfoy) leaving the country and refusing to supply any more money for Fudge's pet projects, Fudge was battling for his political survival as soon as the story came out, even though he had not been mentioned in any way.

No matter where Voldemort had met Quirrell, Voldemort had seized the chance and had joined his essence with Quirrell. The reason given for his coming to Hogwarts was to strike at young Harry Potter, with not a hint of the Philosopher's Stone (which had actually been returned to Flamel this time, and not destroyed, although only Harry, Dumbledore, and the Flamels knew that) or Horcruxes. Quirrell/Voldemort had attacked young Harry the very first night he had the chance. The protections Harry's late mother had endowed him with because of her sacrifice (otherwise unspecified in the accounts) had again saved the young man, driving Voldemort from Quirrell, although the split had killed Quirrell.

Lucius Malfoy's leaving undercut any outside pressure or help which might have aided Fudge in his fight against the story coming out, or, as two of Fudge's aides (one of them Umbridge) had suggested, even bringing young Potter to trial for at least abetting Quirrell's death. It was clear that Fudge would have no support in the general community for attacking The-Boy-Who-Lived-Still.

Despite requests from the Minister and others around him, despite pleas from The Daily Prophet and other organs of the press from around the world, Harry only released one small statement, which basically asked that he and his friends be left alone while he was at Hogwarts. This appeared in a very odd little publication called The Quibbler.

Two weeks after Harry's encounter with Voldemort, Severus Snape appeared in the Headmaster's office. "Yes, Severus?" Dumbledore asked mildly. He had wondered if Severus would come to him at some point, as Snape was one of the few people who knew most of the full story, and the only one of them not favorably disposed to Harry Potter.

"I find I need to ask you some questions," the Potions teacher stated. "I would hope you will find yourself able to answer them."

Dumbledore merely nodded and asked, "And what might those questions be?"

Snape gripped the arms of his chair. "Is it true that Potter, a First year, is going to be allowed to play Quidditch?"

"Harry is a magnificent flyer, and as you observed to Minerva and Sirius just three nights ago, Gryffindor is in sore need of a Seeker," Dumbledore stated. "Harry will not be allowed to fly a personal broom outside of practices and matches, and so will not violate the school rules in any way."

"You don't think he might have an unfair advantage, this being the second time around for him?" Snape asked.

"According to his memories, he was the Seeker his original First year as well," Dumbledore said with a shrug.

Snape said nothing for a few moments, but looked like he swallowed a particularly nasty nostrum. Finally, Snape asked the real question he had come to ask, "Is it true that the reason why we have never had a Defense professor two years in a row is because the Dark Lord cursed the position?"

"I cannot swear that it is true," Dumbledore said, "but I do have some evidence that it may be true and I do believe it is true, although I admit I have no idea how he would have done it."

Snape considered that for some time. Finally, he said, "You know that as much as I enjoy potions, I would like to teach Defense."

Dumbledore nodded, but said nothing.

"I would make a proposal," Snape said slowly. "I would like to teach Defense and Potions in alternative years. I believe I could get Slughorn out of retirement for alternate years."

"Oh?" Dumbledore asked. "How?"

Snape's lip curled. "He'll jump at the chance to get to know Potter, especially if he doesn't have to work too hard. Having a year off every other year might be the right enticement."

"Why do you wish to teach Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"I don't, particularly, either Potions or Defense," Snape admitted. "Still, it is a price I am willing to pay."

Dumbledore thought about that for some time. Finally, he said, "Your idea has merit, Severus. However, if we can get Horace back, how would this sound? Next year, you would teach the Third, Fifth, and Seventh year of both Potions and Defense. Horace would teach the Second, Fourth, and Six year Potions, while Alastor would teach Defense for those years. The next year, you would alternate. That way, none of you would be teaching the same years of Defense at least two years in a row, and so we may be able to get around any curse. At the same time, Horace could have contact with Harry and only have to work half as much." Dumbledore smiled slightly. "If we pay him slightly more than half his salary, and give him all the other benefits, he may see it as being worth his while."

'And I would never have to teach Potter!' Snape thought almost joyously. "An excellent alternative, Headmaster." Snape had hoped Dumbledore would suggest this alternative, but he knew he could not suggest it himself, as he could not ask to avoid Potter again.

'Yes,' Snape thought as he took his leave some minutes later, 'I might be stuck with Black, and even his bloody werewolf, but at least I won't have to teach the golden child.'

Chapter XIV

Sunday, November 3, 1991

The sexless, aged servant looked at the Muggle standing at the Master's front door. "Back again?" the servant asked. "Can't you keep a body?"

Voldemort would have dearly loved destroying this creature, but managed to hold back. "Let me see your Master," he snarled in the Muggle's voice.

The servant considered, then bowed and allowed the Dark Lord to enter. "I shall announce you to the Master."

Two hours later, the old evil warlock looked at Voldemort and considered. "Difficult."

"But can you do it?" Voldemort asked.

"There are several ways to accomplish the creation of a body for you," the warlock answered. "Is your father alive?"

"No," Voldemort spat.

"Good. Was his body destroyed?"

"Not to my knowledge," Voldemort admitted.

"We would need three special ingredients -- your father's bones, or at least some substantial part of it, such as a femur, skull, or part of the spine; flesh from a servant of yours, willingly cut from the servant's body by his own hand; and the blood of at least one enemy, taken without his consent." The warlock sneered. "I would suggest staying away from young Potter."

Voldemort glared, but said nothing.

"That would be the best way," the evil old warlock mused. "There are at least four other ways you haven't tried which are less effective, more hazardous, and much more expensive. However, I believe I have paid my debts to you. I shall perform the ceremony, if you gather the ingredients. Anything more, you will pay for."

"Very well," Voldemort stated angrily. "I will see to it."

Saturday, November 19, 1991

Two men met at a run-down Muggle café across the street from the magical area in Buda. One was a very worn-looking young man with bloodshot eyes. The other was a very old if spry man, dressed in evening dress in the style of the 1910s.

"It has been many decades since I last conversed with you," the elderly man stated. "I had heard you had changed, but I had not expected this."

"Very amusing," Voldemort said from inside the most recent body he had stolen. "You are the last of Grindelwald's advisory council still at large. The others are either dead or have been in various prisons around the world for over forty years. I say that not as an overt threat, but just a reminder that we have much in common still."

"What is it you want?" the elderly man demanded.

"I need three things," Voldemort said. "I believe you may be able to supply two of them, and hopefully three." He had considered waiting, but the destruction of his Horcruxes was pushing Voldemort to regain a body of his own. The Muggles he took over burnt out after a few days, and he needed to find a new way to insure his immortality. For that, he needed a real body.

The old wizard's eyes narrowed. "And they might be?"

"First of all, the bones of a Muggle, from a grave in a small village in England."

"His name?"

"Riddle," Voldemort said in a tone of complete disgust, unable to even articulate his father's, his own, given name, "in a place called Little Hangleton. Get all the bones from the family graves."

"Very well."

"Secondly, at least eight ounces of blood from at least one enemy of mine. Ideally, it should be from Harry Potter, or perhaps Albus Dumbledore. I must admit, I do not see how you could accomplish so much. Still, I would appreciate the most you can do for me."

"With no disrespect intended, I believe I can find and bleed an enemy or two of yours with little effort."

Voldemort held his temper at the sardonic tone. "Thank you. The third thing I need you will have trouble with. In exchange, you may name your price."

"What do you need?"

"Not a what, a who. A very specific who." The elderly wizard's eyes went wide with shock when the name was revealed.

"That may take some time," he finally said.

"Then take it."

Friday, December 20, 1991

Severus Snape coldly surveyed the noisy great hall that night at dinner. The students would be leaving for the winter break the next morning. He had been very busy all term, even busier than usual, despite not having to teach the First years. As he looked at the happy students with a tinge of contempt, he admitted to himself that this was been a most unusual year.

His ego had been shredded in many ways, and repeatedly. Severus had still not completely dealt with the betrayal his other self had perpetrated against Albus Dumbledore.

He could believe that he had sacrificed what few principles he had in order to try and save Draco Malfoy. If he would try and save anyone, he knew it would not have been himself, but his godson. He could believe he had betrayed so-called 'Light Magic', 'the Cause', the Order. He saw the world in shades of gray, and had only believed in causes before he had betrayed the Dark Lord. No, one more betrayal was not impossible to believe. But actually killing Dumbledore? Obviously there were many details that Potter did not know. There had to have many reasons obscure to the cocksure schoolboy who had only seen the results, not the background.

It couldn't have been that he had been a coward when the tough choices had to be made.

Could it have been?

Snape swept that line of thought away, as he always did. Instead, he let his eyes land on that godson, happily chatting away in the back of the hall with Potter. Whatever deals the two had made were obviously being carried out to his godson's satisfaction, if not Snape's.

Snape had at first privately questioned why a Malfoy would lead a discussion group for a group of Muggle-raised First years while forcing a Muggle-born know-it-all witch on the Pure-bloods. Draco's stated reason for working with Mudbloods and Half-bloods, when questioned by the older Slytherin students, had been simple. "They're going to win. We're going to direct them to living with us on good terms for us later."

Being on the winning side, after all, was more important for many Slytherins than serving the 'right' cause.

Then Snape saw Potter's plan (or, in Snape's mistaken opinion, more likely Dumbledore's plan).

With this arrangement -- Draco acting at the coach to those in the Magical Traditions class and Granger doing the same for those in the Muggle class, and those two acting as Potter's lieutenants and others acting as their aides in general coaching classes -- the First years were a coherent whole, all in the thrall of Harry Potter.

Snape had been taking spot-checks on the First years via Legilimency since late September. He had tried this on Potter six times between September and early November. The first time, he had simply been blocked and gotten a dirty look. The second and third times, he had been forced to relive his killing Dumbledore. The fourth time, he had been sent Potter's memory of his own execution. The fifth time, he had suffered through seeing himself dangling in the air with his dirty underwear showing as he had during his O.W.L.s. The sixth and final time, an annoyed Potter had threatened to shred his mind, and Snape could tell the boy was serious.

He hadn't tried to invade the boy's mind again.

Granger had also been annoying. Somehow, she had learned Occlumency (Snape mistakenly attributed this to Remus Lupin) and he had earned many a dirty look and no information.

The others in Potter's little coterie were easy to read, even his godson most of the time. This was actually nearly as useless as what Snape had gathered from Potter and Granger. None of the First years knew anything of what Potter knew or planned as far as Snape could see. Snape had to commend Potter at his willingness to protect his secrets, although again he attributed this to Dumbledore's influence.

What Snape refused to see, of course, was that bringing the Houses together was a primary part of Remus and Harry's long-range plan. While the magical peoples of the world lived apart from the general population everywhere, it was only in Europe that there was near-total self-segregation. It was only in Europe that there was the emphasis on 'pure-blood', almost to the exclusion of culture and tradition.

Harry knew he could do little to affect the general magical population of Britain, let alone Europe, other than protect it from Voldemort and provide an example. He hoped, however, that the changes Remus had proposed would, in the long term, bring the magical population of Britain together. Perhaps, if it worked in Britain, in time it might even affect the rest of Europe.

Then, Harry hoped, all his suffering might have had some purpose beyond killing one madman.

Snape refused to see this beyond a nod to the concept, and that only because Dumbledore had pointed it out repeatedly, and the presence of Black and Lupin was a daily reminder of the idea. He had to swallow his pride daily and nod to Black and Lupin at meals. He had to encourage his Slytherins in any moves they might make away from the concepts of Pure-Blood supremacy. He did so, hating every concession but masking his feelings well.

And, to his surprise, it seemed to be working, at least on the surface.

To his disgust, Snape dealt with these internal conflicts with a stiff drink every night. He was sorely tempted to make that two or three stiff drinks every night, but resolutely stuck to three fluid ounces of brandy.

On the other hand, Snape had maneuvered himself out of the mainstream of events. He would never teach the bloody Boy-Who-Lived. Unless the Dark Lord made contact with him, he would likely never be involved in whatever was coming. As long as he swallowed his pride every bloody day, he would be left to direct his Slytherins. He might have to urge them to the new goals being taught by Black, but he was also there to make certain that the traditions remained in the foreground.

He watched as Draco and Potter broke apart and went to their respective places at the near-ends of their House tables. He had noted with great displeasure the growing tendency of students to sit at different tables. The First years had of course started it at breakfasts, and soon the habit had spread, especially with those couples cross-dating. At Snape's insistence (quickly agreed to by the other Heads of House), this new tendency was restricted to breakfast and, on weekends, lunch.

Snape thought of a recent proposal which had drifted up to the staff from the First years, which of course, he thought, meant Potter. The request was for one of two things: either allowing students into all the common rooms or providing some places in the castle where the students could easily meet to study and even mix socially, other than the library and unused classrooms.

The first part of the suggestion had nearly sent all of the staff (other than Lupin) into seizures. That had, of course, led to a near-stampede to the second options. Black was making a survey of possible locations, while Flitwick was drawing up possible plans for supervision.

Snape had to admit some slight admiration for Potter's plan (although it was actually mostly thought up by Susan Bones and Tracey Davis). The staff had never liked the ad-hoc use of unused classrooms and other rooms in the castle, of which there were an abundance in the huge rambling castle. If the prefects could be fit into the plan, relieving the staff of having to supervise the 'study rooms', there was a good chance the plan would be approved.

Snape frowned as the Weasley twins, grinning as usual, came into the feast. Snape had braced himself for a huge upsurge of pranks directed at the staff in general and himself in particular, now that Black was back in the castle. So far, however, the werewolf seemed to be keeping a tight lid on things. In this, Snape was (for once) mostly right. Remus and Mad-eye Moody had stopped five pranks Sirius had set for Snape and managed to shame him into stopping, at least for the moment.

In addition, Peeves had been very quiet all term. The poltergeist had cowered in a chimney for over six weeks after his run-in with Voldemort. Even now, he had not been seen near the staff quarters and was keeping a low profile in general. He also fled in terror from Potter on those few occasions when their paths had crossed.

There had, however, been an up-swing in pranks played on students, and there was little doubt the Weasley twins were behind most of them. Two weeks before, however, the pair had trapped Potter and his friends in the room where they were practicing their spells, under his and his pet Mudblood's direction, letting off an entire crate of dungbombs.

The end of the tale worried Snape a great deal, for Potter had literally blown the heavy oak door into kindling, despite being magically reenforced like all the doors at Hogwarts. As far as Snape knew, even Dumbledore or the Dark Lord would have been hard-pressed to do the same with a mere reductor curse. To make matters worse, two little storm clouds had followed the twins around for most of the next day (other than into classrooms). Whenever the twins failed to be cheerful, their respective cloud rained on the offending twin. If they tried any mischief, a small bolt of lightning sparked against their buttocks.

All the staff were in awe -- the trailing storm clouds themselves were N.E.W.T. level magic. To have them sensitive to the twins' actions and capable of distinguishing classrooms from everywhere else in and out of the castle, was remarkable. It was only when Lupin had managed to catch up with Potter that this display of power and technique was ended.

Snape looked down at the Gryffindor table, trying once again to sense the dynamics. The First and Second years seemed wedded to Potter. Even the Third years, led by the Weasley twins, seemed willing to follow the young wizard. Most of the rest of the table seemed to respect his Quidditch playing abilities, at the least.

Snape almost growled at that. A First year playing Quidditch still rankled.

The only fly in Potter's Gryffindor ointment seemed to be Percy Weasley. The older Gryffindor prefects tended to ignore him and none of the younger students paid him much mind. The only two

Gryffindors who seemed to treat him with any real deference were Potter and Granger.

Still, Percy knew in part why he carried no authority -- Potter commanded the younger students, not the boy with a badge. Snape was glad that the Dark Lord was not in the castle these days; Percy Weasley might make an easy target.

Seeing a gleam in the Headmaster's eye, Snape excused himself before finishing his dinner. He rightly saw that there was about to be a sing-along, and he wanted no part of it.

Monday, December 23, 1991

With Voldemort disembodied and Lucius Malfoy having fled the country, it was thought safe enough for Harry to stay at Grimmauld Place for part of the vacation. Draco was spending the entire vacation there as well.

Harry was woken up early that morning by Dobby.

Harry dressed and presented himself in the kitchen, where he saw Dumbledore was sitting with Remus, Alastor, and Sirius. "What's happened?" Harry asked.

All four men looked abashed. The tired, driven Harry of his first year back was gone, replaced by an almost happy, quietly charismatic Harry. They all knew this might change.

"What's happened?" Harry now demanded.

"There was a prison break," Dumbledore said.

"Azkaban?" Harry asked. Dumbledore nodded. "The Lestranges, Dolohov, and that bunch?"

"Most were caught before they fully escaped," Dumbledore said. "Those who were recaptured were Kissed on the spot. As best we can tell, only Antonin Dolohov and Bellatrix Lestrange actually escaped."

Harry thought a moment and then looked at Remus. "You did clear out Riddle Senior's grave, right?"

"We did," Remus assured Harry.

"You believe that this escape is related to the ceremony Voldemort performed in your Fourth year?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded. "Bellatrix is the only Death Eater I know of fanatical enough to carve her own flesh willingly," Harry stated. "Pettigrew did it from cowardice."

"But we destroyed the bones, and you're safe," Remus assured Harry.

"The blood of any enemy would do," Harry reminded the group. He thought a moment and asked, "Would Voldemort be able to use his grandfather's bones?"

That brought silence. "We should have cleaned out all the family graves," Remus finally said.

"Does that mean it's possible?" Harry asked.

"Possible," Dumbledore agreed. "The results would not be as sturdy a body, but it would be possible."

"Would Voldemort be that desperate?" Moody asked.

"He might be," Harry said. "He wasn't in as big a hurry last time, because the Horcruxes kept his essence stable."

"He could begin to dissipate after a few years without them," Dumbledore agreed. He turned to Remus.

Remus held up a hand. "I'll check out Little Hangleton today." He turned to Harry.

"I won't come back here after I'm done at Hermione's," Harry said without protest. He was going to be spending Christmas night and the morning of Boxing Day at the Burrow and the afternoon and that evening with Hermione and her parents. He would go back to the Dumbledores' on the morning of 27th instead of coming back to Grimmauld Place.

Needless to say, Remus had found the Riddle family graves emptied.

Wednesday, December 25, 1991

"Get to your rooms!" Molly screeched. "Ginny! Bring me a towel or something. Oh, thank you, Percy. You help Harry to Ron's room, while I deal with your brothers."

"Honestly, Mum!" George protested.

"It wasn't our fault!" Fred pleaded.

"It's never done that before!"

"I DON'T CARE!" Molly roared. "I've had enough! One more of your tricks, and you'll be staying home degnoming the garden and feeding the chickens instead of going back to school. Now GET OUT OF THE WAY!"

"I don't understand," George said as he and Fred made their way to their room in disgrace.

"They've never exploded before," Fred agreed. "Just a little spark. And how could Harry have gotten cut?"

"I don't know," George agreed, "but that's one trick we'd better leave alone for a while."

"We can come back to it later," Fred agreed.

Meanwhile, Percy Weasley, acting under the Imperius, sent his owl off with several ounces of Harry's blood.

Thursday, December 26, 1991

It was nearly mid-day, but despite the symbolism of night for Dark magic, the time of day made no difference to this ceremony. The dark sorcerer had finished mixing the preliminary potion and had left it steeping the required amount of time. All it needed now were the last ingredients.

All of the bones recovered of Voldemort's paternal grandparents, who together had of course created his father, went into the pot.

The blood of an enemy, forcibly taken, in this case Order member Hestia Jones, mugged outside her home the evening before. This would be reenforced by just over an ounce of Harry Potter's blood, the amount salvaged by Percy Weasley and not lost in transport.

Finally, of course, was the flesh of a servant, willing given. Bellatrix Lestrange stood nude next to the simmering cauldron, a long, super-sharp knife in her hand, ready to carve her breasts into the cauldron. She was nearly passing out from fanatical devotion, so great was her desire to share her body with her beloved Master.

"Let us begin," the sorcerer intoned.

Chapter XV

Thursday, December 26, 1991

"Are you alright, Harry?" Emma Granger asked.

"No, not entirely," Harry managed to say as he swayed a bit. "May Hermione see me through the floo?" He had just arrived, but he did look ill enough to want to leave early.

Emma looked at Harry more closely. The boy was sweating and very pale. "Would it be better for her to get someone?"

"No, not really," Harry answered through gritted teeth. "Magical migraines from a curse scar need to be treated with darkness, lots of ice water, and attention, plus Moony really needs to know."

"Let me get you to bed," Emma said briskly. "Hermione can fetch Mister Lupin or Mister Black and then supply all the attention you need."

"Fine," Harry said, and then passed out.

"What's happened, cub?" Remus asked quietly twenty minutes later, when Harry managed to come out of whatever state he had drifted into. Harry was laying in the darkened guest room with Hermione and Sirius. Hermione had Harry's head on her lap and was holding an ice pack on his scar.

"He's come back," Harry answered quietly. "It was done by the same sorcerer who joined Voldemort to Quirrell. They used as much of the skeletons of both of Voldemort's paternal grandparents that his agents could find. I'm not certain whose blood they primarily used. . . ."

"Probably Hestia's," Remus mused. "We found out this morning that she was attacked late yesterday afternoon and was cut pretty badly."

"Probably," Harry agreed. "More importantly, they also used some of my blood."

Hermione and Remus both hissed in anger, while Sirius demanded, "How did they get that!?"

"Shhh!" Hermione commanded in a soft but harsh voice. "Unless you want Mum to know all about this."

"Sorry," Sirius whispered.

"I already told you what happened last night at the Weasleys," Harry reminded them. "In retrospect, I think Percy was under the Imperius. Remus, you should check and see how he is."

"Right," Remus said.

"And the flesh?" Sirius asked nervously.

"Bellatrix," Harry replied tersely.

"She cut off her hand?" Sirius seemed surprised.

"No," Harry answered with a very distressed look. "She sliced up under her breasts and then skinned the flesh off into the cauldron, one at a time. Just as I passed out, I saw the sorcerer affixing the skin with the nipples back on her bloody chest." All four swallowed back the bile this image had produced.

Harry swallowed again, and said. "Voldemort looked different from the last time; shorter, softer. Instead of a snake with red eyes, he looked a bit more like a slug with pink eyes. Still, he looked . . . vile. Evil."

"Corrupt?" Hermione suggested.

Harry nodded, shivering. "A dead thing." Hermione hugged her friend, while Remus and Sirius looked at each other.

"Remus, you check on Percy," Harry directed tiredly. "Sirius, you get to Dumbledore and then keep an eye on Draco. I would imagine Alastor is already making the rounds."

"You still don't trust Draco?" Remus asked.

"I don't trust Voldemort from not making a try at him," Harry retorted. "He's their most obvious way into my friends, other than an Imperius attack."

"Good point," Sirius sighed. "It's bad enough I have to spend a week with Lucius and Sissy, isn't it?"

"Draco is getting human, and little Cassie is still your goddaughter."

Sirius merely nodded. "True." The pair left.

Harry relaxed in Hermione's embrace, but said, "I need to nap."

"Then nap," she retorted even more softly, while running her fingers through his hair with one hand while holding the ice pack with the other.

And Harry did.

Friday, December 27, 1991

The select group came out of Harry's memory of Voldemort's rebirth, all looking distinctly queasy. The two Dumbledores, Moody, Sirius, Remus, Snape, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, Minister Fudge (who was one of three people who promptly vomited on coming fully back into their bodies), Madam Bones, eight British aurors, Arthur Weasley, and nine representatives of different western European ministries and the International -- all were shocked to different degrees.

"Are you certain this so-called 'vision' is accurate?" Fudge finally protested. "If this boy is having visions. . . ."

"He is a natural Occlumens," Dumbledore said. "Only the extremity of the ceremony made the connection active. And yes, it was accurate. Voldemort has been restored to a body. He is dangerous, and as evil as ever. Now that he has been reembodyed, however, he is mortal. We must, if it is possible, track down this sorcerer who helped him and see that he is punished for undertaking such a Dark ceremony, not to mention having Hestia Jones assaulted and placing Percy Weasley under the Imperius." Arthur winced. At least Percy was now free of the Curse, and the only damage was his shame.

"We know of this sorcerer," the representative from the Hungarian Ministry stated. "It will not be easy accessing his estate."

"You all know those suspected of being Death Eaters, or those convicted but released," Dumbledore stated. "Professor Snape here, and perhaps Igor Karkaroff, Lucius Malfoy, and his two hirelings are the only ones I would suggest do not need immediate attention." Fudge relaxed slightly.

"Do you have a list of suspects I can compare to who we already have on our lists?" Madam Bones asked.

"I do," Dumbledore said, passing a copy to each of the law enforcement people.

"What do you think he'll do?" the French official asked nervously.

"He may attempt to contact the giants, vampires, werewolves, and dementors," Dumbledore stated.

"The vampires should continue to reject him, as will most of the werewolves, other than those

associated with Fenrir Greyback."

"He's been at large too long," Remus growled. "He's been behind nearly every werewolf infection in Europe for almost forty years."

"Like many of the werewolves, the giants are also very disorganized these days. The dementors are holding at the moment, but should Voldemort promise them free feeding and breeding. . . ."

The group shuddered.

"Would you trust any of these . . . groups, other than the dementors?" Fudge demanded. He believed that anything connected with the Ministry was 'good', including the dementors.

"The vast majority of werewolves wish to be helped and to be allowed to work, with safe havens for the nights of the full moon and medical treatment thereafter. Vampires want to retain the right to draw blood from Muggle victims, providing they do not seriously injure those victims. I believe the vast majority of both groups can be dealt with fairly and they will not believe Voldemort's blandishments. The giants are more difficult to deal with," Dumbledore admitted, "and the dementors can only be kept on our side by satisfying their demands on Azakaban." Dumbledore glared at Fudge, making the Minister squirm. "Are you prepared to swear that Sirius here was the only innocent on that island?"

"I would hope so," Fudge blustered. "I believe so."

"I've gone over all the files myself," Madam Bones said quietly. "There are only three I'm not totally convinced belong there. I've had them moved to the less affected parts of the prison."

"Were they all just tossed in without a trial, like me," Sirius demanded.

"Actually, yes," Madam Bones answered. "There were twelve all together. You were released, two died. We found more evidence against the other six. As for those three, well, the evidence still points to their guilt, but we are looking into their cases and like I said, they've been moved further from the dementors."

Fudge was not to be distracted. "Are you certain about the werewolves, Albus?" His assistant, Delores Umbridge, was certainly vocal on this as on a few other subjects.

"Yes," Dumbledore said firmly. "We must make certain they can earn a living, and are kept track of. It is those who fall through the cracks who pose a threat. We did it for the vampires, after all."

"True," Fudge admitted. His eyes roamed the room. "Weasley. Do you have time to take this on? Making some concrete proposals, so that we can safely look after them, without them rebelling?"

Arthur glanced at Remus, who nodded. "If you mean modeling something like the vampire regulations instead of the repressive measures we currently have, then yes," Arthur agreed, "I believe I can have something by early February, if not earlier."

"Good."

"We already have such regulations," the German representative pointed out. "The British laws are the strictest."

"True, but Greyback hasn't operated out of this country too often," Fudge pointed out.

"True rogues, like Greyback, always have to be outside the pale," Remus said.

"Most of the giants are in central Asia," the Spanish representative mused. "Maybe we can get everyone to agree to reserves for them, the Russians supplying the land, the rest of us the money for upkeep."

"If you can negotiate something, we'll sign on," Fudge said. "Someone else needs to take the lead on the giants." Selling the werewolf changes would be hard enough.

"I must ask you all to consider releasing this statement, and image," Dumbledore said. Remus

handed copies of the press release around. "I don't think this will alarm people, but it will get things started."

The various officials looked it over. It was clear this idea was right up at the line Fudge was willing to agree to at this point, but he did agree. Without Lucius Malfoy whispering in his ear, Fudge was almost useful.

After the officials left, Albus looked at Remus, Sirius, Moody, and his brother with some satisfaction.

"I'm surprised Fudge went along," Sirius stated.

"It was mostly due to Harry's ideas," Albus admitted. "With Lucius out of the country and not pushing Cornelius against us, and with the support of the others, he felt Fudge would go along."

"What is it?" Sirius asked Remus, who had a very bemused look on his face.

"I was thinking about Harry's Christmas, actually," Remus said.

"What about it?" Aberforth inquired.

"Think about what Harry has gone through these last few days. Think about how much money he knows he has, and will have in the future. And do you know what his favorite gifts were, and still are?"

"Something Hermione gave him, no doubt," Sirius said drily.

"No," Remus said. "It was a green jumper Molly made for him by hand, and a pair of matching socks Dobby made for him. How that boy came out more-or-less normal after all he's been through is a miracle."

Hermione jumped guiltily as a knock sounded on her door. She had been admiring herself in a bright green jumper (which she had bought herself, because it matched Harry's eyes exactly), looking at the simple white gold chain Harry had given her, and looking at her teeth, which Harry slightly shrunk right before he left.

Hermione tucked the necklace away. "Come in!" she called, glancing at the clock, and seeing that she still had a few moments before bedtime.

Emma and Dan came in. "What's wrong?" Hermione asked, seeing their expressions.

"Remus Lupin stopped by," Dan said. "He had rather disturbing news."

"And that was?"

"This Voldemort has regained his body."

Hermione nodded, as if to say, 'Go on.'

"Your friend Harry once said that if that happened, there might be a war," Emma pointed out.

"There might be," Hermione agreed.

"We haven't made any decisions yet," Dan told her, "but just so you know, we are considering all our options, should a war break out."

"Such as?" Hermione asked.

"You know my brother has asked us many times to come to join him in his practice in Perth," Emma told her.

"I understand," Hermione said. "I would miss you, but I would understand."

"I don't think you do, Princess," Dan said. "If we went, you'd be coming with us, of course."

Hermione shook her head. "That's not possible," she told her parents. "You enrolled me in Hogwarts, and even though you are not magical, it was a magical contract. All three parties would have to agree to it for that to happen."

"Three parties?" Emma asked.

"The two of you in agreement, the school, and myself," Hermione answered. "And I will never abandon Harry. Ever."

"You look worried, pup," Remus teased. He was the only person 'in the know' really allowed to treat Harry as a child.

"I am," Harry answered, "but probably not about what you think I should be worried about."

"You should be worried a little about what Voldemort is up to," Remus pointed out.

"I am, a little," Harry retorted. "I am more worried about these unknown allies of Voldemort's. We trusted Dumbledore would somehow find out who Voldemort visited last summer, and we still have no idea. Still, personally, that's not what's bothering me at the moment."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Remus asked.

"At some point," Harry agreed. "I meant to ask Sirius before he left, by the way, have there been any complaints about his courses?"

Remus shrugged. "A few owls from Pure Bloods, and only about the course the Magical-Raised have to take." He eyed Harry narrowly. "Except for Voldemort's bodily return, aren't things going well?"

"On the surface, yes," Harry retorted.

"Good point," Remus agreed. "I'll ask Alastor what has been found out about what Voldemort was up to last summer. Just because you or I haven't been told, that doesn't mean there isn't anything to know. After all, Harry. . . ."

"Please don't tell me about the 'need-to-know' and all that nonsense," Harry retorted. "Even if an argument can be made that I don't need to know the details about such things, I DO need the general outline of what is going on around us. Sooner or later, that information is going to be biting ME on the arse."

Remus thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "You're right, of course. I'll mention that to Mad-eye."

"After you do, THEN you and I will talk about what's worrying me the most."

Saturday, December 28, 1991

Lucius Malfoy sat on a bench, watching the sun rise over the southern Indian Ocean. His estate in southern Africa just did not have the same feel as the ancestral estate in England.

Still, for what amounted to an exile in everything but legality, life was pleasant. He sighed when he heard someone approach. "What is it, dear cousin?" he demanded with disdain.

"It seemed as if there were things you wanted to say to me," Sirius retorted. "I thought you might want to get them off your chest."

Lucius sighed. "Very well. In some ways, I hate what is happening to my son, never mind to myself. On the other hand, considering how you could be training him while keeping within the letter of your vows, you have done the family a favor."

"Thank you, I think," Sirius said with a grin. "Care to explain?"

"You could be training him to serve Potter," Lucius pointed out. "You are not training him to serve the family, but you are training him to improve the family's standings."

"His name is now Black-Malfoy," Sirius pointed out, "even if he won't be known as that except in formal settings."

"I didn't know you cared about your family name so much," Lucius stated, now with an out-right sneer.

"There was a time when I despised it," Sirius retorted. Regulus' turning on Voldemort had reconciled Sirius to the idea of his family, since they were all dead now anyway. "Now I want all the chances I can get to redeem that name." He grinned. "The fact that my parents would disapprove of this even more than you do adds to the appeal."

"I will be frank with you," Lucius said. "I still do not believe that your plan can work. We are too different from the Muggles, and we grow more different every year."

"Actually, it is they who are growing, we who are staying where we were," Sirius pointed out.

"There are plenty of Muggles who hate that, in very different ways from you and from each other. I doubt, even in our grandchildren's lifetimes, if it won't be easy to avoid mainstream Muggle culture." Sirius shrugged. "And who knows, by then the fools may have destroyed the environment and crashed their civilization, leaving us where you want us anyway."

"Oh, be still my heart," Lucius retorted drily.

"You know," Sirius mused, "I sometimes wish I could go back and give one ancestor of mine a good stiff boot in the arse. You would want to even more."

"Only one?"

"Well, one more than the others," Sirius allowed. "Constantine Black, back in the 1720s."

"What did he do?"

"He collected an amazing coalition against an idea," Sirius said. "The people running our world were going to remove all Muggle-born and many of who we would call Muggle-raised children from their parents at the age of three and raise them magically. It was a well-thought out scheme."

"And he opposed it because?"

"Well, he opposed letting the Muggle-born in at all," Sirius replied. "Others were against removing children from their parents, even if they were Muggles. Most, however, fought the idea because they would have had to pay for the raising of the children. If the scheme had worked," Sirius explained, "they wouldn't have been raised as paupers or as charity cases, but more like dependents of the great houses used to be."

"Expensive," Lucius allowed.

"Still, they wouldn't have resented their position as much as if they had been raised as magical orphans have been since," Sirius pointed out. "Oh, and magical orphans were included in this scheme. You can probably guess the outcry."

"Why waste good gold on Mudbloods and bastards?" Lucius suggested.

"Exactly," Sirius agreed.

"Maybe it's time to start resurrecting the idea," Lucius mused. "I have a tame historian still on my payroll. He might do a monograph, and we'll see how it flies."

"Good idea," Sirius agreed, for his own reasons.

Remus and Mad-eye came to talk to Harry in his room at the Dumbledores' just before he went to sleep.

"I need to talk to the two of you about next summer," Harry said. "You can brief Sirius when he gets back."

Chapter XVI

Friday, February 14, 1992

Harry sat in a very comfy love seat and surveyed the Gryffindor common room. Hermione lay on the love seat, her head in Harry's lap, her feet (encased in pink bunny slippers that George had animated the eyes of) hanging off an arm, reading a book on Transfiguration theory he had not been able to make heads or tails of until his Sixth year his first time through Hogwarts. He smiled as he watched Hermione fingering the small platinum heart charm he had given her that morning, and which Hermione had immediately added to the chain he had given her for Christmas.

Next to them, the other Gryffindor First years were sitting around a table, finishing their assignments. The next day was a Hogsmeade weekend, and while they and the Second years were not allowed to go, this meant that the youngest students would have the run of the full common room for once. Plus, many of them had pooled their pocket money and some of the nicer older students would bring them back sweets from the village. (They had all learned not to rely on the Weasley twins, and a few of the older students, like Percy, were too stiff and distant to be asked.)

Harry was very satisfied with the way things were going this time around. For one thing, Arthur Weasley, with some help from Remus and Diggle, had sent up the proposed werewolf regulations two weeks after Fudge had requested them. A faction within the Ministry, led by Delores Umbridge, had opposed them but Fudge had pushed them through earlier that week.

Obviously, not having Lucius Malfoy around was a better thing than Harry had anticipated.

Harry knew he was not as close to Ron this time, but he was friendlier with many of the other First years. In Gryffindor, this especially meant Neville, Dean, and Susan. Having Susan in Gryffindor rather than Hufflepuff seemed to bridge all their differences. She was friendlier to Hermione than Lavender or Parvati had ever been, but was friends with those two as well. In fact, she was friends with everyone. While Harry was their acknowledged leader, and Hermione the one who made certain they all did their homework correctly, it was Susan who made certain they all got along.

Harry wondered if it was his own work with Neville which had brought the shy boy out of his shell four years early, or the fact that everyone, especially he and Susan, treated him more as an equal this time around. Of course, not having Snape snarl at him in every Potions class helped as well.

All this did tend to make Ron fade a bit into the background. Harry had noticed this the first night at Hogwarts, although he had had so many more important things on his mind.

The first time, he and Neville, the two shyest, had immediately gone to the two beds on either side of the room. This time, while Harry had gone to his usual bed, it was Neville who had claimed the bed next to him, while Ron had retreated to the far side of the room. This Ron was a lot more uncertain of his friendship with Harry. Ron had been shocked that Harry would accept the twins' invitation to spend Christmas night at the Burrow, and was shocked that Harry thought of him as a close friend.

Harry wondered if this was why Percy was even more distant and at times almost hostile, at least compared to the original First year. Harry hadn't gotten into nearly as much trouble this time, so that couldn't be it. Of course, Scabbers had already been revealed as Petter Pettigrew, plus Percy had been put under the Imperius in order to attack Harry -- those probably contributed a great deal to Percy's feelings. It was also, no doubt, that Harry was the leader of the First years, not one of the Fifth year prefects who were in nominal control of them.

Within Gryffindor, the only students above the Second years who paid Harry any real constant attention (they often came to him for help with their practical spell work, since he was obvious ahead of them) were the Quidditch team members. Oliver respected his talent and the girls thought it was 'cute' how he treated Hermione, and had adopted the pair as their favorites. The twins, of

course, really respected Harry for his connections to the Marauders, even if they thought him too studious.

Outside his House, Harry really only led some of the First years. Hannah and Justin reported that the older Hufflepuffs liked how Harry was bringing the First years together in what they regarded as a very Hufflepuff manner. The young Cedric Diggory had even deigned to speak to the much younger Harry a few times to encourage what he was up to, as had a few others. Zacharius Smith was the only First year Hufflepuff to try and fight against Harry's influence so far.

Zacharius, Harry had always suspected, had been placed in Hufflepuff only for the lack of a better place to put him, much like Crabbe and Goyle had been placed in Slytherin. He couldn't have been Sorted into Slytherin, because both his parents were first generation Squibs. Smith had proven himself a coward on several occasions in his last year at school the first time around, and while sly, he was not really smart enough for Ravenclaw.

Harry was not too worried about him.

Padma, Tracey, and Anthony gave Harry good information about Ravenclaw. There were actually a number of people in that House who had either taken the Dark Mark or had leaned in that direction in Harry's first experience -- for example Michael Corner and Stephen Cornfoot from his year had taken the Mark and Kevin Entwhistle had been killed for backing out at the last moment. There was also the Clique who had made Luna's life difficult. Harry liked and respected Professor Flitwick as a teacher more than any instructor at Hogwarts (although Remus and McGonagall came close), but knew he could not directly interfere with the inner workings of Ravenclaw, at least not yet. Instead, he concentrated his work in Defense and Charms, and made certain that Sirius sent him to Flitwick for extra coaching. He hoped he could actually make friends with the Professor the next year.

Slytherin, of course, was even more of a problem than Ravenclaw. Draco's two stooges went along with Draco's reformed ideas because their parents had trained them for ten years to follow Draco Malfoy. Harry took it upon himself to give them extra coaching, and the two were actually almost pleasant at times, if very confused over what seemed to be happening to them and around them. Millicent Bulstrode was again hanging about Crabbe and Goyle, perhaps, Harry thought uncharitably, because it was only compared to those two that she really looked feminine.

Harry was glad to see that Daphne Greengrass was also hanging about Draco, something she had avoided the first time around until the end of the Fifth year. Ted Nott and Pansy Parkinson, however, stayed closer to the older pro-Death Eaters in the House, while Zabini and the other two girls, Margot Rivers and Doreen Spinks, seemed to aiming for neutrality at the moment.

All-in-all, Harry was content.

"Don't you think it might be good for you First years to get to bed?" Percy demanded, suddenly looming over Harry's loveseat. "Even if it is the weekend, you lot still get up early for those exercises you do." Harry was teaching a number of students rudimentary Tai Chi while Hermione coaxed them in meditation, plus they jogged through the castle three times a week.

Harry glanced at the mantel clock and saw it was 10:45. "I suppose you're right," Harry answered.

"Then get going!" Percy snapped, shocking most of the assembled students with the tone of his voice.

"That's it," Harry muttered, glaring so nastily that Percy beat a hasty retreat.

Saturday, March 1, 1992

It was just over two weeks later when Harry managed to corner Percy. This was not through Harry's lack of effort. Percy had decided to avoid the First year as much as possible. The look that Harry had given him had seared right through his magic. Here was a student who had killed a professor --

one possessed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, which might make it acceptable, but even more frightening.

He also seemed to be creating his own little army, with a few support troops in the immediate years above him, such as his twin brothers -- which was also frightening in its own way.

Yet the boy had an air of command, and when Harry trapped Percy in an unused classroom that Saturday morning and demanded explanations, Percy felt obliged to give them.

Percy, despite being the only inhibited Weasley, was also in many ways one of the smartest. From his readings in History of Magic and Muggle Studies, he had formed an idea of how society should work. The individual, while needing freedoms and liberties, must not be allowed to trample over others. The only way for that to work was to have a strong central government, dedicated to protecting the rights of all, and with the power to enforce the agreed upon rules.

A person like Harry was in some ways as dangerous to such a system as one like Voldemort. Harry had the charisma to be a demagogue. In Harry's previous life, Percy had feared that Harry could even become another Dark Lord, and he worried about that even more this time around. Add in the influence that Harry had on Percy's family (which had been even greater the first time around than this time, although of course Percy couldn't know that), and Harry understood Percy's concerns.

"In principle," Harry said slowly and thoughtfully after hearing out Percy's twenty minute lecture on these general ideas, "you're right of course."

"You mean you agree with me?" Percy asked, stunned that a First year would actually even understand what Percy meant.

"In principle," Harry pointed out. "In reality, though, there are at least two major problems with your stance."

"And those are?" Percy demanded.

"First, the Ministry isn't the sort of government you say you want," Harry pointed out. "The Minister and the various councils aren't elected. The Ministry isn't a representative democracy, like most of the European and North American Muggles have. It's an oligarchy." Seeing Percy's stunned look, Harry added, "An oligarchy. . . ."

". . . is a government that is run by a self-selected group, perpetuated by continuing selecting its own replacements, usually from an elite social group," Percy finished. He thought about that. He blinked.

Potter was right! Percy had never realized in either time-stream that the Ministry he so admired wasn't what he thought it was. He had merely accepted what it claimed for itself.

"Like the Muggle Roman and Renaissance Italian Republics, or the communist dictatorships that are just falling in Eastern Europe," Harry agreed. "The Ministries in Europe are oligarchies, Percy. They select their leadership from their civil services and the old families. So, whose interests do they primarily defend? The civil services and the old interests, provided they don't transgress the public peace too openly." Percy winced at that.

"That also means that public policy is partially held hostage to those old interests," Harry pursued. "Magical Britain is taxed at less than one percent of the rate Muggle Britain is. In part, that's because we can do a number of things by magic that Muggles have to pay for, and in part because even a fair number of Muggles think the Muggle taxes are too high for the services they get back, but it also means that a number of public projects are paid for by wealthy patrons, like Lucius Malfoy. He was a Death Eater the last time around, and got around going to prison, or even Kissed, by paying for St. Mungo's to be updated and expanded. If we paid a bit more in taxes, the government could have paid for it, and Malfoy and the Death Eaters he got off with him would not have been influencing Ministry policy for over a decade. None of that is in the text books, but the same sort of thing happened after Grindelwald was defeated."

"That may be true," Percy had to admit. "But still. . . ."

"Don't be fooled by your father," Harry broke in. Percy looked confused. "Your father is a good person, and is hard-working, honest, and competent." Harry gave Percy a half-smile. "If everyone in the Ministry was as good a person as your father, the Ministry would be nearly perfect. Of course, if everyone was like your father, we probably wouldn't even need a Ministry."

Harry then frowned. "But people aren't all like your father, and that brings me to the second flaw in your reasoning. People like Grindelwald and Voldemort exist in part because the Ministries still aren't strong enough to do more than run the basics or threaten the weak, especially in Europe. The choices then are to sell out what few freedoms we have for a little short-term safety, or follow someone or at least allow someone to take the fight against any would-be Dark Lord."

Harry sighed. "The last time, that person was Dumbledore. This time, I hate to say, it's me."

"WHAT!"

Harry looked Percy in the eye. "I haven't even told Hermione all the details, Percy, but a Prophecy was made. I am the only person who can destroy Voldemort. Maybe the Prophecy has already been fulfilled," Harry said hopefully. "Maybe by stopping him in 1981 and again in September I fulfilled what needed to be done." Actually, of course, Harry hoped he had fulfilled the Prophecy by destroying the Horcruxes and forcing Voldemort into an inferior body, although everyone in on the secret doubted it was likely. "Still, I have to think like I still have more to do."

It was the slight tone of hope, followed by despair, that convinced Percy that Harry was telling the truth. Since September, a few of the students had started calling Harry 'the Chosen One'.

Perhaps they were right.

Percy looked ashamed.

"Look," Harry said, "if you think I'm upset about Scabbers, or even about what happened at Christmas. . . ."

"Maybe you're not, but it doesn't make dealing with you any easier," Percy complained.

"I know," Harry sympathized. "And it's probably hard for you to see the twins and Ron treat me the way you want them to treat you."

Percy winced.

"That doesn't mean I want to undermine you," Harry told the older boy.

"But you do," Percy complained. "Even if you don't mean to, you do."

Harry sighed. "Look," Harry said, "you've spent most of the school year trying to work against me, when I don't want to. Has it worked?"

Percy scowled. Arguing with Potter was not like arguing with his younger siblings. It was more like arguing with Bill. "No," he finally admitted.

"Then why don't we try working together?" Harry suggested. "For the good of the students now, for the good of wizarding Britain later. I have no desire to be the next Dark Lord, or the first Light Lord, if there is such a thing," Harry stated firmly.

"What?" Percy asked, disbelieving, "are you offering to make me your front man in the Ministry?"

'Damn, Percy is sharp,' Harry thought. "No," Harry retorted. "One of the people working with me in the Ministry."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if I put all the influence I would have if I defeat Voldemort behind one person, that person might make Minister of Magic. It would also mean that I have too much influence, and so

might that one person."

Percy thought about everything he knew about Potter and his gang. Suddenly, an anomaly made sense. "Malfoy," Percy sneered. Potter's people must have made a deal with Lucius Malfoy which included pushing young Draco up the Ministry ladder. That got the elder Malfoy out of Britain, and lessened his influence at the Ministry.

Harry nodded.

Potter would honor his agreements, of course. Percy did know Harry well enough to know that. However, it looked like he would also arrange some safeties within the system.

Like Percy.

"Why me?" Percy asked.

"Because you are aiming for a career within the Ministry, and I bet you're just the type of person the Ministry people like. And, unlike a lot of people, I think -- or at least I hope -- you care about both the system and the people the system is supposed to serve. I think the current Minister cares most about the system. I would say your father cares more about the people it's supposed to serve."

"Go on," Percy said. "Again, why me?"

Harry looked Percy straight in the eye. "Because you're a Weasley. That means despite any differences you might have with anyone -- your family, colleagues, even a patron -- you're a truly honorable person."

Percy gave Harry a twisted smile. "You mean because I'm Ron's brother?" Both saw the irony, since both knew Ron had an inferiority complex.

"It means I know you and your family because of Ron," Harry corrected. He knew better than to mention his friendship with the twins, who loved teasing their older brother. Harry knew Percy was a fiercely loyal person. He just hoped he could get that loyalty which Percy had attached to the Ministry in his first life transferred at least in part to him.

Percy thought about his ambitions and scruples. Then, he nodded. "We'll work on it."

Saturday, June 6, 1992

Albus Dumbledore smiled genially at the boy seated before him. Harry glared back.

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, it's long past the time for us to discuss the up-coming summer."

Harry shrugged. "It's been planned since December." He grinned at the Headmaster. "You mean Moody, Sirius, and Remus haven't mentioned the summer?" he added, disingenuously.

"No," Dumbledore retorted, "they haven't. No matter. Harry, with Voldemort returned to his body, I think it would be wise to return, for a short time, to the Dursleys."

"If you think I would ever step foot in Privet Drive again. . . ."

"Actually," Dumbledore mused, "they had to leave Little Whinging."

"Let me guess," Harry retorted with an evil grin added in. "They had to report me missing, and when all the abuse reports you covered up over the years came to light, they were suspected of killing me off. You interfered as much as you could, but the rumors still drove them out."

"More or less," Dumbledore admitted.

"And despite the abuse, and despite the fact they almost certainly hate me more than ever, you think it would be a good idea to spend some 'quality time' with my so-called family?" Harry's voice was flat. It wasn't incredulous, because he had suspected Dumbledore would spring this idea sooner or later.

"I am certain. . . ."

"You really do hate me, don't you?"

That shocked Dumbledore. Dumbledore was rendered speechless.

"You must, unless there's some other reason you want me to suffer," Harry went on remorselessly.

"I can never, ever, call where ever the Dursleys live 'home'. I never could. That's why the blood protections never worked as well as you, for some reason, always thought they would. Not that you ever checked carefully." Harry stood. "If you ever bring this idea up again, we are through. If you somehow force me into their custody, I will wreck their lives and leave, and this time I won't be back to help you. Do I make my self clear?"

"Very," Dumbledore admitted. He would have to rethink the idea.

Harry turned to leave.

"May I ask what your summer plans are?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry turned back. "After the exams are over, Hermione and I are going to start a select group studying Occlumency," Harry answered. "I don't know if I would ever share my real secret with any of them -- I doubt it, in fact -- but it would make any later secrets easier for them to keep. We'll also exercise, and when we return, we can practice defense."

"And the group would be?"

"Draco, Daphne, Padma, Tracey, Anthony, Hannah, Justin, Ernie, and all the other First year Gryffindors," Harry answered. "Maybe a few others." Dumbledore nodded. At least there would be some from each House.

"I'll spend most of the time until my birthday at the cottage, with some time at Grimmauld Place. Arthur Weasley is arranging warded floo access between Hermione's and Sirius', accessible only to Hermione and myself. Mad-eye has been planning my schedule for months. I'll have a birthday party at Sirius', and then spend two weeks with the Grangers on vacation. The Occlumency group will spend the last two weeks with me at the cottage if their parents agree, and so, we won't reveal the actual location to them."

Dumbledore nodded. With one exception, it was a fairly acceptable summer. "Are you certain about the vacation with the Grangers will be safe enough for all concerned?"

"Remus will be with us for most of it," Harry answered. "Sirius and Moody also contacted a cousin of Sirius' to join us."

Dumbledore's eyebrows went up.

"Nymphadora Tonks," Harry answered. Dumbledore relaxed. "She's trying to get through auror school. We've decided to hire her away from the Ministry. Her morphing abilities should come in handy. She'll be joining us for training all July. I'm willing to bet when we're done with her, she'll be better trained and less clumsy than she was the last time around."

"She is a good choice," Dumbledore agreed. "Her metamorphmagus abilities have really reached the highest point I have ever seen over the past year." A thought hit Dumbledore. "Is it a coincidence that you are throwing her and Remus together?"

"No," Harry admitted. "I have no idea if they'll fall in love again or not, especially since she's only nineteen and Remus is thirty-two. I can give them the chance."

"Well done," Dumbledore said. "Well done."

Saturday, June 27, 1992

Harry looked at his 'group' proudly as they waited to board the Hogwarts Express. None had any

great natural ability in Occlumency, but they all showed they might be able to acquire the ability. Draco, Dean, and Padma showed the most ability, Ron, Lavender, and Seamus the least.

Each of the group brought something to the whole they were forming. Even Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode, whom Draco had also insisted be brought in on the training, looked like they could be assets.

It was a good start, Harry decided. In fact, on the whole, the year had been wonderful, except for the major fact that Voldemort still had to be dealt with. He had formed a closer-knit group of First years than the DA had been, and it cut across all House lines. Draco seemed to be fully anchored to the group, and as arrogantly grandiose as the old Draco was (and the current Draco still was at times), he had been much more dangerous than Ted Nott or Pansy Parkinson might be this time.

Harry's flying (on a Nimbus 2000 which Sirius supplied him) was even better this time around. The Gryffindors had easily captured the Quidditch Cup, and Gryffindor had just squeaked a win over Slytherin in the House Cup.

Compared to the last time around, at least, it had been a good year. The fact that he would not be returning to the Dursleys made it even better.

Chapter XVII

Friday, July 31, 1992

Albus Dumbledore looked around the main parlor of 12 Grimmauld Place with satisfaction. Compared to its state when Sirius had reclaimed the house two years before, it hardly looked like the same place. With a nod to Tonks, who had already spent the month working with Harry, he went off in search of Harry, wanting to catch him before the horde arrived for his birthday party.

Dumbledore found Harry in an attic, where he was finishing some meditation exercises. "Yes, Headmaster?" Harry asked, his eyes still closed. He was also still in the lotus position and floating an inch above the floor.

"I am very impressed by what you have accomplished this month," Dumbledore started off.

"Considering your dueling and overall combat skills, I withdraw my opposition to your vacation with the Grangers, since Nymphadora has agreed to accompany you the entire time, and Remus will be with you until he has to leave for the full moon on the Thirteenth."

Harry shrugged and touched down. He really was not concerned with the Headmaster's approval of his plans, but it was easier when Dumbledore went along with what he was going to do anyway. Instead, he moved to a slightly different topic the Headmaster had raised. "The full moon will be around Nine-thirty in the morning, French time," Harry pointed out. "He'll feel miserable, but he won't transform. If the Mediterranean sun helps him feel better at all, why should he leave? He'll be back to escort us back on the Fifteenth anyway."

"Feel free to bring it up with Remus if you like," Albus said simply. "You know how private he is about his condition. While you have seen him at his most vulnerable, he may not wish to expose the others to his pain."

"True," Harry agreed. "I'll wait until we're at the coast."

"Also, two nights ago an intruder was caught near the Department of Mysteries. He turned out to be a Squib under the Imperius, who died when the Curse was withdrawn. Therefore, I suspect that Voldemort is indeed after the Prophecy, just as you speculated. I have had a word with the Unspeakables, and this time they will be on guard."

"I wonder why didn't you do that last time?" Harry asked. "Fudge?"

"Cornelius is still being fairly cooperative, and this time I swore to him I did not want his job and would come to him before making any move to replace him with myself," Dumbledore said. "That indeed might be the difference."

"I suppose that's good," Harry said. "How was the Governors' meeting last night?"

"It went well," Dumbledore said cautiously. "Horace's limited reappointment went through, as the Board wanted to see if our plan would indeed side-step Voldemort's alleged curse on the Defense position. Remus' appointment as an auxiliary professor went through after a little heated discussion." This would allow him to step in as necessary. It also would mean he would be able to keep an eye on Sirius, who was still chaffing to make Snape's life miserable as much as Snape was to return the favor. Each was waiting for the other to make the first move. "Also, I managed to persuade Professor Kettleburn to retire. Hagrid was appointed in his place on a three-year trial basis." Dumbledore smiled. "Acting on your suggestions, his ban on performing magic was lifted by the Ministry a few weeks ago, and Filius and I have been tutoring him on how to use his new wand."

"Great," Harry said. "No luck with Binns, I take it?"

"No," Dumbledore admitted.

"At least we're spared Lockhart," Harry said. He frowned. "I don't suppose there's anything we can do about that fraud, is there?"

"Alas, not much," Albus said. "I have alerted friends around the world, however. We have uncovered two of those whose memories he stole. Their memories have not been restored, as, unfortunately, he does have a remarkable talent in that one area. If anyone other than he tries to lift the charms, the mind might be severely damaged. However, sooner or later we may come across some who had high skills in Occlumency or a developed resistance to the Imperius. They would have a much easier time recovering their memories."

"That's good to know, at least," Harry said. "Now, since except for the last thing it was nearly all good news, what's wrong?"

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "Just before you returned two years ago, I made a suggestion to two other schools. . . ."

"About the Tri-Wizard Tournament?" Harry asked. He had not realized that the preliminaries had stretched back nearly that far.

"Exactly. Igor Karkaroff sent me a note a short while ago, saying that his school was eager and willing. Madame Maxime had already done so two years ago. I had not followed up beyond polite responses, since I knew what had happened in your previous life."

"Why did you suggest it?" Harry asked. "Not just to promote contacts between the schools."

"No," Dumbledore said. "I was hoping whomever the Hogwarts Champion might be would be able to help you inspire the students." He frowned. "The idea had popped into my head when I saw Cedric Diggory Sorted. Perhaps it was almost a Prophecy."

"Perhaps," Harry agreed. "So, I take it there will be a Tri-Wizard Tournament in two years?"

"It looks like it," Dumbledore agreed, "unless I scuttle it, openly or behind the scenes." Dumbledore did not seem to like the idea of doing so, but Harry was touched his views were being solicited.

"Well, I have no intention of entering," Harry said. "Still, if we keep a better eye out this time, some good might come of it."

"I agree," Dumbledore said. "Have a good birthday party, Harry."

"Thank you."

The party went off very well, and Harry left for the Grangers happy. The Grangers had a very different start to their vacation planned this year. Mrs. Granger did some work in forensic dentistry, and was giving a paper at a conference in Poland on the Monday. Saturday morning, therefore, the Grangers, Harry, Remus, and Tonks (who had reluctantly agreed to being called Dora for the trip) flew to Warsaw.

On Sunday, they and many of the Conference attendees were taken to see the huge concentration camp of Auschwitz and the associated death camp at Birkenau.

It was not a good idea.

"Not everyone can take the intensity of the experience," a guide said kindly to the two British children who had frozen at the gates and who were being taken back to the tour bus by two of the adults. Privately, however, the guide thought they should have at least been able to stay longer than opening lecture at the gate.

"What happened?" Mrs. Granger asked the four shaken magical portion of their party. "It wasn't just

Harry and Hermione, it was all four of you."

"Ghosts," Remus said. "Ghosts are real. Most ghosts are magical, and become ghosts because they were afraid to move on or had some other reason to stay. Still, some Muggles and Squibs might become ghosts, if they die under horrific enough circumstances. They aren't as aware as magical ghosts, but their spirits still aren't ready to move on. Up to four million people were slaughtered or worked to death in those two camps. Thousands, likely tens of thousands, of their spirits are as confined to those camps as their bodies had been during life. They were drawn to us."

"They were drawn to Harry," Hermione corrected. "I was barely aware of them, and neither were you until the end."

"I was aware of them, alright," Harry said with a shiver. "Most were simply radiating their pain and anger. Some were begging me directly for release." He looked at Remus. "Can they be helped?"

"I don't know," Remus admitted.

"What about you, Dora?" Dan Granger asked.

"I not only saw them, but I heard them," Tonks answered. "Didn't you two?"

"Not really," Hermione admitted.

"It was sort of a mournful whisper," Remus agreed.

"It sounded more like the wail of the damned to me," Harry said with a shudder.

"They aren't damned," Remus said forcefully. "They are the tortured. Their tormentors, their murderers are the damned."

"I know. Can't we help them?" Harry asked again.

"I don't know," Remus admitted a second time.

"I'll ask Aberforth," Harry said then, tiring. It had been a very emotionally draining day, after all.

They were in Harry and Remus' room at the hotel, but Hermione simply kicked off her shoes, climbed on the bed, and dragged Harry's head onto her lap. Tonks pulled off Harry's shoes, and even though it was only 7:15, he was asleep within moments.

Tonks then dragged the startled Grangers and Remus out of the room. "Dora!" Dan protested. "This is hardly appropriate!"

"Why?" Tonks asked, curious.

"They're twelve!" Remus hissed. "They're too young to get into real trouble, but in a year or two. . . ."

"It doesn't matter," Tonks responded. "You men . . . idiots, right down to Dumbledore. In case you hadn't noticed, those two have already bonded."

Dan pushed all of them into the Grangers' room, and then demanded, "They've what!"

"They're pair-bonded," Tonks answered. "Their magic, minds, and souls have intertwined, even if their bodies, well, haven't. It's the highest form of marriage. They will love and honor each other with true love throughout their lives, and will never be tempted by another."

"They can't be!" Remus protested. "The bonding ceremonies. . . ."

"Require you to be at least seventeen," Tonks agreed. "But those are all lesser bondings. This . . . this is the real thing. I know, it rarely if ever has happened to those under fourteen, but that doesn't mean it can't happen. It has."

"And our daughter, not quite thirteen, is, well, married?" Emma demanded.

"Yes," Tonks simply. "Granted, you should put off registering the bonding until they leave

Hogwarts, but that's all that's required. It's already legal." The other three simply continued to stare at the young woman.

"Now, there's no need to worry," Tonks added. "If anything, they are more unlikely to be . . . early starters, if you know what I mean, because of their closeness. I'll give them a talk tomorrow. The bigger fuss the two of you make, the more it will drive Hermione away from you, because she and Harry are together now."

The two Muggles looked at her helplessly.

"But where do I sleep?" Remus asked plaintively.

Tonks wagged her eyebrows. "Come on, Wolfie."

Tonks' talk was frank and vivid -- Hermione and especially Harry were bright red and squirming within a minute. Both pledged not to even think about engaging in actual sexual behavior before Harry's fourteenth birthday, and despite some temptations, both held to that pledge -- at least about actual sex.

Not to say that it was always easy as the nearly two years went by, but they made it, as they found 'compromises'.

After Poland group spent the rest of the week in Vienna. The sleeping arrangements went back to the original ones, and Remus was even shyer with Tonks than Harry and Hermione were around each other. As for the Grangers, Harry and Hermione enjoyed teasing them by holding hands and brushing against each other.

Of course, Hermione was also now wearing her chain and heart outside of her clothes now, instead of inside, as they had been since she had come home. By Friday, she also sported a discrete small white gold star sapphire ring (Hermione's birth stone) as well.

After Vienna, they traveled to Venice, Geneva, and finally Nîmes, spending a day in each place. Late Monday afternoon, they finally arrived at the Mediterranean beach resort they had stayed at the year before, where they would stay until Saturday afternoon, when they would drive back to Nice and fly to London.

Remus was convinced to stay the entire time. Tonks cast several glamours on Remus to cover up his many scars, and despite feeling ill Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, to his surprise Remus found that the sunlight did make him feel somewhat better, even with the moon out.

Remus was the shyest of the group, and tended to stay laying in the sun near the cabin the Grangers had rented. Since he wasn't feeling up to par, Hermione and Harry did not even try to get him to chew gillyweed and frolic in the sea, although Tonks did join them once.

This time, Harry was pleased to run into a small group of Merpeople. He had not had a chance to practice his Mermish, and brought the group a present of rust-proof knives the next day. In return, the Merpeople gave him a handful of grayish pearls and a few gold coins which had been lost at sea.

One of the gold coins had been rubbed to the point of being almost a blank disk. Harry would later have this melted down and made into a white gold alloy, used as a setting for a pearl ring and a set of pearl earrings for Hermione's birthday. The remaining pearls were set as a necklace. He kept one pearl for himself, uncertain exactly what he would use it for. He would wear it as an earring after he turned 15, but of course did not know that yet.

Sunday, August 16, 1992

"Good evening, Harry. You look tanned and well-rested."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Harry answered.

"I understand congratulations are in order," Dumbledore smirked, his eyes twinkling.

Harry flushed. "I really don't know how that happened," Harry answered, almost stuttering. "I hope the people who know this will be kept very limited."

"Will Miss Granger, or should I say Mrs. Potter, agree to that?" Dumbledore asked.

"It's Miss Granger until we leave Hogwarts," Harry snapped. "And yes, she understands exactly how much potential danger this puts her and her family in." He scowled. "How the hell could this have happened?"

"In part, no doubt because while your body is twelve, you are magically and spiritually twenty. In your original life, while you may not have been actual lovers, you did love each other in many ways." Harry had to agree to that. "In addition, Miss Granger is your truest confidant in this new life. She is a person who needs to believe mightily in truth and knowledge. In your first lifetime, it seems as if that belief was largely abstract. In this life, she has placed that belief primarily in you."

"True," Harry agreed. He also knew something that none save Hermione did -- that she was in some small part from that altered life as well. Her ghost was not anywhere as dominant as his own future self was -- Harry was in most ways mentally the boy from the future. Still, just as Harry remembered his time with the Dursleys both from the first time around and from the second, so Hermione had some bleed-over from the knowledge and feelings she had had from that first time as well. In a sense, Harry thought of himself as being mentally 18 and Hermione 15. "Anyway, like I said, I hope the people who need to know about our bonding is limited."

"Her parents, Miss Tonks, Remus, Sirius, Alastor, Aberforth, and Dedelus," Dumbledore answered. Seeing Harry's frown, Dumbledore reminded him, "As your bondmate, you owe it to Miss Granger to make a will."

"True," Harry had to agree. "By the way, did Remus tell you about my experiences at the death camp?"

Dumbledore nodded. "The International is now aware of the problem, and there is a team working on it." He looked very sad. "We can send any individual on, although it takes time. The problem is dealing with so many. They are studying the problem."

The pair was quiet for a moment, then Harry asked, "Is everything ready for tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes," Dumbledore answered. "I have arranged for everyone to floo to Hagrid's, however. If we move the location of the training around, there is less chance of anyone being traced." The students were staying in just a few homes and flooing for training each day.

"True, and especially with the extra Slytherins, we can't be too cautious," Harry agreed.

"I was surprised you agreed to them," Dumbledore remarked.

"I don't like them," Harry said, "but Draco is used to Crabbe and Goyle, and Millicent goes with them. Hopefully, having them won't do any harm."

"I would hope not," Dumbledore agreed.

"Now, Harry asked, "what happened that you don't want to tell me?"

Dumbledore winced. Harry was the only person who could read him so easily, other than Aberforth. "As you may know, most long-term Azkaban prisoners may have visitors."

"I didn't," Harry admitted. "Let me think about this." "Who is still in Azkaban would I least want to have suspect visitors?" Harry asked himself. "Rookwood?" Harry asked. The man had worked in the Department of Mysteries, and would know the most about the storage of Prophecies.

"Exactly," Dumbledore replied. "He was one of the prisoners who Voldemort's people tried to free last year, but since he never made it out of his cell, he was not Kissed. We don't know who his visitor was, or what they talked about. Aurors are looking into how this could have happened."

"Let me guess, he might have clued Voldemort into there being a Prophecy registered with the Department in the first place?"

"Yes. He was not the man who partially overheard the Prophecy, but he did confirm its being registered at the time . . . and the two boys it was suspected the Prophecy might be about."

"So, Voldemort knows, or will shortly know, that only he, Neville, and I can release the Prophecy safely," Harry mused. "He won't mess about trying to get other people into the Hall of Prophecies to steal it for months, like he did last time."

"Exactly."

"Is Neville safe?"

"Yes, although two attempts have already been made. One was directly on the Longbottom estate, and that was easily repelled." Dumbledore smiled nastily, perhaps the only time Harry had seen that look on Dumbledore. "Augusta seriously upgraded the protections there after Frank and Alice were attacked in 1981. The second attack was on St. Mungo's. With Augusta's permission, I have arranged to have Frank and Alice transferred to a special clinic in North America, connected to the Salem Institute. They will be quite safe there."

"Is there any reason why we should leave the actual Prophecy in the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked.

"You mean, plant a false Prophecy as you did the diary and not try too hard to keep it away from Voldemort?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, not hard enough for people to risk their lives over it," Harry answered.

"I will bring up the idea with my contacts in the Department," Dumbledore answered.

Harry split his friends and followers into the following three groups of six:

Team 1 (Ron team leader, Justin second), Daphne, Padma, Lavender, Susan;

Team 2 (Draco team leader, Ernie second) Vincent, Gregory, Hannah, Seamus;

Team 3 (Neville team leader, Tracey second) Anthony, Millicent, Parvati; Dean.

He would coordinate their training, aided by Hermione. The only offensive spells they would learn would be stunners and the disarming spell. They would learn several different types of shields, however, and Tonks and Sirius would help teach them hand-to-hand combat and of course Occlumency, and Harry would get everyone flying, while Hermione would make certain all homework was finished.

Harry planned on using these students as the core of a new DA come their Fifth year, even if Voldemort was defeated by that point. Between now and then, he hoped that they would have learned to work across House, gender, class, and background differences.

Harry did not really trust Draco to have completely overcome his upbringing, and there were several times when he saw Draco having to swallow comments he dearly would have loved to have made. Harry appreciated that the Draco he had known before could not have kept his mouth shut except under direct threat or active duress. The fact that he was able to contain himself counted for something, but Harry did note that it still took some effort.

He was more surprised by Millicent. She had been smart but thuggish the first time around, and had

actively supported the Death Eater position, while her parents had tried to stay neutral, perhaps because Millicent's maternal grandmother had been Muggleborn. This time, she was getting more into the tenor of what Harry was trying to promote, and was actually slightly more useful than Draco in keeping Vincent Crabbe and especially Greg Goyle toeing the line.

It was not all work, of course. Hermione even arranged for the group to see two movies. Neither was particularly memorable as a movie to the Muggle-raised, even to Harry who had seen a few movies from the corner of the room at the Dursleys, but even Draco had quietly admitted himself impressed.

It also made him wonder if too much exposure to Muggle culture might not be a bad thing. When he mentioned this to Harry, Harry had to admit that Draco could have a point, and shelved plans for any further group cinema experiences.

Chapter XVIII

Tuesday, September 1, 1992

Harry was relatively relaxed as he sat in the train compartment. There were plenty of people who had wanted to share the compartment, and Harry had, with difficulty, picked out the five to come with him without hurting anyone else's feelings.

Hermione had been obvious of course, and Harry made certain Neville was with him as well. This Neville was now very different than he had been the first time around. He was more confident and less clumsy. Still, he was now still just an above-average (other than in Herbology, where he sometimes surpassed Hermione) 12 year old student -- and Voldemort's most obvious, or at least easiest, target.

Harry had resolved to keep Neville close, if he could without stifling him.

Ron was with them as well. Being made a team leader for two weeks in August had given Ron some confidence, and careful coaching by Harry and Remus had managed to keep Ron's ego from becoming arrogant. Ron was still prone to moments of jealousy and self-doubt, but Harry hoped those would fade in time.

While too young to date, Ron and Susan had been close the year before, and even more so during the two weeks of training. Ron had even spent the weekend after training with Susan and her mother and formidable aunt.

Ginny completed the compartment, as she knew no one other than her brothers and Percy had demanded that she ride with one of them. Harry was not about to force her to ride with the twins, and was happy enough at first to have her with him and his friends.

Harry was glad that this time he was not flying to Hogwarts in the Weasleys' enchanted car, which also meant no Dobby trying to save him, no Whomping Willow, and no Snape wanting to expel him the first day. With any luck, he would not have to deal with Snape at all this year.

On the other hand, while he also would not have to deal with Lockhart, who as a pain in class ranked only behind Snape and Umbridge as far as Harry was concerned, he would have to deal with Slughorn. Harry had dug through the storage bins in the Potions Lab during some of Sirius' Potion classes the year before and found Snape's annotated textbooks (Harry still wondered why they were there, but was not about to bring Snape's attention to them). Still, Suck-up Slug, as Sirius called him, should be far easier to deal with than Snape, or Lockhart or Umbridge for that matter.

Harry glanced at Ginny, and saw her avert her eyes. He repressed a sigh. Obviously, Ginny's crush was replicated this time around, and, on reflection, Harry knew he should have realized this. Ginny had been awkward around him the previous Christmas, but in the excitement, he hadn't really paid any attention to it.

Harry wondered how uncomfortable he might be with Ginny in Gryffindor this time (after all, if Percy, the least Gryffindor of all the Weasleys, was Sorted there, an unpossessed Ginny was certain to be). He was rather embarrassed by his return crush on Ginny his Sixth year, and the jealousy he had felt. It had been very unlike his usual feelings and behavior. He still didn't regret the fooling around, snogging, and even heavy petting he and Ginny had engaged in, either, although in retrospect he actually felt a little used by her. This time, his bonding with Hermione would prevent such behavior on his part but, he wondered, if Ginny did not get over her crush earlier this time around, how determined she might be. This time, the diary would not have hindered her development.

Harry rather hoped that this would mean Ginny would be less concentrated on him, but he wouldn't want to place bets on it.

Harry was happily surprised when Slughorn did not immediately make the slightest fuss over him in their first potions class. Harry finally decided the real difference was that now he appeared 12 rather than 16 and that Slughorn did not want to overwhelm a student that young. That pushed his respect for the old panderer up a notch. Slughorn had noticed the superior results Harry and Hermione had come up with. (Hermione this time had agreed to use any alternate directions in Snape's old textbooks. In part, this was because of the different type of relationship she had with Harry, but also because this time Harry had been to explain why the directions sometimes differed. Hermione therefore looked upon this as a chance to learn more about how potions actually worked, as Potion directions and ingredients often made no sense in Muggle terms in any event.) Slughorn had praised the potion they had brewed together the first week and the ones they made separately the second, but not overly so. Harry made certain that Slughorn knew and valued Hermione's worth by giving her most of the credit. They would both be invited to Slughorn's little receptions, but Harry found he did not mind so much this time.

Overall, Harry decided at that second Saturday morning as he and Hermione walked hand-in-hand on the lawn (to the teasing of some of the older Ravenclaws), this year was certainly looking up in most aspects.

The mandrakes were growing on schedule, but they shouldn't be needed. He and Hermione had impressed Professor McGonagall with their turning of beetles into buttons. Harry had nearly fallen off his chair in the first Defense class, when Moody showed up with Cornish pixies. This time, however, they had had a proper lesson on the little creatures.

Harry had especially impressed Professor Flitwick, and the little professor had taken Harry aside and agreed to Moody and Sirius' request that he give Harry some extra dueling tutoring. In fact, that would inspire Flitwick to talk about restarting the dueling clubs. Add in the fact that Ron didn't have a broken wand this time, which had threatened everyone's well-being within thirty feet of him, and things were generally looking good.

On the other hand, Colin was just as annoying this time as he had been the first time around. Added to Harry's annoyance to the years of stalking the first time around were the facts that 1) it turned out that the photos Colin took and freely circulated around Hogwarts had helped the Death Eaters identify Harry's supporters by sight; and 2) either Dennis or Colin (or both) had led a group of Hogwarts students into a trap near Hogsmeade in October, 1997, believing they were going to surprise Harry, Hermione, and Ron. Instead, it had been a trap designed by Draco and implemented by Pansy. All the students had either been killed or injured.

For these reasons and of course the fact that Colin had stalked him for five years, Harry had no patience with Colin. He had let Colin take a photo of him and Hermione on 'their' loveseat in the common room, and then he did his best to shut Colin down. This time, he had help from all the other Second years. Harry tried to let Colin down easy, but the boy just would not take 'no' for an answer, and had no respect for anyone's privacy.

Harry had therefore taken to wandlessly hexing Colin's cameras within a week. The boy was still annoying, but could do no real damage. Colin was also spending a great deal of time trying to figure out what was wrong with his camera.

Ginny was another matter. She was following Harry around nearly as much as Colin, and when she wasn't following Harry, she was trailing after Hermione, making cutting remarks. Ron, Percy, and the twins all tried to reason with her, but when she persisted, Harry reluctantly wrote a letter to Mrs. Weasley towards the end of September.

Molly Weasley descended on the castle on the first Saturday of October, spoke with Harry, her sons, and Professor McGonagall, and then sat Ginny down for a private talking to which lasted over half an hour. Ginny came out of the room, red-faced, tear-stained and shaking. Harry realized sadly

that he and Hermione had lost a friend, at least for the immediate future. He was glad to see, however, that this episode had at least brought Ginny and Percy closer. The fact that this made Harry somewhat happy encouraged Percy in his notions that Harry was both a valuable ally and a very troublesome one.

While this soap opera was going on, Sirius, Moody, Flitwick, Remus, and Snape activated the long-defunct dueling club, this time based on tutoring each year separately (as opposed to all together, as Lockhart had tried to do). Snape kept well-away from most of the meetings, other than the Seventh years', where he acted as a coach, and which Sirius and Remus had no part in.

Sirius and Flitwick coached the Second years. Harry's group of friends were several steps ahead of the other Second years, and many of the others quit the optional club after two weeks. Harry's friends and a few others, however, kept at it and worked hard.

After Harry had given a toned-down demonstration of what he could do the first week, he was co-opted as the student coach. Unknown to most of the students (other than Hermione, Draco, and Harry's dorm mates), Harry spent an hour early every Sunday morning before breakfast dueling against the professors. Professor Flitwick had been stunned after he had agreed to tutor Harry to see exactly how advanced Harry actually was. As Moody had pointed out nearly two years before, Harry's reflexes were the fastest anyone had ever seen, and they were even faster now. While Flitwick was not let into Harry's basic secrets until later that year, it was obvious to him that first Sunday when he 'coached' Harry that his primary function was to face Harry in an open fight with nearly every stop pulled out from his own performance.

By the end of the term, Harry would be able to defeat any four of the professors (any combination of Moody, Flitwick, Remus, and Sirius, plus Aberforth Dumbledore) at least three out of every four times they fought, even though they now fought without many limitations, as opposed to the more limited repertoire. Even when Dumbledore joined in the three-against-one, Harry was now winning at least two out of five times. Granted, the professors had some dirty tricks which they didn't dare use in a practice fight. Still, Harry was coming along quite well.

Still, all this added up to the fact that Flitwick understood why Harry preferred to coach his fellow Second years to fighting them. When Zacharias Smith persisted in calling Harry out at the second meeting of the club that early October, it was only Smith's insistence that persuaded both Harry and Flitwick to finally give in.

After the quick and thorough drubbing, Zach never called Harry out again.

One somewhat unpleasant chore Harry did feel obligated in redoing was attending Sir Nicholas' 500th Death Day Party. Harry had brought the problem of the thousands of Muggle and Squib ghosts in the death camps to Sir Nicholas' attention in early September, hoping that a ghost might be more interested than the Ministries or Dumbledore in seeing if there was a faster solution. Sir Nicholas had been appalled. Unlike most Muggle ghosts, who were not fully aware of their surroundings or circumstances and who were usually confined to one place, magical ghosts almost always had all their mental faculties and freedom of movement. The ones like Binns and Myrtle who stayed in the exact same places where they died did so because they wanted to, not because they were forced to.

Harry's story of the death camp ghosts touched a nerve in not only Sir Nicholas but the other three House ghosts and even Professor Binns. Over their long terms as ghosts, the group had acquired many contacts across haunted Britain, and even into Western Europe. They, in turn, had contacts reaching deeper into Europe. By mid-October, Sir Nicholas was able to report that magical ghosts were able to contact a few of the spirits haunting the many death camps and even some of the World War I trenches. In the latter, some ghosts were still attacking each other in ghostly parodies of the years of trench warfare. No doubt the work would take decades, perhaps even centuries, but over time the trapped spirits would be 'sent over' into the next plane of existence, whatever that might be. In any case, they insured that it would be done faster than the Ministeries' plans.

Hence Sir Nicholas' inviting Harry to his 'party'.

As large as Sir Nicholas' Five Hundredth Death Day Party had been the first time around, this time it would be even larger, as ghosts from all over Britain and western Europe would be coming to meet Sir Nicholas' good friend 'Harry Potter, friend of ghosts everywhere'. Harry had been worried that this might pose a problem to Sir Nicholas, but the ghost was happy to share his Death Day with Harry. The whole affair had apparently upped Sir Nicholas' own standing in the spectral realm. Although still not allowed into the Headless Hunt, Sir Nicholas was being honored to some degree along with Harry.

Harry was told he could bring anyone he wished to the celebration. Harry had told all his friends what to expect. Only Remus, Hermione, Susan, Padma, Daphne, and Tracey expressed enough interest to come along. Neville came along only because his friends were going.

Susan was reconsidering her choice as the group made their way -- the black candles with their dim blue flames made the beginning of the experience spookier than she had anticipated. The month had been cold and dank outside the castle, and the dungeons were never all that warm or dry to begin with. As the air grew colder around the group, Susan wished very much that Ron had been willing to come with them, or more accurately, had been willing to come with her. When the distant droning shriek of the music of the dead was heard, nearly everyone but Harry and Remus shivered. Susan bumped into Neville as she squeaked, just a tad frightened.

Neville put his arm around Susan.

Harry, seeing it, shook his head as he pulled Hermione close. He'd match Ron up with someone, someday.

Somehow.

The Death Day Party was at least twice as large as Harry remembered. Harry stationed himself near Nick, and made certain every ghost who came over paid at least as much attention to Nick as they did to Harry and his friends. Myrtle was one of those who came to pay her respects, and Harry managed to divert her from mentioning his presence in her toilets in the summer of 1991.

"I'm surprised that Peeves isn't around," Harry mentioned at one point.

"He was here until you arrived," Sir Nicholas said. "I must say, it is good to have him afraid of someone besides the Baron. If we must have a poltergeist, I must say I prefer him the way he is now."

With the crowd present, the Headless Hunt was unable to caper about at all, which also seemed to cheer Nick up a bit. Finally, with everyone living shivering a bit, Harry and Remus led the group out of the deep dungeons, Sir Nicholas' thanks ringing in their ears.

"Come on," Remus said. "I arranged for the elves to have some hot cider and a light dinner ready for us."

Sunday, November 1, 1992

Harry was slightly surprised to be intercepted by Sirius on the way to dueling practice the next morning. Sirius was not a morning person, and tended to spend weekend mornings asleep until around 11:00 whenever possible, and it was not his turn to duel with Harry.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Not here, not now," Sirius replied so quietly that only Hermione heard him. The older students were getting ready for the second day of their first Hogsmeade weekend, and so were also on the move early that Sunday. "Just come on, and I mean just you. You may pass on the information later."

And so Harry found himself in the Headmaster's office some ten minutes later, along with Remus, Moody, and Snape.

"This is who we were waiting for?" Snape demanded.

"Yes," Dumbledore stated so firmly that Snape held his peace. "There was a strike last night."

"Riddle himself?" Harry asked.

"Presumably so," Dumbledore answered. "He, or someone, attacked and killed a Squib family outside of Godric's Hollow around Eleven last night. Whomever it was cast the Dark Mark."

"Didn't think of that, did you, Potter?" Snape spat.

"Severus. . . ."

"What do you intend to do about it, Potter?" Snape demanded.

"I'll do the exact same thing YOU and the Order did last time, when similar things occurred," Harry stated quietly.

"And what was that?" Snape asked, his sarcasm fully engaged.

Harry stood. "Nothing. Not a damn thing. That's what the lot of you did. I am doing nothing, because at the moment there's nothing I can do. Voldemort can be a random terrorist; there is little anyone on earth can do about some lunatic who does such things. What little that can be done is done by superior intelligence work, and that is one thing I've never claimed I could do." Harry gave Snape the dirtiest look he could muster. "You, on the other hand, always claimed to be the greatest spy in wizarding history. When you get off your arse and bring in some solid information, I will be more than happy to do something about it."

Harry turned away from the sputtering Snape and faced Dumbledore. "Thank you for keeping me informed." Harry turned and left the office.

Remus tracked down Harry about an hour later. He was in a part of the dungeons set aside for his training. Harry was busy destroying targets with a wide variety of hexes.

"Where's Sirius?" Harry asked.

"The Infirmary," Remus replied with a wry look.

"Snape hexed him?" Harry was surprised.

Remus shook his head. "The two of them yelled so much they both lost their voices," he replied. "Once they had screamed themselves into hoarseness, Albus and Alastor lit into the pair of them and then Alastor dragged them to the Infirmary, where, I hope, he's keeping an eye on them."

"I think Madam Pomfrey can handle those two," Harry retorted.

"Perhaps, but it's better for all concerned if she doesn't have to do it by herself," Remus agreed.

"Tell me," he went on with a concerned look, "did you mean what you said?"

"Did I mean it?" Harry asked. "Yes. Do I like it? Not one bit. I hate it!" he nearly spat. "Still, Voldemort is a terrorist. He's never had the numbers to openly confront any Ministry. Hell, the Benelux aurors, all what? fifty of them? could mow down the thirty or forty original Death Eaters in a straight fight. If they had all attacked Hogwarts on that Halloween of 1981, the school staff and students would have massacred them. They aren't entrenched all over magical and Muggle Europe, like Grindelwald's people were. They have nothing except sadism and an incredibly powerful lunatic as a leader."

"I suppose that's true. . . ."

"Remus, Voldemort called all his Death Eaters to the cemetery when he was reborn after the Twi-

Wizard Tournament," Harry responded. "There were barely twenty. Add in the dozen or so who were in Azkaban, and that's all there were."

"But that was the Inner Circle. . . ."

"Inner Circle, hell!" Harry snapped. "Any 'Inner Circle' with Crabbe and Goyle Senior in it isn't any group to be feared on its own."

"That might be true, but there has to be others!"

Harry shrugged. "Not really. Every active Death Eater still alive by 1981 was born after 1945 and before 1963." Remus' eyebrows went up at that. "Voldemort had other followers, but I mean those with the Mark, those who engaged in terror, who hadn't been killed by aurors, the Order, or by Voldemort himself before Voldemort was disembodied. More than half came from Slytherin and were the younger siblings or children of Tom Riddle's first followers, who were dead by then while most of the rest from Ravenclaw."

Remus frowned. "But what about Karkaroff?"

"He and the other foreigners with the Mark were exchange students, some program that went on from just after Grindelwald's fall until the mid-1960s, when the Ministries stopped funding it," Harry answered with a shrug. "He was in Hufflepuff, believe it or not, from 1963 through 1965, as a Fourth and Fifth year student."

Remus tried to get his mind around all this. "You mean . . . all this is just. . . ." He slapped his head.

"What?" Harry asked. "Confined to Britain and Ireland? Of course it is, for the most part. It's only here that there's any of this 'You-Know-Who' nonsense. He was called 'Voldemort' in all most of the continental newspapers and all of the North American and other ones. I mean, sure there are plenty of pro-Pure Bloods and Dark types all over the world. But none of them are going to back ol'Moldieshorts until he can overthrow the British Ministry, or destroy Dumbledore or something!" Harry paused and added, "Or, I would guess, kill me." Harry shrugged. "I'm sure they're pushing supplies and money to him and certainly information, but they aren't coming over in droves. The last time I went through this all he had were a couple of giants and the dementors -- which was pretty frightening at times, I admit -- and about fifteen to twenty Death Eaters besides the ones in Azkaban, maybe two dozen younger Death Eaters who joined over a three year period, some crazy German sent over from an old pro-Grindelwald group, and that animal Greyback. Without Draco and Snape, we might have gotten through everything without nearly as much bloodshed in the end. It was Dumbledore's death that ripped the guts out of the Order, and the Minister was still reactive right up past the attacks on Diagon Alley, the Ministry, and Hogsmeade. Everyone waits until they attack and then wrings their hands and point their fingers."

"What can we do?" Remus asked.

"You and the others had better come up with something," Harry retorted. "No one else will come and help us, or at least they wouldn't last time." Harry stopped as a thought hit him. "And I would advise you to do it fast, because you might not like what I will do if you don't."

Chapter XIX

Monday, November 23, 1992

Albus Dumbledore's head snapped up from the worthless set of intelligence reports he was rereading for the fifth time. Nowhere could he find a hint to Voldemort's location, his plans, or his allies. None of the known Death Eaters or important sympathizers seemed to have been contacted, and the Ministry surveillance had nothing to report.

Therefore, he welcomed the arrival of two of his staff coming up the stairs to his office. Until they arrived, that is.

"Horace, Severus, what may I do for . . . you. . . ?" Dumbledore's voice trailed off, as he saw that Severus had some sort of large rodent with orange incisors and a rat-like tail in a cage. The rodent was chattering away angrily.

"I do not understand."

"Potter," Snape spat.

"Most likely," Horace Slughorn agreed, obviously upset, but not to the degree as his much younger colleague. "To make things concise, this is Miss Parkinson."

"The rodent?" Dumbledore asked.

"Precisely," Slughorn agreed. "I admit, I have observed some . . . undercurrents in my Second year class between some of the Slytherins and some of the Gryffindors, especially on the part of Miss Parkinson directed against Miss Granger, and Mister Nott directed against Mister Weasley. All their comments were too soft for me to catch them, and for Mister Potter to catch them for that matter. Today, however, I turned just in time to see Miss Parkinson use her wand to pull a jar of acid off the shelves onto Miss Granger's head."

As Slughorn shook his head in sadness, Dumbledore demanded, "Was she seriously injured?"

"It was amazing," Slughorn admitted. "Potter's reflexes were so fast, the jar was stopped with a voiceless levitation spell half way to hitting her. Voiceless! A Second year!" He shook his head. "Then, while he was still levitating the jar with his wand, Miss Parkinson was turned into, well, whatever that is. I don't know how he did it, but I know no other Second year could have."

"So was anyone else hurt?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Fortunately, the seal held and no one was splashed," Slughorn stated. "However, even laying aside the fact that Miss Parkinson could have seriously injured, even killed Miss Granger directly, had any of the acid fallen into the cauldrons with the vanishing potion. . . ."

"Vanishing potion? Which kind?" Dumbledore asked.

"The kind for cleaning stains out of magically treated cloth," Slughorn stated. Dumbledore and Snape both winced. The result would have been a very toxic, even deadly, gas. "Exactly," Slughorn stated. "Miss Parkinson must either be expelled from class, if not Hogwarts, or some other equally severe punishment must be imposed."

"We should discuss that after she is restored." Dumbledore glanced at the cage. "And why is she still a rodent?"

"Because we can't change her back," Slughorn admitted.

"Really?" Dumbledore asked, amazed. Horace Slughorn was a powerful and canny wizard.

"I can't, Severus here can't, Filius couldn't, and neither could Minerva."

"Oh . . . my," Dumbledore said, surprised. "Where is Mister Potter?"

"He and Miss Granger should be along presently," Slughorn said. "Minerva went to fetch them from their current class."

"No doubt Black or his shadow will be with them," Snape muttered, since Harry and Hermione were now in the Magical Traditions class.

In fact, in short order, Harry, Hermione, Sirius, Remus, Flitwick, and McGonagall had joined the group in the Headmaster's office.

"Miss Granger? Are you feeling well?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, sir," Hermione said tentatively. "I'm not used to having people trying to kill me," she added.

"We do not know that Miss Parkinson knew what was in the jar," Snape pointed out.

"All students should know by now that the Potions lab is NOT for playing pranks," Slughorn intoned.

"Yes, be that as it may," Dumbledore interrupted, "we are all glad that you were not injured, Miss Granger. Mister Potter, what did you transfigure Miss Parkinson into, and how?"

"I didn't transfigure Pansy into anything, sir," Harry answered.

Dumbledore frowned and waved his wand several times over the rodent, muttering. Finally, he admitted, "This creature does not appear to be transfigured, transformed, or even enchanted in anyway."

"Enchanted?" Snape demanded. "That's post N.E.W.T. work, at least at this level in any event!"

"I was merely taking in all possibilities," Dumbledore answered, frowning. "Whatever this is, it would not appear to be Miss Parkinson."

"But I saw her transform into this!" Slughorn protested.

"Do you know what this is?" Dumbledore asked Harry, pointing at the rodent.

"I haven't the faintest clue, other than it's a big rodent of some kind," Harry answered, unconcerned.

The teachers all frowned in puzzlement. "Harry," Remus finally asked, "do you have any idea of how Pansy Parkinson might have ended up looking like that, assuming that it is her?"

Harry shrugged. "She chose the form, or rather it chose her."

The adults are stared at Harry, confused. Finally, Snape said, "Look, Potter, you've had your joke. Tell us what you did!"

"Severus!" Remus remonstrated, "Manners!" Sirius was now in a corner, giggling, having figured things out. He therefore of no help whatsoever. Remus looked confused, and then started chortling as well.

Snape gritted his teeth, and asked, "Could you please inform us, MISTER Potter, exactly what it is you did?"

Harry turned to McGonagall. "What are the three ways to check to see if someone has an animagus form, Professor?"

McGonagall frowned, but answered, "There is an enchantment, usually used on mirrors, which shows the forms reflection. There is a potion, which will change you into the form, if any, for about three minutes. There is also a charm. . . ." Her eyes went wide. "Mister Potter! That is a highly classified spell! No one not a Transfiguration Master should even know it! And I cannot believe anyone under a Seventh year could make it work in any event!"

Harry shrugged. "It worked." He turned to Dumbledore. "May we leave now, sir?"

"I see," Dumbledore said. "That will be five points for your saving Miss Granger, and six points off for your using this charm on Miss Parkinson."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He took Hermione's hand and the pair left. No one was certain, but they thought they heard Hermione giggling as the door shut, but it was difficult to tell, considering the laughing pair of Marauders on the floor.

"Oh, grow up the pair of you," McGonagall told them.

"But what about her?" Snape squawked, pointing at the rodent.

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "As you may know, an animagus actually becomes the animal, which is why there were no magical traces on Miss Parkinson."

"Yes, so?"

"Well, there are only two ways for her to be changed back," McGonagall said. "One, that she wills herself back, or two, someone fires an incantation at her."

"And why is that a problem?" Snape demanded.

"The incantation is simple, in a sense," Remus managed to answer, since Sirius was still laughing hard but silently and unable to say anything. "In this case, it would be 'reveal the girl inside the. . .' well, whatever that is."

"You mean. . . ?"

"Exactly," McGonagall said. "We can't change her back until we know what the devil she changed into."

Remus undid the top of the cage. Rodent! Pansy laid there, shivering, twenty pounds of a rat-like creature. "Well, we can try 'reveal the girl inside the rodent!'" Remus commanded. The rodent expanded slightly, but then contracted back into its rodent form. Pansy started chattering angrily again.

"Call those two back here!" Snape demanded. "Have them find the creature's name!"

"Do you really want to wait until they find it?" Remus said softly. "They might not be in much of a hurry."

Snape glared, but said nothing. Instead, he turned and stamped away to look at reference books.

"I'll ask Aberforth," Dumbledore said. "He might know."

It took over a week to discover that Pansy had turned into a nutria, a South American rodent, also found in Louisiana and Texas waterways. Pansy was not amused that Christmas to receive a nutria fur coat and several tins of 'Nutria Gumbo' from anonymous givers (ie Sirius and Remus).

In the short term, she was also not amused to be given twenty-four hours of detention -- an hour each of the four week nights (Monday through Thursday) for six weeks, one third with Professor Slughorn, one third with Professor Snape, and the final, hardest third with Professor Black. Had she not had to spend so much time as a nutria, her punishment would have been worse.

It was on the day that Pansy was turned back into what passed for human that Harry again met with Dumbledore. Harry was glad that Pansy was back to being human (more-or-less), as he had won the betting pool the Weasley twins had going on the topic. As Dumbledore was trying to keep Harry in the information loop, he mentioned that Professor Snape had just learned that it had been Bellatrix Lestrange and Walden Macnair who had killed the Squib family on Halloween.

Harry agreed that it was too bad that this was not in any way legal evidence which could be used against Macnair, who might have no influence anywhere in the Ministry, but who no doubt was keeping his ears open.

Thursday, December 17, 1992

"Good morning, Severus," Dumbledore said. "You look troubled. Would you care for some tea?"

"I could use a brandy," Snape retorted.

"Severus!" Dumbledore wondered if Snape had finally developed a real drinking problem.

"Walden Macnair was found yesterday afternoon," Snape said. "He had failed to report to work Monday. To be honest, no one probably cared, as I am certain he was unpopular with his co-workers. Still, Amos Diggory sent some people to Macnair's shack yesterday afternoon to see if he was ill or something."

"And I take it he was worse than ill?" Dumbledore asked.

"He was very dead," Snape answered. "In fact, he had been executed."

"Voldemort?"

Snape shook his head. "He had been bound hand and foot, but there was no sign of any type of torture. His head was set over a chunk of wood, and he was beheaded with the axe he used to execute condemned beasts. Soot from his fireplace was mixed with his blood and a copy of the Dark Mark was painted on one of the walls. Then a slash with fresh blood was painted over it. His forearm was bared, and the Dark Mark stood out on it, even after all the time he had been dead."

Dumbledore went very pale.

"Others could have found out that Macnair was working for the Dark Lord," Snape said. "They could even have discovered he was involved in Godric's Hollow. Could anyone, other than the Dark Lord, have raised the Dark Mark? Could Potter have done it?" He shook his head. "If it wasn't Potter, then there are no other guesses I can come up with."

"I do not see how," Dumbledore answered. "I would know if any student left the grounds."

"Are you certain of that, Headmaster?" Snape asked. "I mean that. Can you be that certain? It's not like we have tracking charms on them."

Dumbledore thought on that.

"Did you know the night I left the grounds, going by way of that tunnel to the Shrieking Shack?" Snape asked softly.

"No," Dumbledore had to admit, "I did not. I warded the tunnel afterwards, however."

"Would you swear you know every exit in and out of the castle and its grounds? You didn't know about the Chamber of Secrets, after all."

"Also true," Dumbledore had to admit. "But even so, how would Harry be able to track Macnair down? If the man lived within walking distance of Hogsmeade, maybe. But Harry could not have been absent long enough to have flown to . . . where did Macnair live? East Anglia, wasn't it?"

"You knew where Macnair lived?" Snape asked.

"Of course, I know where all suspected Death Eaters live." Dumbledore frowned. "I suppose it's possible, if not likely, Harry could have brought that information from the future. Still, how could he have gotten there from here?"

"He has a boy's body, but as you and the others keep reminding me, he is not a boy, he is in almost every way a twenty-year-old wizard," Snape retorted. "He certainly knew how to apparate, and for all we know can make his own portkeys."

Dumbledore remembered when he had 'liberated' Harry from Privet Drive. Harry had asked then where they were apparating to. "That is true, Severus."

"Well? What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing!"

"Nothing," Dumbledore stated. "Our way failed last time. While taking forceful action can lead to unsuspecting Dark traps in life, it appears as if our usual caution backfired. Harry has spared Lucius because he made a deal with Draco and because Lucius quit the field. He has said nothing about Crabbe and Goyle seniors for much the same reason. I have little doubt that any followers who abandon the field without committing fresh atrocities will also be spared."

"You mean you will allow their executions without a trial? You won't demand second or third chances?" Snape demanded.

"We allowed that to happen the last time," Dumbledore said sadly. "It didn't work, so I am afraid we must allow a stricter sense of justice to prevail this time from the start."

"Good," Snape said, shocking the Headmaster.

Dumbledore hesitated, then said, "Of course, it might not be Harry."

"I don't think we should ask," Snape said, although saying so made him want to vomit. "If Potter is behind us and can fool us, he can probably get away with this. I hate to say this, but we mustn't stir the waters."

Sunday, December 20, 1992

For the first time in many many years, no students were staying over at Hogwarts that Christmas. Dumbledore had therefore decreed, with no objections from any staff member, that only dinners would be in the great hall. He was therefore enjoying a very rare breakfast (sweet crepes and hot chocolate) in bed.

He was not happy to be disturbed, but when Snape knocked frantically on his door at 7:20 am, he bade him to enter.

Snape hurried into the Headmaster's private sanctum, and then stopped -- goggling. He had never been here this early in the morning. The sight of the headmaster in a dark velvet purple Victorian night gown with magical pink flamingos strutting around the gown, which was also decorated with electric blue pansies and vibrant green grass, would stop anyone not color blind. He spared a thought to wonder if this explained why the Headmaster had never married.

"What is it, Severus?" Dumbledore demanded, calling Snape back to matters at hand.

"This flyer has appeared all over magical Britain, Ireland, and several places in western and central Europe," Snape said nervously, holding it out.

Dumbledore frowned and took the large piece of parchment. Under the headline **WANTED:** **DEAD OR ALIVE** with the next line **(dead by preference)** came a list of fifteen names, with moving photos of the people named. Dumbledore knew all fifteen names -- all associated with Voldemort and thirteen, it was (correctly) claimed, carried the Dark Mark. The fourteenth was Greyback. The fifteenth was the dark sorcerer who had brought Voldemort back into a body, Deitmar von Spitzbach. After the description and a wizarding photo of each of the 'wanted' came an amount in Galleons, ranging between 25,000 for a number of minor Death Eaters and, for Bellatrix Lestrange, 100,000. The body, once proven not to be someone else's under polyjuice or other magical disguises, could be turned into any branch of Gringotts for the reward.

"I don't understand," Dumbledore said, confused.

"Someone has put up something like. . . ." Snape estimated rapidly, "six hundred and fifteen thousand Galleons to declare a hunt on fifteen Death Eaters." He frowned. "This can't be legal!"

"It isn't, but since the goblins are unlikely to turn anyone in to a Ministry, how would the officials find out?" Dumbledore asked. "But how. . . ? No government would spend this type of money, especially with no warning."

"Potter?"

"Harry does not have this kind of money to throw around."

"No one has that kind of money to throw around," Snape pointed out. The magical world was a very frugal one in many ways, other than for personal display. There had never been an award higher than 5,000 Galleons, and that had been for Grindelwald himself.

"I have to admit, I would never have thought of such a strategy," Dumbledore admitted.

Snape opened his mouth, but shut it. Not even the Dark Lord, only using his followers money, would want to offer rewards on anything near these amounts for his enemies. No government, considering the incredibly low taxation rates, would survive a revolt of the old families for this supplying kind of largesse.

Dumbledore looked at the details listed on the 'Wanted' poster again. "I note that none of those listed may collect on any of the others, but they may give themselves up if they wish their heirs to get the rewards."

"Black and Lupin must be in on this," Snape declared. "That sounds like something Lupin would think of. Black must have contributed some of the money."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore agreed.

There was suddenly another knock on the door. "I have not been this popular before breakfast since 1883," Dumbledore commented. "Come in!"

This time it was Moody, waving another copy of the poster. "Have you seen . . . oh, I see Snape beat me here about this."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "Do either of you know who has been distributing these?"

The two men looked at each other and frowned. "I had wondered if it might give us a definite clue as to who is behind this," Dumbledore pointed out.

"I didn't check," Snape admitted.

"I checked for any residual magic, but didn't find any," Moody admitted. "They just . . . appeared, in pubs, cafés, and such."

Another knock sounded. Dumbledore sighed and got out of bed, his breakfast forgotten. "Come in!" he called, pulling on an orange and lime green satin dressing gown.

Aberforth came in, holding up the poster. Moody and Snape raised theirs in return.

Snape turned to Moody. "I take it you would say that Potter and Black aren't behind this? with or without Lupin?"

"I can see why you'd think they might be," Moody admitted, "but I cannot see how they could have gotten this past me."

"Who else would have this much money to throw around?" Snape demanded.

The four wizards looked at each other, stumped.

At that moment, there was another knock on the door. When Dumbledore called out, in came little Professor Flitwick. The three wizards with posters waved them sullenly at Flitwick.

Filius frowned. "What are those?"

"You mean you didn't come to show the Headmaster these?" Moody demanded.

"No," Flitwick answered, puzzled. "I just got this week's Quibbler."

"Why, what's in that rag now?" Snape asked, unconcerned.

"The story of Tom Riddle," Flitwick said. "I had always wondered if he were really You-Know-Who, and this lays it right out. It's actually a fine piece of investigative research, most unlike their usual stories."

Dumbledore grabbed the tabloid out of Flitwick's hand. **THE DARK LORD'S MIXED PAST!** the headline screamed. Indeed, the story was a very accurate biography of Tom Marvolo Riddle, from his mother and uncle's physical and mental problems, their family background, and the use of a love potion to seduce the Muggle Tom Riddle. Tom Marvolo Riddle's Muggle birth certificate was replicated, and there were side-by-side photos of the Head Boy with Muggle photos of his Muggle father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. The family resemblances were clear. To make certain there were no doubts, Tom Marvolo Riddle's entry in the Hogwarts Register of Students was reproduced, giving his parents and grandparents names and his status (bastard, half-blood, orphan).

There were also a number of other photos, showing Tom Riddle's changes as he added Horcruxes and became less human. Voldemort's anagram (tom marvolo riddle=i am lord voldemort) was forming and reforming on the top of the second page, and Riddle's career at Hogwarts was repeated, including the accusation that it was he who had unleashed the 'Monster of Slytherin', a basilisk, which had killed Myrtle Smith, and which in turn had been discovered and killed in June 1991 'by a brilliant team of dark wizard fighters, led by Sirius Black and Remus Lupin'. In short, in the space of an article which took up a third of the issue, there could be no doubt that the Half-Blood Tom Marvolo Riddle was indeed Voldemort. The only information which was missing was exactly what the 'dark ceremonies' were that Voldemort underwent or any suggestion of Horcruxes.

Unless some of Voldemort's classmates or some European Dark Wizard knew all these facts and had decided to release them, then Dumbledore knew everyone who knew this much about Voldemort, and of them, only Harry could have released this material. Of course, for all his eccentricities, Lovegood did on occasion do a brilliant bit of reporting. This could be one of those times.

In any event, combined with the 'wanted posters', this news should shake things up in the wizarding world, and probably for the better, in Dumbledore's opinion. He regretted these actions only because he knew no one could predict what effects they might have.

At Twelve Grimmauld Place, Harry looked at the two happy-looking elves. "You distributed all six thousand posters?" Harry asked the pair. The two nodded their heads, grinning as only house elves who had successfully fulfilled a job could grin. "You two are wonderful," Harry said. "Winky, could you take this note to Tollkeeper at Gringotts and then drop this thank you note off at The Quibbler office?"

"Yes, Master Harry," Winky said, disappearing with a 'pop'.

Dobby said, "Dobby must start breakfast."

"Of course," Harry said genially. He was glad he had spoken with the goblins the previous Saturday. He had had them invest some of the money he had in his current account from some interesting Muggle ventures he had remembered future versions of Uncle Vernon wishing he had invested in early a year and a half before. Harry had remembered them all and had reaped the rewards -- more than enough to pay for a little preventative vengeance, with a 10% processing fee

for the goblins.

Harry stretched and got dressed. He would be going back to the cottage until Wednesday later that morning.

The Rewards:

Bellatrix Lestrange. . . .	100,000
Fenrir Greyback.	75,000
Antonin Dolohov.	75,000
Deitmar von Spitzbach. . .	75,000
John Nott.	40,000
Jason Gibbon	25,000
St. John Mulciber.	25,000
Joyce Wilkes	25,000
George Jugson.	25,000
Jacob Gibbon	25,000
Peter Yaxley	25,000
Alecto Carrows	25,000
Amycus Carrows	25,000
Jack Avery	25,000
Darlene Avery.	25,000

Chapter XX

Remus and Sirius denied any knowledge of the posters or the ideas which lay behind them, or that they had anything to do with the article in The Quibbler. In addition, as Harry's legal guardian, Sirius would know if Harry tried to withdraw any sums over 100,000 Galleons (or amounts totaling that amount over six months or less) out of his current account, and Harry had not. Of course, Sirius did not know that Harry had withdrawn 90,000 Galleons out of his account in September 1990, and that his information from the future had already made that amount to grow to nearly three quarters of a million. Harry had given some hints that his information was very much insider trading, in which goblins were firm believers. They had made a killing and had even cut Harry in on one percent of their net profit as a formal thank you, to encourage him to share just in case he came up with any more information.

Harry had already done so, and had two more tips to go, both for his slush fund and for the goblins.

Since no one had any clue as to how Harry might have pulled off the posters and the rewards (Gringotts had notified the curious press that the reward money was already being held in trust by the bank, along with a statement that they were doing this as a public service and would only act in such a capacity when the rewards were for wanted criminals -- the fact that some of the Death Eaters had been cleared by the Ministry was of no concern to the goblins) no one mentioned the episode to Harry. Even Snape did not want to believe it possible that Harry could be that devious or ruthless.

Unspoken was the thought that if Harry had pulled all this off without any of them having a clue to his doing it, it might be best to stay well out of his way, at least for the moment.

Meanwhile, the public debate over the 'wanted posters' raged all through the Yule holiday. All the Ministries of western and central Europe howled in outrage, none more so than the British. Fudge's first thought was 'Dumbledore,' but the Headmaster denied all knowledge of the posters and, while verifying all the information in The Quibbler (to Fudge, The Daily Prophet, and to the International Confederation for dissemination to the other governments) he also denied all knowledge of how the newspaper story came across any of its facts.

The Ministries also all protested formally to Gringotts. The official reply, sent on behalf of all the branches, the central office, and the chief advisory council of all the goblin clans (known as the High Hullabaloo), boiled down to a statement that said 1) if the Wizarding governments could not police themselves, they shouldn't reject any private initiatives; 2) any attempt to extract information from any branch of Gringotts on this matter would result in the start of the next goblin rebellion; and 3) a long word in gobbledegook which, when idiomatically translated, could best be rendered as 'screw you and the broomstick you rode in on'.

Outside of Europe, especially in the powerful North American Confederation, newspapers derided the helplessness and disunity of the European Ministries, and noted how there were more ministries in Europe than in the rest of the world combined (the rest of the magical world had combined into just eighteen confederations between the late 1700s and the early 1960s, while there were twenty-one Ministries which covered Europe and the former Soviet Union). Most of the non-European Governments issued statements by New Years' condemning the isolationist practices of the Europeans in general and the British in particular, and trying to show that the British had refused all offers of aid (when in reality, no one had actually offered them much aid to begin with -- still, the Press did not let that stay in the way of beating the Europeans in their editorials).

The International Confederation, of course, was merely a clearing house so that general policies of Muggle/Magical relations (meaning keeping the magical world secret) could be standardized. The Magical world had many rules and regulations devoted on how the various governments would work together to keep the magical world secret, even to allowing agents of one government to use memory charms etc. on the Muggle population outside their own territory if convenient. They had

no such rules on magical law breakers.

The first editorials demanding such rules started appearing in African newspapers by December 28. While the Muggles of the continent were suffering political and economic troubles, the magical communities weren't, and they wanted to keep things quiet. The four Confederations in the Americas conferred, and joined for the call in early January. By May, all of the non-European confederations had joined in a new law-enforcement agreement, which spelled the end of any large dark movements in their territories ever again.

All the Europeans, worried about their freedoms and influenced by the Pure-Blood groups which dominated their Ministries, held out.

As for those Pure-Blood groups, they not only stood together to oppose any greater cooperation between the European Ministries. They also closed ranks against any further cooperation with Voldemort. Most of their members had heard of rumors of Voldemort's background, but it was uncertain how many of them had believed the rumors but had disregarded them. In any case, the secret was out, and they preferred having no dealings with Tom Marvolo Riddle. Half-bloods who knew their place and were ashamed of their immediate Muggle ancestry might be admitted to these groups, but they were certainly NOT allowed to lead such movements. The leading Purist newsletter (located near the German/Austrian/Swiss border) also announced in the mid-January issue that any of those people on the 'wanted posters' could surrender themselves to one of the movements' representatives by March 1 and that they would be protected, provided they were willing to publically renounce Voldemort. After that date, they would join in the hunt.

Some were even serious about the idea of joining in the hunt, now that Voldemort seemed weakened.

Voldemort had been as shocked by the wanted posters as everyone else. He knew that he could not punish the goblins, at least not until he took over the wizarding world, or at least wizarding Britain -- having a Goblin rebellion on top of everything else would not be a wise move. All of his unMarked contacts had been as surprised and even more shocked by the posters than Voldemort had been. Most had dropped all contact with him.

All Voldemort could do was grit his teeth, prepare to welcome any of those Marked supporters who made it to him, and hope that the remaining plan he had in motion would hold up.

Wednesday, December 23, 1992

Harry had enjoyed watching the start of all that fuss the previous few days. There had been a great deal of fire-calling to the Dumbledores' cottage over the previous few days, and several times Remus, Sirius, or Mad-eye had started to ask him what had happened, but refrained at the last minute. Tonks (who had been let in on the location, the only new addition to the Fidelius) had also started to ask Harry, but said nothing when Remus grabbed her and kissed her, the only way he could think to keep her quiet.

Tonks hadn't minded.

"Are you ready, Harry?" Tonks asked as Winky cleared off the breakfast dishes.

"Absolutely," Harry answered. They had to floo through to Hermione's in the short window the connection would be open. Hermione and Harry were going Christmas shopping, with Tonks as bodyguard. Harry would again be spending Christmas Eve and most of the day at Grimmauld Place, Christmas night with the Weasleys, and Boxing Day with the Grangers.

Tonks left the pair at the Grangers in the late afternoon. Harry would have dinner there and then the floo would be open that night between 8:35 and 8:40.

Hermione had promised her parents that she and Harry would stick to the ground floor of the house

if they stayed inside and had promised Tonks they would stay inside or perhaps at most go into the back garden, so they kicked their shoes off, curled up together on a sofa, and waited for the Grangers to arrive with pizza.

"Harry," Hermione asked tentatively.

"Yes?"

"You've heard all about these wanted posters I take it?"

"Of course," Harry answered. "There's been an awful lot of whispering about them the last few days."

"Did you see the copy of one that was in the paper Monday?"

Harry made an affirmative noise.

"Interesting, that of the fifteen people, ten were all valued at the minimum amount," Hermione remarked after a moment of silence.

"Why?" Harry asked. "Whoever posted the rewards must think some are more dangerous than others. Remember, Lestrage is the one that cut herself to bring the loony back."

"True," Hermione agreed. "She's also one of the people who tortured Neville and his parents, and in the other life she killed Sirius." Hermione felt Harry's arms spasm a bit at that.

"True," Harry agreed. "Still, the poster's creators aren't likely to know that, are they?"

"Maybe not," Hermione agreed. "Dolohov was another who tortured the Longbottoms, and he has a high reward, too. And Greyback bit Remus."

"And in the other life," Harry said slowly, "Dolohov hurt you."

"I see," Hermione said thoughtfully. "It's also interesting that Ted Nott's father is worth more than the other Death Eaters."

"So it is," Harry said.

Hermione decided that she had enough of an answer, and asked nothing more about the subject of the posters.

Since she had co-wrote [The Quibbler](#) article with Harry, she didn't have to ask about that.

Meanwhile, John Nott was having a very quick talk with his son, Ted. Two wizards had already tried to kill him, and Nott had little doubt that the wizards gathering just outside the family's house would soon have the wards down. He had to take an emergency portkey to a safe location and hope he could make his way to his Master.

First, however, he needed to arrange something.

"So," Nott told Ted a second time, believing in learning by repetition as he did. "Memorize this spell. At some point between mid-March and the end of term, you hold this little device in your left hand and cast the spell at Potter's face. You make certain no one sees or hears you do it. You can whisper or even just mouth the charm if you want. Understand?" Ted nodded.

"Good. When you're alone, open the lid and check to see if this light which is glowing red has turned green. If it is, you were successful. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Ted said in a small voice. He only had a vague idea of what was happening outside, but it was frightening, to say the least.

"Then owl the device to the location on this bit of parchment. Don't lose it."

"No, father." Ted frowned, "But what will happen?"

Nott considered that. He decided to tell his son part of the truth. "The charm connects the device with whatever it was cast upon, so long as it's not living tissue. Potter won't feel a thing. You're casting it at his face because what you want is his glasses."

"That makes sense," Ted agreed. That meant whoever had the little device could locate Potter, probably for up to six months. Ted smiled grimly.

"I see you understand," Nott said.

"I believe so, father," Ted said.

"The charm is invisible," Nott reminded his son. "I suggest a star-lit night atop the astronomy tower as one possible attack point."

"Yes, sir," Ted answered. "In fact, in every class I have with him. . . ."

"Try and sit within his field of vision, so he gets used to you being there," Nott finished. "Good lad. Beyond this assignment, feel free to suck up with the Malfoy boy or even Potter if you wish. This will cover you with the Master."

"Yes, sir."

Nott's head jerked up as an alarm screeched for a second. The outer ward was down. "Goodbye, son."

"Goodbye, father," Ted said. 'Someone is going to pay for this,' Ted thought as his father disappeared. He hoped that the nine wizards breaking into the house wouldn't trash the place looking for father. He had already called for the aurors, and he saw with relief that the group just appearing were in fact from the MLES.

"Could you help your father with the groceries?" Emma Granger asked Hermione.

"I'll help," Harry said. He and Hermione got off the sofa, slipped their shoes back on, and went out to help.

Just shy of the Grangers' car, Harry suddenly grabbed Hermione and pulled her to the ground, calling out, "Everyone down!" The door of the Fiat exploded as a hex hit it.

Harry had managed to fall on top of Hermione. He spotted the attacker in the shadows of the back garden and directed all his anger into one voiceless attack.

The man's chest exploded just as four figures apparated in. "It's us!" Tonks called before Harry could attack any of them. Harry recognized the other three people as Order members he had not yet met in this time stream. He helped Hermione get up, and they carried in the groceries while Tonks and the Order members tidied everything up.

"So let me understand this," Dan Granger said slowly forty minutes later. "Someone has offered rewards for the fifteen major followers of this Riddle fellow." Tonks and Harry nodded. "Eleven of them were freely roaming around the country, having bribed and lied their way out of trouble back in 1981." Tonks nodded. "One of them. . . ."

"Peter Yaxley," Tonks supplied.

"Attacked us, and Harry here killed him."

"Sorry," Harry muttered.

The Grangers looked at their daughter's bondmate with a touch of fear, which Harry's Legilimency picked up. He flushed a bit.

"He saved us," Hermione pointed out.

"So he did," Emma conceded. She looked at Tonks. "And the other ten?"

"John Nott just escaped a group of bounty hunters a few hours ago," Tonks answered. "Jack and Darlene Avery were killed by bounty hunters yesterday. Joyce Wilkes has been given asylum in the Albanian embassy Monday night. Jacob Gibbon turned himself in to MLES this morning; he had two narrow escapes. No word on any of the others."

Dan Granger looked at Tonks. "I know Harry was going to travel by floo tonight, but could you escort him home early? There are some things we need to talk about as a family."

"Alright," Tonks said.

"Don't worry," Dan said to Harry. "We still want you here Boxing Day."

"Thank you, sir."

Despite Mr. Granger's assurances, Harry did not have a very pleasant Christmas season. He knew that Hermione's parents were frightened, and not only that, they had good reasons to be.

Harry's equilibrium was not helped when Hedwig showed up in the early afternoon of Christmas Eve with a request that Harry arrange for Professor Dumbledore to visit the Grangers on Boxing Day. While there were no attempts on Harry's well-being at the Burrow this year (unlike the year before), Ginny's blatant cold shoulder did not help settle Harry down in any way. Molly and Percy were shocked at the news of Harry's execution of Peter Yaxley, which was made worse by the twins' mock worship of Harry for the same act.

Harry arrived at the Grangers' at 9:31, practically the instant the floo connection opened. He saw that Dumbledore was already waiting with the Grangers.

Harry sat on the sofa next to Hermione. At Hogwarts, they maintained the illusion that they were 12 year olds playing at dating. Here, they looked like what they were -- an established bonded couple in miniature.

"The people you have protecting us tell us there is very little they can do to really insure our safety," Dan put out to start the conversation.

Harry looked at Hermione's strained face, and the fatigue on the Grangers'. He saw that Dumbledore was almost as in the dark as he was as to where the conversation was going. "That's true," Harry finally said. "That's true of every society, of course. If some nutcase wants to kill you, there's little that can be done to stop an attack. You could be killed by a deranged patient," he pointed out.

"True, but society puts in safeguards to lessen the probabilities of that happening," Dan retorted. "I don't see many safeguards in magical Britain."

"That's true," Harry agreed.

"Harry!" Dumbledore objected.

"What?" Harry asked. "It's certainly true. Maybe you just don't know Muggle society well-enough to understand how exposed the Grangers feel."

"That's true," Emma agreed while Dumbledore was trying to think of what to say. "From what we can learn, Australia would be safer for us, and for Hermione. There must be a magical school for her there."

"There is, but. . . ." Dumbledore protested.

"But we can't take her, since she won't go willingly," Dan agreed. "We can go, however, and are. My brother-in-law is in practice in Perth, and we have arranged to join him in March. Hermione will spend her summer vacations with us. Harry is welcome to spend any or all of his summers with us. If that is not satisfactory, then we go to court."

"We might lose," Emma said quietly to Dumbledore, "but we doubt you would welcome the publicity."

"True," Dumbledore admitted.

"May I offer you the reward money I got for Yaxley to defray your expenses?" Harry asked.

Dan and Emma looked at each other. Emma then said, "Please put twenty thousand of it in a vault for Hermione. You can use the rest for transportation costs to visit us."

"Alright," Harry agreed. He turned to Dumbledore. "Wouldn't it be easier, and cheaper, for some Order members to move the Grangers magically? And give them protection on the trip?"

"Yes, it would," Dumbledore agreed. He turned to the Grangers. "May we help?"

The two looked at each other again and then Emma agreed to the magical help.

Hermione leaned back. She was sitting on the vanity bench in front of the small vanity her parents had bought for her when she had been five. She had been examining the latest 'treatment' Harry had given her teeth. They were still too large in her opinion, but were almost down to a size that didn't embarrass her. She picked up a hair brush and started brushing her hair.

She smiled when she saw Harry come into her bedroom, dressed in plain blue pajamas and a new dressing gown. She was dressed in a short electric blue nightgown with spaghetti straps.

Harry came up behind her and kissed her bare shoulder. "Let's get some sleep," Harry suggested. As a concession to their bonding status, Harry could sleep with Hermione. As a concession to their age, they had to keep the bedroom door open.

It was a solution that all of them could live with.

Chapter XXI

Monday, December 28, 1992

"Well, Harry," Dumbledore said jovially as Harry walked into the dining room for breakfast, "you must be feeling relieved."

Harry, his hands full of breakfast trays, looked around the empty dining room. It was as rare for no one to join him for breakfast as it was for Dumbledore to be there at that time. It was obviously a set-up. Harry frowned.

Harry wondered if he should be upset with Moody and Remus for leaving him alone to face the Headmaster's Machiavellian plans or pleased that they would expect him to be able to handle them without their help.

Harry decided to give his friends the benefit of the doubt. "Relieved about what?"

"The Grangers not withdrawing Hermione from Hogwarts," Dumbledore answered.

Harry shrugged and said before the Headmaster could go on, "They could only withdraw her with your and Hermione's agreement, which Hermione at least would not give." Dumbledore winced just slightly at that dig. "Nor could they go to court and win, because all I would have to do is reveal our bonded status, which automatically makes us as emancipated as any seventeen year olds." It would bring about some embarrassing publicity, but Harry and Hermione would stand it if they had to.

"Ah . . . true," Dumbledore had to agree.

"I am glad that no one was hurt in the attack, other than the Death Eater," Harry went on. "Since I didn't use my wand, there was no way for them to actually prove I did it, and therefore they can't try and prosecute me for underage magic -- they would be laughed out of anything but a totally rigged court."

"Also true," Dumbledore had to agree.

Harry's face hardened. "Also, I've spent some time making certain that THIS time I am aware of all my rights, should the Ministry try anything like they did the last time around."

"That's . . . very wise," Dumbledore had to agree. "Of course, if those bounties had not been advertised, perhaps there would have been no attacks."

"Oh, I'm sure Riddle would get around to it sooner or later," Harry said.

"But some of the Death Eaters might not have followed him this time around!" Dumbledore protested.

"These weren't new recruits," Harry said coldly. "These are his old guard, everyone one of whom rallied around him last time around. As it was, I left off Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Snape, and Karkaroff, and I probably should have had them hunted down as well. I didn't. And I would suggest you wipe that smile off your face. You did not trick me into revealing anything I care if you know about or not. I will not tell you how I did it, and if you or anyone else had had the guts to ask me last week, I would have told you then." Harry leaned forward. "Now, any other questions or accusations?"

Dumbledore tried to lighten the moment. "Not unless you know how three newly constructed Muggle houses magically disappeared." It was unclear what had happened to three up-scale Muggle houses which had almost been completed. All three had disappeared over the previous week without a trace, except for a faint magical signal.

Harry rolled his eyes, stood up, and tossed two fried eggs and some bacon between two slices of toast. "I came back in time with one goal -- to destroy Voldemort and his supporters with less

bloodshed on my side than last time. Except for Voldemort himself, I would say I have already surpassed everything I accomplished last time, which was a lot more than you did. If I could, I'd track him down and kill him and the people around him right now. Stuck in this body, I can't, not for a while or not without some help from you and the Ministries. Find Voldemort and help me get to him or stay out of my way while I do what I feel I have to do to cut out his support."

Harry took a mug of hot chocolate and his sandwich and left the dining room.

Alastor Moody stumped in a few seconds later. "We tried to warn you," Moody chortled. "Your caution the last time around has created someone unique in the history of the wizarding world. Be very glad his goal is to lead a quiet life and raise a family. If this one wanted to conquer the world, he might just be able to do it."

Friday, January 1, 1993

Harry was sitting in the parlor of the Dumbledores' cottage, waiting for Hermione to floo through in twenty minutes or so. He looked up when Moody came in. "How you holding up, son?"

"Pretty well, Alastor," Harry answered. "Can you tell me something?"

"Well, you can ask," Moody retorted.

"What would you say to the idea of having some people with Muggle sniper rifles and similar weapons reinforcing areas like Diagon Alley and so on?"

"Muggles?" Moody asked, shocked. "Protecting us? Knowing about us?"

"Not as such," Harry answered thoughtfully. "There are Squibs and there are Muggle siblings of magical people. Some of them must have been in the military or police and such. They would have the knowledge and the training."

"That kind of trick would likely only work once," Moody objected.

Harry shrugged. "Disillusion them or put them under invisibility cloaks. I bet neither would hide a Death Eater from an infrared sniper scope."

"There you might be right," Moody allowed. "Still, I don't know if there would be enough such people, and I know it wouldn't be allowed."

"I wouldn't tell if you wouldn't," Harry answered with a shrug.

"Well," Moody allowed, "It can't hurt to look at the numbers."

Monday, January 4, 1993

There had obviously been some serious plotting going on over the holidays. It was announced in the Slytherin and Ravenclaw common rooms the Sunday night everyone returned that there would be House meetings concerning 'the general direction of the Hogwarts Curriculum' the next evening. The Hufflepuffs, hearing about this the next morning, opted to do the same, which made Percy feel the Gryffindors should as well.

Before going off to the Gryffindor house meeting after dinner, Harry asked Sirius if any of the staff were in on this. Even Sirius admitted that Snape seemed to have nothing to do with what was going on, and was in fact upset that his students were challenging a curriculum which he had approved and was (a little reluctantly perhaps) pushing.

Harry went off to the Gryffindor meeting a little relieved. He disliked Snape on many levels and for many reason. He was sure that the 'great greasy git' would ultimately control his students, at least outwardly. Harry was more concerned about what the Ravenclaws might be up to.

Despite a few lurking doubts on Harry's part, Percy led the Gryffindors easily through a discussion on the curriculum reforms put in place the previous year. There were a few criticisms of the actual content of both courses, which Percy rephrased into suggestions for improvement. The House approved the ideas unanimously. Harry was unsurprised to learn the next morning that the Hufflepuffs had done much the same.

Harry learned from Draco and Daphne that the Slytherin meeting had been longer and much more rancorous. As a Second year, Draco couldn't directly influence any of the older students, but the tradition of the rare House meetings were clear -- all actions had to carry a vote by all the students, no matter which House was involved. Draco (and Harry) carried a lot of weight in the lower three years, perhaps overwhelming weight in the lowest two. In Slytherin, nearly every one of those two years (except Pansy Parkinson and Ted Nott) would almost automatically support the new curriculum. As Draco pointed out when he was finally allowed to speak, since they were the two years who had actually taken the new courses, they might be presumed to have a more informed opinion.

Unspoken (at least openly) were the facts that Sirius Black and Severus Snape were both powerful wizards and staff members, and Professor Black's background also commanded respect. In the end, by a narrow vote, the Slytherins asked the Board of Governors to reconsider if the 'Living with Muggles' course should stay mandatory. Draco had Daphne noted every opinion expressed and who expressed it, and of course how everyone voted. They copied that and passed the information on to Sirius, Snape, Moody, and Harry.

Pro-Purists in Ravenclaw had more detailed critiques of the basic concepts of the courses, without of course criticizing Sirius' actual teaching. This critique went down to a strong defeat (largely because of the overwhelming support given by the First and Second years, and because the clique of girls who had made Luna's years at Hogwarts miserable had decided that Professor Black was 'dreamy'), with the details sent on by Padma.

Sirius was wont to be upset by all this, but Remus had reminded him that 1) the project was just getting started; 2) nearly every First or Second year student had stood by him; 3) the meetings had revealed possible students to keep an eye on, and 4) he (Sirius) was still considered 'dreamy'.

Remus refused to repeat Sirius' retort to all that, but Harry noted that Sirius was no longer upset.

Sunday, January 31, 1993

Moody took Harry aside after his 'special instructions' (dueling practice) and led his protege to his office. Moody threw up every security ward he knew which would work at Hogwarts.

Even for Moody, this seemed a tad paranoid to Harry, but he said nothing, knowing Moody would give him a reason for all this.

"You remember that idea you had," Moody finally said, "the one about using Squib snipers?"

Harry nodded. "And Muggle siblings of magical people. You said you'd look into it and see if the numbers were there."

"I did, and there aren't," Moody answered. "However, as I was looking, something was tickling the back of my brain. Something about using Squibs and Muggles who know about our world. Well, the Squib thought was something of a dead end. There just aren't all that many Squibs. Maybe one out of three hundred births when both parents are magical, about one out of a hundred when only one is. Even if both parents are Muggles, only about one out of ten full siblings don't have magical power if one does. Drives Purists and those Arithmancers who specialize in statistics a bit barmy." Harry grinned, since he knew that was one of Moody's hobbies.

"None of yer cheek, son," Moody pretended to growl. "Where was I? Oh, right. You probably know that the Second War with Grindelwald is called the Second World War by the Muggles, right?"

"Right," Harry said. "Grindelwald incited both world wars in order to weaken the Muggle World. He directly incited the Communists and especially the Nazis."

"Very good. If I thought you'd learned any of that from Binns I'd give you a point."

"Well, I didn't," Harry admitted.

"The Muggle Government and the Ministry both had a fair amount of information the other needed," Moody went on. "The Muggles set up a small bureau to coordinate things, and the Ministry supplied the people. They didn't send anyone they thought much of, of course. A few Squibs, a few siblings of Muggle-born, a few Muggle-born themselves, who wanted to help directly in the war effort. There was even a vampire, two werewolves, a couple of quarter giants, and the like. Now, as far as I knew, there was no use for the thing after the War. Still, bureaucracies can have a life of their own."

"True," Harry agreed.

"One thing Muggles are brilliant at is collating information," Moody said. "Some system called 'punch cards', I believe."

"Those were replaced in the 1970s, I think," Harry said.

"So I've been told. Anyway, I went to the old location, a small building in Shrewsbury and there it was, still masquerading as a Government department on inland fishing statistics." Moody frowned. "Actually, they said they also do work on inland fishing statistics, because people kept on stopping in and asking questions. Anyway, the important thing is, they let me in. They've been collecting data -- magical and Muggle, Governmental and public information -- since 1940, and some solid back data at least to 1881. If the dementors start drifting away, say, and the idiots in the Ministry don't notice, this bunch will likely understand what's happening from Muggle and Magical media reports before anyone."

"I never heard of them," Harry admitted, meaning no one had thought of this the last time around as far as he knew.

"There's only one problem," Moody said.

"Ah, that figures," Harry sighed. "And what's that?"

"They can't tell anyone."

Harry blinked, then asked, "What do you mean they can't tell anyone?"

"They can't alert anyone when anything happens," Moody replied. "If someone doesn't ask them for information, they can't send anything to anyone. How fast do you think the Ministry would shut the flow of information off to these folks if they ever remembered the place existed?"

"The Muggle Government probably wouldn't be thrilled either," Harry said. "They'd probably consider the place a security leak."

"Good point," Moody agreed.

"So," Harry asked, "who can ask for information?"

"There about twenty-seven people all together," Moody said with his twisted grin. "Fifteen in the Muggle Government and a dozen in ours. Including the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

Harry grinned back. "Can you go directly to Mister Wesley, or do you have to work through Dumbledore?"

"I can go right to Arthur," Moody declared. "I'll brief Remus, in case something happens to me."

Unfortunately, no one can replace Arthur."

"I understand," Harry said. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that, then."

Moody grimaced. "Still, at least we'll have another source of intelligence."

That night, Harry and Hermione sat curled up on their usual loveseat, Harry glancing over some rather useless intelligence reports (charmed to look like a Muggle history text) while Hermione was triple-checking her out of class writing assignments for the next week. Seeing no one was close enough to overhear, she leaned next to Harry's ear and whispered, "A few of the girls are getting really good at Occlumency."

Harry merely nodded, knowing that Hermione wouldn't see this as being rude, but rather just being careful.

"Do you intend telling anyone else what I found out?"

Harry frowned, and shrugged. He had not planned on cluing anyone in, but knew he should hear Hermione out if she had an opinion.

"Tuesday morning?" she asked. They had Astronomy late the next evening, and would be allowed to sleep in Tuesday morning. If they met at 9:00, they would likely have the common room to themselves.

Harry nodded. Hermione lightly kissed his ear, and they went back to what they had been doing.

Tuesday, February 2, 1993

"So, you have no intention of telling anyone else?" Hermione asked.

"I really don't see why anyone else needs to know," Harry pointed out. "I can see why they would want to know, but that's something very different."

Hermione frowned, and Harry muttered, "There's already one too many who knows as it is, as far as I'm concerned."

Hermione looked at Harry sharply.

"Snape," Harry said simply.

They were quiet for a few moments, and then, "If I hadn't known part of it, would you have told me?" Hermione asked.

"I honestly expected that if anyone figured it out, it would be you," Harry answered. "Well, you and Dumbledore. I had to risk his figuring it out because I wanted to destroy the Horcruxes and free Sirius as quickly as possible. As it was, he knew something was wrong and I had to tell him our first meeting. I wasn't surprised that you figured it out, just that you had done it so quickly. I knew that if we were close friends, you'd likely have it sussed Christmas our First year."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "I think you're avoiding the question."

"I'm saying there is no question, because I had absolute faith you would have figured it out. Therefore, I never considered not telling you." Had Hermione been seventeen instead of twelve in many ways, there would have been no way Harry could have gotten off so easily. As it was, this Hermione was satisfied with his answer.

"Hermione," Harry said, blushing slightly as he moved on to a new topic.

"Yes?" Hermione was curious what this might be about.

"Considering our, well, relationship, I really don't know what I should get you for Valentine's Day

this year," Harry confessed. "I don't want to make a mistake, so despite the fact that it would ruin the surprise, what would you like?"

"You mean besides the flowers you ordered?"

Harry frowned, which confused Hermione. "Ah," Harry finally said. "Neville or Ron overheard me and they told someone. The flowers were for Luna." Seeing Hermione's expression, Harry added, "It's her birthday; it's not because of Valentine's Day."

"Oh." Hermione was embarrassed by her flush of jealousy towards the dead girl. "I was wondering why you were ordering sunflowers and tulips. Roses would be nice." Harry had given her free access to his accounts, and she could owl order just about anything she wanted.

"What color would you like." He paused. "I seem to remember you like white roses."

Hermione nodded, and smiled.

Hearing Susan Bones come down the girls' stairs prevented any further private conversation. The trio went down to have a light and late breakfast.

Harry was a bit surprised to have Dumbledore motion for Harry to join him after breakfast. "I thought I should tell you," Dumbledore said, "the false Prophecy was stolen last night." He frowned. "Despite the heavy wards at the Ministry, despite increased awareness of the plot, somehow, he was able to sneak in, take it, and leave."

"What was finally left?" Harry asked. "The version we came up with?"

"Exactly," Dumbledore said. The ending of this phony Prophecy hinted that not only could Harry destroy the Dark Lord, but that once Harry was Marked, his death would cause Voldemort's death as well.

Voldemort should not only be avoiding Harry, but taking care that Harry was not injured, at least until Voldemort found some other way to restart his pursuit of immortality or until he realized the Prophecy was partially false.

Chapter XXII

Monday, February 15, 1993

It was the first day that it was possible to even try and hold a Quidditch practice, so of course Wood had scheduled a short impromptu practice in the late afternoon.

In the changing room, Harry looked up and saw the rather displeased-looking Weasley twins and Wood.

"What?" Harry bleated. "It was a good practice!"

"Yeah, but you're still a little wanker, Potter," Wood growled.

"What did I do?" Harry asked nervously.

"So, you want to get your little girlfriend flowers," Fred complained. "Fine. You're both a bit on the young side, but okay. But you couldn't just get someone to transfigure or conjure them for you, could you? No, you had to get the real deal. Not only that, but did you have to get her every bloody white rose in Scotland?"

"Scotland be blowed," George chimed in. "Every white rose in the British Isles, and probably the Low Countries and France, too."

"It was a mistake," Harry lied. "I asked for a dozen long-stemmed white roses and the witch asked 'how many?' and I said twelve. So she sent twelve dozen."

"And just where did you 'talk' with a witch about flowers?" Wood demanded. Second years couldn't go to Hogsmeade, of course.

"Professor Lupin let me use his floo connection," Harry answered without batting an eyelid. Actually, Remus had ordered the twelve dozen flowers for Harry, and was glad to do so, since it reminded him to order some for Tonks, who was still at Hogwarts, providing extra security. "If you remember, I did try to remind the lot of you about Valentine's Day three times over the last two weeks." He glared at Fred. "YOU told me to buggar off, and then you and Lee ran me off from 'your side' of the common room." He transferred his glare to Oliver. "And you laughed."

"Ah."

"I suppose I did."

"I wasn't there!" George protested.

"You sprinkled itching powder on Hermione's and my love seat," Harry pointed out.

"You're too young to cuddle like that all the time, let alone snog!"

Harry peered at George. "You look like George, but you sound like Percy. Or are you just jealous I get to cuddle more than you?"

George grabbed his heart. "Oh! A hit!" He looked at Harry. "I am merely wounded, but surrender."

The trio of older students were trailing Harry back to the castle at a distance, looking rather abashed. "Wish I knew how he does that," George whinged.

"He's taken Percy down a few notches," Oliver pointed out. "We should know better than to take him on."

"And the girls all think he's so ruddy 'cute'," Fred said with a sigh. "If the 'Boy-Who-Lived' doesn't kick our butts, the girls will."

"Uh oh," George said. The other two looked up, and saw that Professors Lupin, Moody, and Black

were waiting for Harry.

"Do you ever get the idea that there's an awful lot that goes on around here we have no clue about?" Fred complained.

"It's easier to just worry about Quidditch," Oliver said with sigh.

"What's happened?" Harry asked when he was seated in the Headmaster's office.

"We're not sure," Sirius admitted.

"Well, we're certain what happened," Remus hedged.

"We just have no idea what it means."

"Could you give me a hint?" Harry asked.

"You do know what happens to a person when they are Kissed by a dementor," Remus started off. Sirius gave slight shiver.

"Yes," Harry said. His eyes went wide. "Inferi! The Kissed make the most effective Inferi, because they are soulless but in better shape than the actual dead! And Voldemort likes using Inferi!"

"All true, but incorrect, at least for the moment," Dumbledore said. "The bodies of the soulless are cared for in Azkaban for the most part. Prisoners who are not being fed on most directly by the dementors have to feed and care for them."

"An extra punishment, and it does scare them to think, if they're ever in for anything more serious, they could end up the same way," Moody put in.

"And?" Harry asked.

"Obviously, no one keeps a real close eye on the Kissed," Remus plowed on, "mostly just making certain they aren't being abused. Anyway, to make things brief, Pettigrew is missing."

Harry frowned. "Why would anyone want Pettigrew?" he asked.

"We don't know," Dumbledore admitted.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Harry asked, "Can the Kissed be put under the Imperius?"

"Easily," Dumbledore responded.

"Could he be made to assume his rat form?" Harry asked.

"We don't think so," Moody answered. "Still, it's the only thing we could come up with either."

Remus shrugged. "Any other ideas?"

"Is there any way for his soul to be, well, put back?" Harry asked.

"None that we know of," Dumbledore answered.

"How about the dementors?" Remus asked. "If there is such a way, whichever dementor took Peter's soul would have to be involved."

After a moment's silence, Harry asked, "Can dementors talk?"

"A few," Sirius answered in a small, distant voice. "Those who have taken the most souls. The more they Kiss, the more intelligence they have."

"We can't trust Fudge to keep a close eye on them," Harry said. "I need to speak with one of the leaders."

"Are ye daft, son!" Moody cried out the loudest, but all the others had said much the same thing.

"They always seemed more attracted to me than anyone else," Harry mused. "I always meant to find out why. Better to find out now, when I can have some of you with me."

"I'm sure you're powerful enough to produce a Patronus," Dumbledore commented over the stunned silence that comment had created. "Still, not everyone can produce one."

Harry shrugged. "Remus taught me how to do it mid-way through my original Third year. I should try it out, though."

"Third year?" Moody demanded, impressed.

"Yes," Harry answered. "I taught the DA how to do it, even though only a few people managed to produce one. Still, most at least got the mist." He thought a moment and said, "I really think it should be added towards the end of the Fifth year instead of at the end of the Seventh."

"You may be correct," Dumbledore agreed, standing. "Let's go to your practice room to get some space and we shall see what you've got."

"Expecto Patronum!" Prongs sprang from Harry's wand, and stood there, defiantly. Harry felt empowered, as if his magic was truly flowing freely and fully for the first time. "Expecto Patronum!" A wolf sprang from Harry's wand to everyone's surprise, especially to Harry. "Expecto Patronum!" A silver version of Padfoot came out and joined the others. "Expecto Patronum!" A large parrot with an eye patch came out. Harry looked at Moody, and decided he could pass for a pirate. "Expecto Patronum!" A phoenix Patronus emerged. "Expecto Patronum!" An otter emerged. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" All the images suddenly merged into a huge bear-like creature, primitive and ferocious, with gold glimmering amongst the silver.

Harry canceled the spell, and with a final, silent roar, the giant cave-bear disappeared. He turned and looked at the four teachers.

"We'll arrange a meeting," Moody said.

Sunday, February 28, 1993

Harry stood behind the Shrieking Shack, where he could not be seen from the village. Moody stood off to one side, Aberforth Dumbledore to the other. Albus led a dementor to a position about twelve feet in front of Harry, while two others stayed about forty feet further back. Albus then moved away quickly.

"What does the Light One want to discuss?" came a voice, but Harry wasn't really certain if it was sounding in his ears or just in his head. Harry suspected it was both.

"The Light One?" Harry asked.

"You radiate Light Magic," the dementor answered. "We are drawn to you."

"Why?"

"Why is a moth drawn to a flame? We must put out the Light. . . ."

"Or what?" Harry demanded.

". . . or be destroyed," the dementor admitted.

"If the dementors stay on Azkaban and do only what the Ministry asked, then we would not have to be in conflict," Harry said. "If an error is made as to who should be Kissed, I would blame the Ministry, not the dementors."

"The Dark One, the Nearly Soulless One, promises us much food," the dementor said. "Unlimited feeding on the non-magical. Breeding. We have not bred in many many years."

"And assuming that we do not then destroy you, what happens in the future when the non-magical are consumed, either by you or by the Dark One's other plans?" Harry asked. "And when you then destroy the magical? Can you really limit your feeding, or will you starve?"

"If such a thing occurred, it would be many centuries from now. Few of us have fed enough to be able to think that far ahead," the dementor admitted. "As we grow, we think more clearly."

"And when you breed, you combine and divide," Harry pointed out. "You would revert back to that mindless, instinctive state. Tell me, which state would you prefer to exist in?"

That made the dementor think, and then then, "I would prefer this state," the dementor agreed.

"However, we do not feed enough at Azkaban. The minds there have few happy thoughts even before we begin to feed off of them. We must either feed more, or Kiss more. We cannot thrive without both, but we can maintain with just one."

Harry had the gleam of an idea, which he quickly buried before the dementor could read it, as his Occlumency didn't seem terribly effective here, just as Dumbledore had warned him. "Before we continue," Harry said, "tell me, has the Dark One been in contact with you recently?"

The dementor bowed, then added, "Six wild dementors have already joined him."

"Has he asked for the return of one soul in particular?"

The dementor bowed again.

"Has it been returned?" Harry asked.

"No," the dementor answered. "It is a poor soul, even by the standards we have been feeding on these last years in Azkaban, Still, magic enhances the savor of the meal if not the effect. The Dark One has promised us many of the unmagical, but until he can find one with both magic and enough life experience to make the exchange equal, my brother will not entertain the exchange."

"So the dementor with Pettigrew's soul is fully sentient?" Harry asked.

The dementor bowed.

"Would he remain sentient if he gave up Pettigrew's soul and did not get another in return?" Harry asked.

The dementor hesitated, but then bowed in agreement once more.

"I may have a solution," Harry said. "May I confer with my friends in private?"

The dementor hesitated, and then said, "One moment. You have the power of Light. That does not mean you can use it."

"What would you have me do?" Harry asked. "Show you my Patronus? Destroy one of your colleagues?"

He had meant the latter as sarcasm, but the dementor answered, "If you can destroy the nearly-wild dementor on your left, we will take any proposal which betters our position with great sincerity."

Harry thought a moment. He knew everything that hurt a dementor -- bright white light, ultra-violet light, and positive emotion so strong it was concentrated in a form which the dementor could not absorb -- a Patronus. Harry also knew that spells merely gave a focus to magic, which was conditioned by repetitive use, both general magic itself and the flow of magic within any given wizard.

Therefore, he could in theory invent any spell he wanted to. If he believed in the spell enough, and was powerful enough to shape the magic, the spell would work.

Harry used his Occlumency to sort through his emotions, but instead of hiding them, he brought all his positive emotions to the forefront, especially his feelings towards Hermione. He gathered all those feelings together, took a deep breath and cast a spell like a spear. "Amor lux!"

A bright light, just tinged with violet, shot from Harry's wand and slammed into the target dementor, which sizzled and totally disappeared in less than two seconds. Only its smoking robes were left, piled on the ground.

Harry looked at the other two dementors, which prostrated themselves on the ground.

"Now may I confer?" Harry asked.

"As you will, Lord of Light."

"What the bloody blue hell was that!" Moody hissed.

"Just gaining their respect," Harry answered. "Some of the dementors are restless because they aren't really sentient. They act on instinct and the instinct is to feed. Azkaban doesn't supply enough positive emotion for all the dementors, so even the sentient ones who know they might be better served in the long run by staying are being tempted to leave."

"Difficult," Albus mused.

"How about having each sentient dementor being escorted through a Muggle street at least once a year," Harry said. The four adults blinked at that. "They wouldn't stay in one place to really effect any one Muggle, and they certainly wouldn't Kiss any. To do so means their destruction."

"The Ministry will say it's too dangerous," Albus pointed out.

"The Ministry is always saying that the dementors are safe," Harry retorted. "We know how potentially dangerous this is, but the Ministry can't squeak."

"He's probably right," Aberforth said.

"Also, they have been asked to give up Pettigrew's soul," Harry went on. "Pettigrew is a known quantity -- he'll likely screw up anything he's ordered to do. Do we let him?"

"Give me one more reason why we should," Remus said.

"Well, this way we can kill him," Harry offered. The other men glared at him. "What? I'm the good guy, that doesn't mean I'm a goodie-goodie wimp."

"I think we should leave Pettigrew Kissed," Remus said.

"I see no advantage to us in having him return," Albus agreed. Moody and Aberforth added their agreement.

Harry went and offered the dementor the deal, including asking that Pettigrew be kept Kissed. The dementor agreed, and Dumbledore went on to broker the deal with the Ministry.

After an dinner, Harry took Hermione to the Room of Requirement, the first time he had done so, although he had explained what it was long before. He left his mind blank as he made the required passes, letting the magic decide what he needed.

What he needed was apparently a quiet parlor. The lighting was soft and there was a roaring applewood fire in a large fireplace. On three sides of the cozy room were large windows with complex mullions, showing snow softly piling up in the woods, although in actuality it was a cloudless day around Hogwarts. The wall behind them and the walls between the windows were old oak paneling. There was a large Persian carpet on the floor and a very odd piece of furniture.

"Pretty," Hermione said, looking around. "What sort of sofa is that?" It was odd-looking to say the least, a large, soft L-shaped sofa of some sort that had a high slightly inclined back at the angle, with cozy looking Afghans, with two piles of clothing on top of it.

"H'mmm," Harry said. "I see. It looks like we're supposed to change."

Hermione shrugged, and the two stripped down and put on the flannel pajamas, wooly socks, and

warm dressing gowns. Harry had Hermione lie down so that she could lean up against the back. Harry covered her legs with one afghan. Harry then laid down, covered up with a second afghan, and settled his head on Hermione's lap. "You don't mind, do you?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled and let her fingers run through Harry hair, something that she enjoyed and which always soothed Harry. "Actually, I don't mind a bit," she said. "Tell me about the dementor."

"There were three, actually," Harry said, and he told her everything which had happened.

When he was finished, Hermione said, "Having dementors parading around high streets all over Britain won't hurt anyone, will it?"

"It shouldn't," Harry said. "The dementors should be kept moving. Think of dementors as feeding either like great white sharks or like whale sharks. Instead of wrenching out huge chunks of emotion from one or two victims, they'll be swallowing lots of fleeting emotions from lots of people. I would imagine the people on the streets will be moving away from the area the dementors are being led along."

"Emotional plankton? I see what you mean, but it's not a very good metaphor."

"Best I could come up with." Harry sighed with pleasure as Hermione started using both hands on his scalp and neck.

"Harry."

"H'mmm?"

"Am I a bossy know-it-all?"

Harry shifted around so he could look Hermione in the face. "Who called you that?"

"Am I? Tell me the truth."

"The truth is, you were more-so the first time around. I think it's because you have a drive to prove yourself, and people held your birth even more against you that time than they do now."

"So I am?"

"Not towards me, but sometimes you can come across that way to those you have to explain things to more often than you think you should have to. Now again, who called you that?"

"I overheard Ginny talking with Ron and Percy."

"Ron and Ginny have their own issues with you, and of course Ginny. . . ."

"Still resents that you didn't return her crush," Hermione agreed. "Is my being a, well, you know, why we didn't date the other time around?"

"I don't think so," Harry said. "I was a late developer, except compared to Ron. Unlike Ron, who apparently thought you were androgenous until December our Fourth year, I always thought you were a very cute and adorable girl. You acted as much like my big sister as my close friend. Still, I didn't think about being attracted to you or anyone until I was flying the Ravenclaw match in third year." He shrugged. "There was just something about Cho's shape as she flew that sort of, well, woke me up as to what girls being different might mean."

"Cho?" Hermione asked, a bit surprised.

Harry shrugged. "I had a crush on her for over a year, but as soon as we had one date that infatuation died a quick death." Harry smiled. "You and I didn't snog until after Ron died, but you and I shared more hugs and affection during the time I had a crush on Cho than Cho and I did in the time we dated."

He looked up at Hermione. "I love you. Don't let Ginny or Ron or anyone undermine your self-confidence."

Hermione leaned over and kissed Harry's nose. "I won't."

Chapter XXIII

Sunday, May 23, 1993

Despite increased offers by Voldemort, the dementors of Azkaban stayed there. Pettigrew's lifeless body was discovered in early May in Austria. By that time, two of Voldemort's six 'wild' dementors had been tracked down and destroyed, and two others had defected.

Also as the end of May neared, four more of the Death Eaters Harry had put bounties on (George Jugson, Jason Gibbon, Alecto Carrows, and Amycus Carrows) had been killed. Joyce Wilkes, who had been given asylum by the Albanians, was still with them. Deitmar von Spitzbach, the dark sorcerer who had twice reanimated Voldemort, had been run off of his warded estate in the Carpathians, but had eluded capture.

Other than that, no word, no hint, was heard of from Voldemort and his supporters. The Ministries, Dumbledore and the Order, and Harry were completely in the dark. The disappearance of three more newly-built Muggle homes, their sites only bearing the smallest traces of magic, merely perplexed everyone in authority.

Harry did not let any of that bother him. Either Voldemort had moved on to some new dark project, or he had not swallowed the false Prophecy and was still after Harry. Based on his previous experiences, Harry hoped that if Voldemort did try anything, he might have some warning.

Unfortunately, Harry had not detected Ted Nott using a small device held in the palm of his hand as the Slytherin cast an almost undetectable tracking spell on Harry's glasses. Whomever was holding the device would be brought to Harry's location. Voldemort was owed some favors by some of the various Dark and Pure-Blood secret societies in Europe. He had managed to extract the promise of a few wizards who would join him in the attack on Harry Potter.

Voldemort hoped that Harry's death would jump-start his movement.

Harry, of course, had no idea this was in the works. No, what was bothering Harry this Sunday evening were Ron and Ginny Weasley. The previous few weeks had seen dueling tournaments, as the students involved in the dueling clubs held round-robins for each year.

Ron had won the Second Year Tournament. He had been happy all Friday evening and Saturday morning. That was when Ginny had given her brother an evil smile and congratulated Ron for being the second best dueler in his year. Ron had look confused for a moment, and then looked at Harry. Ron, who had been walking around with his trophy under his arm for thirteen hours, threw it on the floor and stomped away.

It was the first time Harry had seen the twins and Percy in total agreement, as they lambasted Ginny for ten minutes. Percy had fixed the bent trophy and the twins had carried it off to Ron. Ron was reported still steaming after dinner. Ginny was reported crying until nearly midnight.

Harry had slept on a sofa in the common room the night before, just to stay out of Ron's way. Percy had seen him there, and had merely given Harry a weak smile.

Now, he was sitting on a rock near the lake, having tossed the squid some left over toast from breakfast.

"Good morning, Mister Potter."

Harry spun around, surprised that anyone could get twelve feet from him without startling him.

"Good morning, Professor Snape."

Snape walked over and sat on another rock. "We haven't had much formal contact, have we, Mister Potter?"

"No, sir," Harry agreed.

Snape was glad the boy merely sounded like a confident student, not like an equal. "Tell me, Mister Potter. Did you agree to join in a dueling tournament next weekend? You and any other non-member of the dueling clubs against all the winners from each year?"

Harry's jaw actually dropped. "What? That. . . !" Harry shook his head. "Why would I want to do something that stupid?" Harry remembered to add. "Sir."

"So, you believe to do so would be 'stupid'?"

Harry's eyes glanced around.

"We are alone, Mister Potter," Snape said. "I had to take quite a number of precautions to get as close as I did, and I could not have approached any closer. In doing so, I have guaranteed us privacy."

"In that case, Professor, then yes I believe that would be stupid. The last time around, despite the fact that you were using passive Legilimency on me and knew better, you claimed I was a showoff, begging for glory. I wasn't, and I'm no more interested in 'showing off' this time around. I certainly don't have anything to prove, and I certainly don't need to beat the other students."

"I see," Snape said. "Under those circumstances, what I am about to say will make little sense to you at first. If you can keep your head from swelling, there is little purpose in keeping your light under a bushel. You have set actions into motion. You must control what you have started, or else you may be left under the control of those very forces you started. The Dark Lord is apparently in disarray as are all those who might support him. The strictest Pure-Bloods and their agenda are in retreat for the moment as well. Who is there to take the lead in the British community? Dumbledore has always refused."

"No offense, Professor, but I don't think any one person should have all that much influence."

Snape looked at Harry and actually looked pleased for a moment. Finally, he said, "The summit is unoccupied. Even the path up the slope is empty. You must set yourself on that path, Mister Potter. It is up to you if you scale to the summit or if you merely help make certain that no one passes you." Snape looked off into the distance. "We pat ourselves on the back and tell ourselves how marvelous it is to be magical," Snape said. "In reality, many, perhaps most of us at least in Britain, either want to be sheep or simply want to be left alone, and will let anyone run things, so long as we aren't bothered."

"I don't know about sheep," Harry said, "but considering the fact that Fudge is the Minister I can't argue against your other idea."

"You may not consider yourself a sheep, Mister Potter, and perhaps you are not," Snape conceded. "However, I did not consider myself one either. Yet I was, when I joined the Death Eaters, and I apparently was when I crawled back into His service in your other lifetime. I do not intend to be a sheep this time. In an ideal world, we would not need a shepherd and his guard dogs. This world is not ideal. I admire the Headmaster, and he literally saved me in 1980, or at least he helped me save myself. Yet that is the most he is willing to do for the magical world."

Snape looked Harry directly in the eye. "You may also avoid becoming the shepherd and allowing the world to use you to save itself. In that case, you must be the inspiration and you must be the court of last resort, urging the Ministry to do the right thing, but willing to step in if things go too far. The time to start is now, Mister Potter. I admit, I came down here to castigate you, because I thought you had agreed to this contest for the wrong reasons. Now I see the Weasleys or someone like them are trying to set you up for something. Use this to your advantage, Mister Potter." Snape nodded at Harry and stalked away without another word.

"If I hadn't heard it, I wouldn't have believed it," Harry muttered.

Some of the older Ravenclaws approached Harry that evening about the 'Dueling Championship' play-off. Harry agreed to participate, and then had to spend the next two days convincing Remus, Moody, and especially Sirius why he had agreed to Snape's idea. Dumbledore had agreed with Snape, which did not surprise Harry in the least.

No one had entered the tournament besides the seven Year Champions and Harry. Their names were randomly paired and the first round would be the following Saturday, as there was no Quidditch game or Hogsmeade weekend. The first would be:

Ron Weasley, Gryffindor, Second Year Champion
Cedric Diggory, Hufflepuff, Fifth Year Champion

Grace Peebles, Ravenclaw, Third Year Champion
Anna Franklin, Slytherin, Seventh Year Champion

Thomas Jackson, Slytherin, First Year Champion
George Weasley, Gryffindor, Fourth Year Champion

Harry Potter, Gryffindor
Tobias Bole, Slytherin, Sixth Year Champion

No one was surprised at three of the duels, as the older three students easily took their younger opponents in well under thirty seconds each. The older students simply had a greater repertoire of spells and shields at their commands, plus greater power due to their age. All the champions had superior reflexes, and so the younger ones could gain no advantage there.

It had been the third match, the one between Harry and the Sixth year champion, Tobias Bole, which had shocked everyone other than Hermione and Tonks, including none other than Albus Dumbledore.

Harry Potter was, after all, several steps beyond any Hogwarts student in terms of his power. He was far more powerful than he had been the night he had destroyed Voldemort in that previous lifetime. In any formal duel, all offensive magic had to be spoken. Defensive magic, however, did not have to be. Harry merely brought his magic to the surface of his body. No one had ever thought of using their magic in such a fashion before. Harry had thought of it over the previous summer, when he and Hermione's father had been watching reruns of the old Star Trek series. He and Dan Granger had fallen into a discussion of the theories behind the Enterprise's shielding.

Dan was very much a SciFi aficionado, a Trekker from the first time The Original Series had been shown in Britain. He knew every Trek and Dr. Who reference there was. Harry had wondered if he could develop the type of passive shielding a ship like the Enterprise would have needed to avoid being pulverized by space dust.

What he had developed was a deflector shield that needed no incantation, only intent. It had stood up to everything Hermione could throw against it the first time Harry had tried it. By now, even Tonks and Hermione working together couldn't throw him off, and he had kept it secret from everyone else. Therefore, when Moody, acting as the referee, called for action, Harry merely stood and looked at the older Slytherin.

Bole frowned, and then sent a stunner at Harry.

Harry merely stood there and let the hex hit him. The stunner hit Harry on his chest near his right shoulder, splattered, and died off. Harry crossed his arms and looked at Bole. "Well, go ahead and do something," Harry said.

Bole looked at Harry stupidly. There were lots of spells, hexes, jinxes, and curses allowed in the dueling clubs, but none were really any more powerful than a stunner. Harry sighed and placed his wand behind his ear.

"Stupefy!" Bole tried again, for lack of a better option.

This time, Harry moved. He clapped his hands together, catching the ball of magic between them, crushing the hex. Harry then took his wand in hand, sighted at Bole very deliberately, and returned the curse with every iota of power he had. "Stupefy!"

Bole just managed to raise a shield in time, not that it did much good. The hex exploded through the shield and hit Bole of the left shoulder, breaking it in four places and spinning the large teen around four times as it knocked him back twelve yards. Bole crashed to the ground, moaned, and hazily decided that staying where he was was an excellent option.

Then he passed out, and Harry summoned the boy's wand.

George Weasley gulped and looked at Cedric Diggory. The two were hardly close friends, being a year apart and in different Houses. Still, the Weasleys and the Diggorys were old families in Ottery St. Catchpole, even though, as was common in magical Britain, their families in the area were now down to a mere two households. They socialized on occasion, and the two teens knew each other moderately well.

"Bloody hell, Weasley!" Cedric said softly but with awe. "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't never have believed it."

"Well, it explains why no one in Gryffindor bet against Harry, doesn't it?" George said. The Slytherins had been running a betting book, and had been surprised that the Gryffindors had been backing Harry.

"I know, but still! I've never seen a simple stunner cut through a protego like that!"

"Bole must have miscast it," Anna Franklin, the Seventh year champion sneered.

"Fine," George said. "You face Harry next, then."

She started to sneer, but then stopped. "Actually, I believe we have to draw lots for the next round.

George looked at Cedric. "I'll concede right now, if you will. We're not earning any House points by competing. I know that Harry could beat all three of us." He had Fred had managed to watch one of Harry's Sunday morning personal training sessions one Sunday morning when Moody was not involved. Harry and Professor Black had been facing the Headmaster, the bar keep of the Hog's Head, Professor Flitwick, Tonks, and Professor Lupin. It had been amazing to watch, and also damn frightening. Harry had lost against those odds, but it had taken a while to take him out.

"I never thought a Gryffindor would be a coward, whatever else I think of you lot," Anna said with disdain.

"I would no more want to face Harry in a duel than I would You-Know-Who, assuming I thought he would stick to the rules," George retorted.

Anna winced.

"George. . . ." Cedric said, warningly.

George turned and faced the Hufflepuff. "Cedric, I know Fred and I are, well. . . ."

"Tricksters?"

"Fair enough," George agreed, "although we prefer pranksters. Still, just to prove the point." George went over to Moody, and announced he was conceding the Tournament. Cedric went over and did the same.

Anna Franklin did some very fast thinking to do, and she did her best. Her family was Pure for six generations on her father's side, and for nine on her mother's. She was smart, but more than that she was ambitious. There was little doubt as to why she had been placed in Slytherin. The question was, what would serve her ambitions at this point?

She knew that to someone with Dark ambitions, like Marcus Flint, this would be a chance to take Potter down a few pegs, perhaps by risking a few curses just outside the pale, like a cutting curse not aimed at the boy's head, or a blinding curse. Had Bole's duel lasted longer, he no doubt would have tried sneaking such curses in at some point.

Anna, however, had no Dark intentions, and was if anything ashamed that Slytherin and Dark Magic were so notoriously thought of together, even if for most of history just as many Dark wizards had come from Ravenclaw as from Slytherin. Still, Slytherin was important to her. Potter had wiped the floor with Bole, and from the looks of how he did it, she wouldn't fair much better. Still, she realized with a slightly sinking feeling, as embarrassing as it might be to be beaten by a Second Year, even the Boy-Who-Lived, it would be worse if she didn't try. Granted, if Potter beat her easily, Weasley and Diggory, both younger than her, wouldn't look bad. If she managed to win or at least put on a good show, they would look bad.

"Are you ready, Miss Franklin?" Moody demanded.

Anna nodded and took her stance. 'At least Potter didn't seem to move too fast,' Anna thought.

"Go," Moody said.

Anna started her first hex and then fell to the ground. She had already been stunned by Harry, hexing her as quickly as his magically-enhanced reflexes would allow.

Snape looked at Flitwick, who was acting as the judge. "Was that a proper curse?" Snape asked. "All Potter said was 'stun', not 'stupefy'."

"It's allowable," Flitwick said with a shrug. "You know as well as I that the actual charm doesn't matter to a powerful sorcerer. All that matters then is the intent."

Snape scowled, but said nothing. Inside, he was almost smiling. His plan had been adopted, and this phase had worked.

Harry walked into the Second year dorm just over an hour later and saw Ron sitting on his bed. The dueling trophy was on the floor in front of him, bent. Ron had obviously thrown it down.

"If that trophy could swing its wand, it would hex you in your sleep," Harry said.

Ron shrugged.

"I think we need to talk, Ron."

"About what? About what a lousy wizard I am?"

Harry sighed inwardly and sat on the bed. "You do know you're the only person who can say that about you that wouldn't get hexed, right?"

"Do you think I need you to defend me?" Ron snapped.

"Yes," Harry said. "Just like I want you defending my back."

"Why would you need me to do that?" Ron cried out. "You're bloody Super-Harry!"

"Let's pretend for just a minute that I am," Harry snapped back. He thought a moment, and tried to put things in a way that a bright but intellectually lazy 13 year old could appreciate. "Let's say I can take on any four or five Death Eaters out there. What do I do when there are ten or twelve? I was given this power for one reason -- to make things better. I can't do it all by myself, and I would be an idiot to try." 'And I certainly was an idiot at times,' Harry added to himself. "Let's say that every plan and hope I have works out, and I destroy Voldemort and people like Malfoy and Percy watch my back in the Ministry, and Hermione and I stay together. There will always be some other dark lord wanna-be coming along. Sooner or later, one will kill me, even if they and a dozen stooges have to ambush me, if I was ever caught alone. I would hope that I would have friends who could

back me up. People I know and trust, and who know and trust me."

"Like Neville," Ron grumbled.

"Like Neville, and I had thought like you," Harry retorted. "You might be envious of some of my abilities, and some aspects of my life, but believe me, you wouldn't want my life, Ron."

"I know," Ron agreed. "Do you really want to be my friend, Harry, or do you just want a supporter?"

"A close friend, Ron. Percy is my supporter. The twins are my friends."

"I'll try and do better, Harry."

"Thanks. Ron, do you know exactly how powerful I am?"

Ron shrugged. "I thought I had an idea, but you just went from a rook to a queen, or beyond today."

"By the time I leave Hogwarts, people are going to be afraid of me, and they are either going to try and hurt me or try and suck up to me."

"Or both," Ron pointed out.

"Or both," Harry agreed. "I need to make my friends now, so I know who I can trust." Harry reached down and picked up the bent trophy and with a thought it was restored. "We're playing different games, Ron. We can't measure what we accomplish against each other. However, we can both accomplish more if we trust each other and work together as friends."

Ron Weasley reached deep into himself and looked. Here was someone who might become the greatest wizard of the age, asking for his help. He knew Harry pretty well by now, and knew that he could probably disagree with Harry about just about anything and Harry wouldn't stop being his friend. Harry hadn't stopped after weeks of siding with Ginny in her spat. Ron knew, with a hurt in his soul, that he was not going to be the next Merlin, the next Dumbledore. He could not imagine trying to get in the way of Harry's destiny to become the great wizard he seemed to on the way to become.

But he could help Harry reach it.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Ron said. "You've tried to be my friend for almost two years, and I haven't done a very good job being your friend."

"Friends?" Harry asked.

"Friends," Ron said.

Chapter XXIV

Saturday, June 26, 1993

It had not been easy collecting twelve wizards to go on the attack this night. Voldemort could only use five of his old group: Bellatrix Lestrange; Fenrir Grayback; Antonin Dolohov; John Nott; and St. John Mulciber. The other seven were on loan to him. He needed to prove to people that he was still a force to be reckoned with, and that meant destroying Dumbledore or Harry Potter.

Voldemort had decided to attack Harry Potter.

Dumbledore had put many a spoke in the wheels of his plans over the decades, but while the Old Man was still cunning and powerful, he was also hesitant about direct confrontation. It was the Boy who had to be destroyed. Voldemort did not for a moment believe that the Boy could possibly be the cause of his difficulties, but Harry Potter was certainly the symbol of opposition, much more so even than Dumbledore. Therefore, the Boy had to go.

The Boy would certainly be well-hidden, but the tracking charm Nott's son had managed to place on Potter's glasses would allow for a surprise attack. It would attract the little device that was paired with the charm, turning it into a portkey. Voldemort was timing the attack to just before 12:00 that evening. Potter should be in bed and an easy target, for this was the day the students left Hogwarts.

The 13 attackers would be portkeyed to the nearest open space which could easily accommodate them. If Potter was in a toilet, for example, they would either appear in the corridor outside the room or in a room next to it. Voldemort could have risked having them appear in a smaller space if he used a smaller group, but had decided to go with the largest force he could muster.

Harry and Hermione were sitting next to each other in the compartment on the train. Ron, Neville, Susan, and Tracey were sitting with them.

"I don't understand why you can't tell us where you're going," Ron complained.

"I would, if your Occlumency was up to it," Harry answered. "I trust you lot, but there are all sorts out there, looking to get a line on me. I won't be at Sirius' or the cottage, and that's all I can say."

"We don't even know where the cottage is," Neville pointed out.

"True," Harry said. "I just need more training, more specialized training that is, and that's really all I can say."

"How about you, Hermione?" Tracey asked.

"I'll be with my parents," she answered simply. "We'll be going out of the country a lot."

Tonks escorted the pair from the platform to the underground station, having pre-shrunk their trunks ahead of time. Hedwig had already been sent on ahead a few days before.

As they approached the end of their tube ride, Hermione asked, "Are you nervous, Dora?"

"Nervous?" Tonks asked in a higher voice than usual. "Why ask that?"

"The ends of your hair seems to be turning brown," Harry pointed out. Tonks frowned and it went all pink again.

"Fine," Tonks muttered. "I don't like crowds; I don't like crowded spaces. That pretty much defines airports and airplanes from what I hear."

"True," Hermione agreed, "but it does mean you get to snuggle with Remus for twenty-two hours."

"There is that," Tonks admitted.

"Have all the arrangements been made for his furry little problem?" Harry asked.

"The time of the next full moon is just before midnight, UTC," Hermione said. "It will be daylight in Perth."

"There's a small specialty quarter in Perth," Tonks added, meaning a magical area. "He has to check in."

"It's a shame that it will be winter there," Harry said.

"I know," Hermione agreed. "No frolicking on the beaches, at least not dressed like we were last year." She sighed. "I hope we can get to the Darwin beaches for a week."

"They haven't mentioned it," Tonks said. She frowned, and then rolled her eyes. "Stupid me. I was wondering for a moment what you were exactly talking about. I keep forgetting exactly where it is we're going. Anyway, why wouldn't we go?"

"Mum and Dad are the new people," Hermione pointed out. "I'm sure they won't have any problems getting a day or two off in any week, but they probably can't take an entire week off. Certainly not any more than that."

"The important things are, we'll be together and we can be with your folks," Harry said soothingly.

"That's true," Hermione agreed.

Tonks was glad to see that Remus was already waiting for them. Their flight wasn't until 9:50 that evening, so they actually had over three hours before they had to board. From there, it would be just under a 13 hour flight to Singapore. With the time changes, they should land at 5:35 pm Sunday. They would have a two hour lay-over and then make the five hour flight south.

Remus shepherded the other three through the airport terminal, with a little from Hermione. They ate a quick meal picked up at one of the stands and then made their way to check in. All their luggage had been magically miniaturized and tucked away in their carry-ons, transfigured to look like small wooden boxes.

As the quartet were sitting in the lounge as the first board call went out, Remus suddenly realized something. "Wait a moment, our seats are only one row apart, but we aren't sitting together!"

"Nope," Harry said. "I paid for the tickets."

"And I booked the flight," Hermione said. "Harry and I are in the last row of business class. You and Dora are in the first row of the regular passengers. There should be the toilets and a galley between us. My husband and I deserve a little privacy, don't we?" With that, Harry stood and picked up their carry-ons. Hermione linked her arm in Harry's, and they went to join the other first class passengers boarding.

"James would be proud," Remus admitted.

Two hours after the plane carrying Harry, Hermione, and their escorts took off, Voldemort gathered his twelve attackers. "You must be prepared for anything. We have no idea where we will end up or what we might face. Are you all ready?"

All twelve nodded, and held on tightly to their wands, facing outward. "in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one. . . ." The thirteen disappeared.

Voldemort had built all the safeties he could think of into his portkey device. Of course, he had not envisioned all the places Harry might be. Unfortunately for Voldemort and his followers, the only open space where 13 people could materialize was the left wing of the jumbo jet Harry was flying

on at several hundreds of miles per hour at well over 30,000 thousand feet above the Mediterranean. They were instantly pulled off the wing and flung in many directions, one of them hitting the body of the aircraft, rendering him unconscious.

Because of the speed they were flung off the plane and the high altitude (being extremely cold and having low oxygen), Voldemort and his followers only had a few seconds to act before being rendered unable to react, if not fully unconscious. Each instinctively tried to apparate back to Voldemort's hide-away.

To do so safely, they had to be within apparation distance. They also first had to slow their momentum before that, so that when they apparated they would not hurdle to the floor at their current acceleration.

Seven of the twelve conscious attackers forgot to try and alter their momentum. Since the hide-away was also well outside their apparation limits, their splinched body parts slapped noisily all over the cavern that they had left just moments before.

Voldemort, Bellatrix Lestrange, Fenrir Grayback, and one of the enlisted Pure-Blood fanatics all managed to slow their momentum and apparate. All four hit the floor with great, but at least not deadly, force. Unfortunately for Grayback and the Pure-Blood, they were outside their apparation limit. Due to his condition, Grayback was able to survive the splinching until Voldemort recovered enough to put him back together. The Pure-Blood did not.

Bellatrix suffered numerous broken bones and other serious damage. She and Grayback would be out of commission for weeks as they recovered. Voldemort, due to his more powerful magic and the condition of his now-inhuman body, survived fairly intact, although badly shaken.

His mood was not improved by hearing the laughter of the Boy-Who-Lived in his head until their connection closed down.

Harry and Hermione had been asleep. Hermione had been sleeping some time. While they had to have their seatbelts on, they had the arm up between their seats. Hermione had slipped off her shoes and tucked her legs up under her and against the side of the plane, as she had the window seat. Harry had his arm around her and Hermione's head was on his chest. Harry had just slipped into sleep.

The magic from the portkey disrupted the plane's electrical system for a split second. That, combined with the fraction of a second the thirteen had stood on the wing and the impact of a Pure-Blood on the plane, shook the aircraft for a few seconds. That, and Voldemort's screams of terror in his head, woke Harry up.

Harry concentrated on what he was receiving and feeling. He probed Voldemort's mind with Legilimency, as it was occupied with assessing the damage of this attempt to attack Harry. Harry taunted the Dark Lord by laughing internally, until Voldemort managed to close the connection.

Harry then spent the next ten minutes reestablishing his own Occlumency shields, and only then sorted through the information he had picked up. Once Harry realized that he had not picked up the location Voldemort had apparated back to, he decided there was no rush in informing Remus. They wouldn't be able to contact anyone until they landed in Singapore in any event.

Voldemort woke up a few hours after the disaster. He had managed to snatch a few fleeting impressions from Potter, which only told him that the Boy had been in an Muggle aircraft of all things. Voldemort had never even considered such a possibility, which explained why there were no safeguards built into the portkey device which might have saved his followers.

Voldemort considered what few resources he had left. A crippled, barely sane werewolf and an

insane yet functional Bellatrix Lestrange, not to mention a pair of wild dementors which were still sticking with him.

They weren't much, but Voldemort decided they would have to do.

Harry carefully explained what had happened when Hermione and their escorts woke up. When the plane landed, Remus was able to make a phone call to Mrs. Figg, who passed the information on to Dumbledore.

There was no question that this information could be released to the general public. There was simply no way to explain how the Order had acquired the information. Dumbledore did, however, pass the information on to a few select members of law enforcement. The aurors from all over Europe covered all their respective territories, looking for any clue on where the injured Voldemort might be found.

They found no clue after weeks of searching, other than a pile of body parts high in the Alps.

Saturday, July 3, 1993

"Well, well, look who is here," Lucius said with a grimace. "Come to visit your goddaughter?"

"I'll see her on my way out," Sirius said. "I thought you might like the most recent news of your former . . . mentor."

"If he was gone, it would have been in the news," Lucius pointed out.

"True," Sirius agreed. "Last week, he and apparently all the followers he could muster used a targeting portkey to try and attack Harry."

"And what happened," Lucius said politely, as if he could care less what had happened.

"Unfortunately for Riddle, Harry was aboard a Muggle aeroplane, several thousand feet in the air and traveling at several hundred miles per hour." Lucius said nothing. "Although it was a large aircraft, carrying several hundred people, the tight space meant the nearest place to materialize the group was on the wing of the aircraft."

Malfoy knew little about such things, but he knew enough to wince.

"As best we can tell, Riddle, Grayback, and your sister-in-law may have been the only survivors. Aurors all over Europe and North Africa are looking for them. Other body parts materialized from central Greece through Switzerland and they found other body parts in a pile yesterday."

"They don't have the know-how or man-power to find them," Lucius said. "They would have to sign on to these new consortiums of Ministries that the North Americans are pushing to have the resources, and it would take another Dark Lord to force the European Ministries to that extreme."

"You're probably right," Sirius agreed.

"So, what did you really come here for?" Lucius demanded.

"I was curious as to how your tame historian might be doing," Sirius answered.

"He is making progress," Lucius answered. "You tell me, how has your classroom experiment played out, now that it has been going for two years?"

"I think it's gone well," Sirius answered frankly. "Many of the Muggle-raised are more interested in the traditions than any of the Pure-bloods. I think that for any Full or Pure-blood we lose to the Muggle world, we will have gained at least two solid supporters of most of the traditions."

Lucius merely curled his lip.

"You believe too much in ancestry," Sirius said. "No society can be static. It either grows or dies off. Wealth and ancestry have never been in total control of any society. People have always been dropping in and out of the top rank of any culture, Muggle or magical." Sirius gave Lucius a twisted smile. "Of course, it's always been easier to drop out than to get in."

"I suppose that is true," Lucius agreed without enthusiasm.

"I've been doing a lot of studying. . . ." Lucius snorted. "I know," Sirius admitted. "That's hardly my reputation. Still, the key is to study when people aren't looking." He grinned. "James and I had it down to an art, although we couldn't hide it from Remus or the rat. The point is, there's nothing wrong with elitism. The problems occur because people want to not just keep power for themselves, but pass it on."

"If you ever have children, you might change your attitude on that point," Lucius pointed out.

"Do you know why Snape hates me?" Sirius asked.

"There are many reasons, but you're probably referring to the time you sent him to visit Lupin."

"Exactly. He had fed me a potion, insuring that I would never have children." Sirius grimaced.

"Nothing worked for two weeks. Even though I'm now, well, functional, I'm shooting blanks." He sighed. "I'd hoped it had worn off, but I had myself tested last year, and still nothing."

Lucius' eyes went wide. If anyone had done that to Lucius, last of his line, before he had created an heir, he would have done much worse than feed the perpetrator to a werewolf. "Which is why you insured that Draco now partially bears your name."

"I plan to have a talk with him, asking him, if he has more than two sons, to have one bear the name of Black," Sirius admitted. "Rather hypocritical of me, considering my opinions."

"I regret to admit it, but the more I see the more I believe it is impossible to be consistent for our acts and beliefs to be without contradictions," Lucius said.

"To get back to the point we've been dancing around," Sirius said, "is your historian going to reopen the debate on bringing the Muggleborn out of the Muggle world?"

"Yes," Lucius said. "What I do not see is why you're interested in pushing the point."

"You first."

Lucius shrugged. "I've lost the war I care most about; regulating the Mudbloods to the dregs of our society where I still believe they belong. If that can't work, we must keep their ideas as far from us as we can."

"I don't if that would work over time, and I don't know if it should," Sirius said. "We really do not have all that much which is original, just ideas which we took from the Muggles centuries ago and have forgotten where they came from." Lucius winced at that. "Still, we need the stress between ideas. This idea is not as extreme as the old Pure-Blood bullshit."

"And perhaps we can at least separate some of the Mudbloods, excuse me, Muggle-borns, from their families when they are young." Lucius smiled. If he couldn't keep the Magical population pure, perhaps he could help keep the ideals pure.

He thought how strange it was that Sirius Black was a partial ally in this.

All around the magical world, things were moving that summer. The non-European ministries continued to form alliances, determined to prevent the rise of any further dark wizards. Percy Weasley's dream of 'good government' seemed to be coming true, although not for Britain or the rest of the Europe. By August, the demands that Europe should follow the rest of the magical world were rising above a mere background murmur.

Into that debate was thrown a controversial book on Magical-Muggle relations, outlining why the magical world had to be wary of the Muggles, and Muggle technology. It had nothing about supporting the old Pure-Blood agenda, although it did castigate most Pure-blood families for under-producing offspring.

Instead, it advocated furthering the split between the magical and Muggle worlds, due to the increasing changes in the Muggle world, which would make the magical world stand out even more in contrast should the two meet on Muggle terms.

To further that, either the magical world had to become more like the Muggle, or the Muggles born with magic had to be removed from the care of the Muggles while young and put into loving magical households. That there were extreme difficulties with both was beyond doubt. What the author claimed was that one or the other had to happen, or else the wizarding world would die out or be conquered.

It certainly gave all shades of opinion pause when it was released in twelve different languages in late July. Any educated Muggle could have pointed out the extreme logical fallacies and the even more extreme rhetorical sophistry of the arguments. However, since such 'mere Muggle education' was almost unheard of even amongst the Muggle-born of the Magical world, it would take decades before the book was successfully renounced.

The portkey idea was adapted from several instances in 'Rorschach Blot's' funny story 'Make a Wish'.

Chapter XXV

Sunday, August 15, 1993

Harry and Hermione had returned to Britain a few days earlier. The next day the pair would go to Diagon Alley for their supplies, and meet with the fellow Third years that Harry was going to work with that year, hoping to make them his core group.

The summer had been a very relaxing one for the pair, especially for Harry. He had never really relaxed for any length of time before his return from the future, other than the few weeks he had spent in Diagon Alley before his Third year. From the time he had learned about Sirius' supposed betrayal from Fudge through the Final Battle, Harry's nerves had been almost always wound tightly. Even the previous two summers, on his vacations with the Grangers, Harry had been on guard, just in case some stray Death Eater had managed to track them down, plus the year before he had been haunted by the memory of the ghosts in the death camps.

This summer, Harry had totally relaxed for the entire month of July, outside of his homework and some extra reading on advanced magical theory and of course his exercise and meditation/Occlumency routines. Compared to his harsh workouts since his return from the future, he was barely training.

Remus, Tonks, and Hermione all noted how the tension which had made Harry seem like a bow ready to release an arrow slowly left him. This was especially apparent when he had returned from a four-day camping trip made deep in the Australian Outback. Harry had packed his broom and had flown to his heart's content.

When Harry had returned to practice active magic after his birthday, Remus and Tonks had been shocked to see that if anything Harry's reflexes were even faster than they had been before. It was their private evaluation that Harry was now more knowledgeable and dangerous than any hit-wizard. This meant that, in their reluctant opinion, Harry was already prepared to take on Voldemort. Before this, any confrontation between the two would have been more on Voldemort's initiative. Even their fight at the beginning of Harry's First year had been an opportunity created by Voldemort.

Now it would be the Order's job to track down Voldemort not just for intelligence purposes, but so that Harry could directly confront him. However, until such time as Voldemort made a move, it seemed unlikely he would be found. Not even the Squib network Moody had linked into could detect a murmur after the Death Eater body parts had appeared after the mass splinching.

The problem would be, of course, actually locating the Dark Lord, who had not been heard from in any way since the attack on the airplane.

Harry had relectantly left the Grangers, who had flown back to take care of some emigration paper work and negotiations for the final sale of their house, that morning and flooed to Grimmauld Place. 'At least I've finally gotten used to the bloody floo,' Harry thought as he landed. He had spent a week learning how to surf on the north Australian coastline. It seemed as if that had help him deal with the pesky floo.

Dobby immediately attached himself to Harry's legs. Winky had showed up in Australia, asking permission to have an elfling with Dobby. Harry had complied with the request without hesitation. Apparently elves were celibate until they chose to procreate and while the female elf was expecting. No doubt, that was one reason Dobby was so happy.

"It's good to see you," Harry said. He looked around. "Am I early?"

"Mister Harry is on time," Dobby answered. "Mister Draco is in his room. Mister Loopy is at Hogwarts." Dobby had only mispronounced Remus' family name once, but Sirius had insisted that

Remus be called that ever since. Harry merely nodded, knowing that Remus was spending his days consulting with Dumbledore and his nights at Tonks'. "Mister Sirius is coming down the stairs."

Sure enough, Sirius rushed into the room a few moments later and embraced his godson, shouting, "Hey, Pronglet! Great to see you!" Sirius pushed back, keeping his hands on Harry's shoulders. "You look . . . Harry, you look great," Sirius admitted. "I know you hate my comparing you to your father, but this is the first time you've looked even healthier and better-rested than James ever did."

Harry smiled. "You and Remus are allowed, as long as you don't do it too often," Harry answered. He looked at his godfather. "You look like you're tired, and haven't been out in the sun. What's up?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Reams and reams of paperwork and reports. I hadn't realized how much scut-work Remus did for the Old Man until this summer."

"And being the well-brought-up wizard that you were, you aren't used to doing anything you don't enjoy," Harry teased.

Sirius tried to scowl at that, but couldn't deny it. "True," he acknowledged. "That's why I had Draco doing some of the non-sensitive work."

"Well, if he wants to rise high in the Ministry, he needs to get used to it," Harry said simply.

"I know," Sirius agreed. "Even if he quickly has people under him to do a lot of the work, if he knows how it's done, they can't hide things from him for his own good, or for their own plans. Or at least not easily."

Harry nodded. "A very Slytherin explanation."

"True," Sirius agreed. "So, is Dora knocked up yet?"

"Not unless it was by accident," Harry answered. "It will be nice to get rid of Moldishorts so we can all get on with our lives."

"It won't be all smooth sailing once he's gone," Sirius reminded Harry.

"In general, no," Harry acknowledged. "However, whoever the next dark bastard is, maybe he'll bother some other part of the world."

"Perhaps," Sirius agreed.

"So, still no word?"

"Not a peep," Sirius agreed.

"So, what do you have planned for me today?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Moody arranged a test for you," Sirius answered.

"Dueling?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"More like combat, although non-lethal spells only."

"Who am I facing? Three or four aurors?"

Sirius sighed. "Three aurors, and two hit-wizards."

Harry blinked at that. "That should be . . . challenging." Hit-wizards were elite aurors, and there were very few of them at any given time.

"Shacklebolt is the most junior auror involved, but probably the most powerful."

Harry grimaced. "When?"

"You leave in about fifteen minutes," Sirius answered. "Moody had wanted it to be a complete ambush, but Dumbledore convinced him to give you a little advanced notice." He handed Harry a dirty paper cup.

"Portkey?"

Sirius nodded. "And that's really all I can tell you."

"I have to admit, I don't like those odds," Harry said.

"You can do it," Sirius stated firmly. "Remus and I are the equal of any auror, and Dumbledore might not be as ruthless as a hit-wizard, but he is more powerful and knowledgeable."

"Hermione is going to be upset if we can't go shopping tomorrow," Harry said with a sigh.

"Such an old married couple," Sirius teased. "Have you formalized the bonding yet?"

Harry looked confused.

Sirius decided he had to be crude. "Did you fuck her yet?"

Sirius found himself pinned to the ceiling. Hard.

"Don't you EVER be crude about her," Harry snapped.

"Sorry," Sirius managed to say. He managed not to get hurt when Harry released him from the ceiling. After checking for injuries, however, Sirius pressed on. "Well?"

"If you must know, we won't until sometime after my next birthday," Harry growled. "I'll be fourteen and Hermione will be less than two months short of fifteen. It is what we promised," he pointed out.

"Is it ha . . . err, difficult?" Sirius asked.

"Very much so, and no," Harry retorted. "And you keep that gutter-mind out of our bedroom!"

"Fine," Sirius answered. He leered. "You know, there are some interestingly-flavored Muggle oils and such which might give the two of you some variety as you li. . . ." Sirius' mouth continued to move, but no sound came out.

"Say one more word when I release the hex, and I'll seal your mouth with a sliver of soap inside," Harry warned.

Sirius nodded his agreement, figuring he had reached his limits for teasing for the day, and that he had accomplished his goal of distracting Harry from the impending battle.

"Harry is having to do WHAT?" Hermione demanded half an hour later, as she stood in her parents' parlor.

"He's in a mock combat, not a real one," Sirius pleaded. Hermione was in many ways a very cute young teen, but at the moment, she was actually scary.

"Why?"

"Harry will almost certainly have to face Voldemort one-on-one," Remus pointed out. "Harry is more powerful, but Voldemort is much more experienced and knowledgeable. In addition, Voldemort will hardly fight fair. Harry needs all the training he can get."

Hermione slumped into a chair. "I know," she whispered. "It's just that he was, maybe for the first time in his life, feeling relaxed, healthy, confident, and happy."

"And loved," Remus added gently. "Don't forget that, Hermione. You love him, he loves you. That gives him hope. Together, all those things give him power."

"Have some confidence in your bond-mate," Sirius said.

"Oh, I'm sure he'll probably win," Hermione retorted. "I just worry about how much damage that win will cost him."

With just the slightest of 'pops', Dumbledore appeared. "If you mean psychologically, Mrs. Potter, most likely none at all."

"We've asked you not to call me that," Hermione said severely.

"I know, but in this instance, I am reporting to a warrior's spouse," Dumbledore retorted. "I would not so inform a casual girlfriend. Harry defeated his five opponents quite convincingly and quickly, if with some effort and even some close calls, which means he should suffer neither from a lack of confidence nor from over-confidence due to the experience. He did so without having to dip into some of his more questionable knowledge as well."

"So where is he?" Hermione demanded, standing. "I need to be with him."

"He did sustain some minor injuries," Dumbledore admitted. As he took a breath to continue, Hermione disappeared. A fraction of a second later, Dumbledore nearly fainted.

"What happened?" Remus demanded as he and Sirius held on to the elderly sorcerer.

"Somehow . . . somehow Mrs. Potter was transported to Harry's side," Dumbledore said in awe. As Headmaster, he was tied to the wards protecting Hogwarts, and they had screamed as Hermione had gone through them. "It was not apparation, let alone a portkey effect. I do not understand how it was even possible."

"Where is Harry?" Sirius demanded.

"The Infirmary at Hogwarts," Dumbledore answered.

"Then I think that's where we should be," Remus said firmly.

Less than three minutes later, the three men entered the Infirmary, where they quickly spotted Harry laying on one of the hospital cots, clad only in his boxers and socks. Madam Pomfrey was putting the finishing touches of healing a rather nasty, deep bruise Harry had sustained on his left thigh, his sole remaining injury.

He was turned on his side, his head in Hermione's lap. His right arm was loosely around her waist and he was holding her right hand with his left, while Hermione stroked his hair with her other hand.

The three halted at the glare Hermione directed at them. "And I always thought Molly Weasley could look fiercely protective," Dumbledore muttered.

The trio barely heard Harry whisper, "You can do it." Hermione then gently moved Madam Pomfrey's wand away from Harry's thigh. She bent over and kissed the bruised area, leaving her lips in contact.

A white light spread over the injury for a few seconds. When it disappeared, Hermione sat up and the bruise was gone. "How . . . how did you manage that?" Pomfrey asked, shocked.

"I supplied the emotional connection, Harry's magic did the rest," Hermione said simply.

"Did I mention that both our powers increased over the summer, and that our bond deepened?" Harry asked.

"Bond?" Madam Pomfrey demanded. "Merlin! Are you saying you two children are magically bonded?"

"No, we're saying we aren't just pair bonded, we have a Fully-Saturated Magical Bond," Hermione said. "I had suspected we might, and my being brought to Harry when we both desired it confirmed it."

The four adults were shocked, to say the least. This meant that the pair's magic was fully intertwined. Magically, they had formed a gestalt -- they could draw upon one another, and could not be separated. Over time, they would no doubt be able to easily sense the other's emotions over

any distance, and perhaps even communicate that way.

"There is still one more step we have to take to make the union complete," Hermione went on, making Harry's ears burn. "However, we did promise to wait at least until Harry's fourteenth birthday." Now the adults were flushing a bit from embarrassment as well. "Any comments?"

The three males shook their heads in terror. Madam Pomfrey looked at Hermione and said, "If you take the anti-conception potion until you finish your N.E.W.T.s, you're physically ready to consummate your marriage any time, Mrs. Granger-Potter."

"I appreciate that, but we did promise and I don't think my parents would be willing to absolve us," Hermione answered. "And the plan for the moment is that I am Miss Granger until the leaving feast at the end of our Seventh year, at which point we will announce I am Hermione Potter."

"As you wish, dear," Madam Pomfrey said. She leaned over and kissed Hermione's cheek.

"Congratulations." She poked Harry's shoulder with a finger. "You be good to her, Potter. You're free to go. I need to go check those five idiots you put into the aurors' infirmary. Maybe I can learn some new de-hexing techniques." She walked past the three men with a sniff of disapproval, but none would have dared to even try and guess why.

Hermione helped Harry stand. He grinned at Dumbledore and snapped his fingers. His clothes disappeared from the pile on the chair next to the hospital bed and reappeared on him.

Three sets of eyebrows were raised, as that was a N.E.W.T.-level spell -- easy to do in principle, but usually resulting in a mess when tried by younger students. Harry bent with a slight moan to put on his trainers.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"My back is a bit stiff," Harry admitted.

Hermione quickly knelt and helped Harry slip on the trainers, and she tied them for him. Harry helped her to her feet and smiled warmly into Hermione's return smile. It was an intimate domestic scene, and the three men realized they were intruders on True Love, the highest form of innate magic.

"Err, exactly how badly did Harry hex those fellows?" Remus asked as the three men averted their eyes.

"I would think the word 'effectively' would be more appropriate than 'badly'," Dumbledore mused. "Harry's magic is now fully integrated with his reflexes, and on a level I have never seen before. When he wants to, Harry can actually move faster than the eye can focus."

"It feels a bit odd," Harry said, walking over, "and I can't do it for too long at any given time."

"Why is that?" Remus asked.

"It's hard to breath," Harry answered simply.

"It's difficult to exchange enough oxygen," Hermione put in. "You're breathing so fast, you're actually pulling in some of the carbon dioxide you just exhaled."

"Still, I can go for about five minutes before getting light-headed," Harry said. "After about eight, I get dizzy, which I certainly do NOT want to have happen in a fight."

Dumbledore glared at Remus, even if his eyes still had that annoying twinkle. "And neither you nor Nymphadora thought it worthy to report this?"

"A reported ability is no longer secret, no longer a surprise," Remus retorted. "Besides. . . ."

"Besides, while you are loyal to the Order, you and Nymphadora, and Sirius no doubt, are all more loyal to Harry than to me," Dumbledore agreed. He thought a moment, and his beard and mustache made odd movements as his mouth twisted. He sighed and asked, "Both you and Mrs. Potter are

widely-read. Do either of you know what the young Pompey the Great told his leader, the Dictator Sulla, during the first of Rome's civil wars when Sulla tried and rebuke him?"

"Something along the lines of 'people worship the rising sun, not the setting sun'," Remus answered promptly.

"Close enough." He looked at Harry. "Ever since you returned in 1990, I have known that I am the setting sun, the past. You are the rising sun, the future."

Harry shrugged. "I think people will be very disappointed in me," he said simply. "If the reforms we've started don't spread through the general wizarding population in a generation or two, there will just be some other Dark Lord wannabe, in here or in Europe and we have to go through this God-awful mess all over again."

"Maybe, but the rest of the world might not," Hermione pointed out. "Remember the reports of the rest of the world organizing we heard about all summer?"

"And, if we don't get as organized here in Europe, and some lunatic tries again in a generation or two, the rest of the world might not tolerate our ineffectual responses," Remus pointed out in turn.

"And all because you came back," Sirius went on.

"All because Luna's mother foresaw it, and she and Luna gave their lives for us," Harry said sadly. "And people will never know of it."

"It's a secret better lost," Dumbledore reminded Harry. The knowledge that time could be so affected was far too dangerous to be generally known.

"I know," Harry agreed. "I suppose we could argue that the lives of two witches and the sanity of one wizard was a price worth paying, but only to those who haven't seen the payments." Over the summer, Gerald Lovegood had sunk beyond the extreme eccentricity which had affected him in Harry's previous lifetime. He was now in St. Mungo's. Harry had purchased The Quibbler and it was still being published, although a tad less quirky than it had been.

"There is one bit of news which might cheer you," Dumbledore said. "We finally collected enough evidence, and Gilderoy Lockhart was arrested three days ago. Once the commission appointed to deal with him finishes his interrogation, the full story will be published around the world."

"At least a bit of justice still prevails," Harry muttered. "Anything else?"

"Only that three more new Muggle houses disappeared," Dumbledore said.

No one seemed to know what to make of that.

Chapter XXVI

With some additions (Blaise Zabini, Anthony Goldstein, Su Li, Mandy Brocklehurst, Terry Boot, and Morag McGougal), the rising-third years who met for training that August were organized in the same teams as the year before:

Team 1 (Ron team leader, Justin second), Daphne, Padma, Lavender, Susan, Su, Anthony;

Team 2 (Draco team leader, Ernie second) Vincent, Gregory, Hannah, Seamus, Mandy, Terry;

Team 3 (Neville team leader, Tracey second) Anthony, Millicent, Parvati, Dean, Blaise, Morag.

Harry had hoped to get Lisa Turpin and the two most neutral Slytherin girls to join in, especially once Blaise had agreed. The two Slytherin girls had been interested, but forbidden by their families. While Harry would have been happy to have had unbalanced teams to accommodate Lisa, she was spending the summer traveling.

He had the group doing physical training (in part disguised as outdoor games), flying, and shield training. Just for fun, Harry had the 25 students attack him with all they had the second day, just to test his shielding against multiple rapid hits.

Seeing Harry's shield holding easily, Remus and Sirius decided to add their stunners to the attack. Harry's shields flared, but held easily. Moody, drawn to the sight and sound of the contest, added his own stunners as well.

"Enough!" Hermione finally yelled. The hexes died off over a few seconds. Harry stood there, sweating but untouched. "That was tough!" Harry exclaimed.

Moody, Sirius, and Remus merely exchanged glances, knowing that despite the somewhat weak level of the students' stunners, the sheer volume of the attack should have broken down any shield within minutes.

Harry had easily last fifteen.

Thursday, August 26, 1993

6:03 am

"Mister Harry?" Dobby whispered. "Mister Harry?" The elf reluctantly gave Harry a slight poke on the shoulder.

Harry opened his eye and saw Dobby. He carefully disentangled himself from Hermione, grabbed a pair of clean boxers, and followed Dobby out of the bedroom at the Dumbledore cottage where the pair, along with Winky, spent their evenings alone.

"Elves have found one of the nasty ones for you, Mister Harry."

"Which one?"

"The unrelated one." Harry nodded his understanding.

Back in bed, Hermione, who had stopped pretending to be asleep, clutched her pillow and shivered.

Fenrir Grayback was hunting. He hunted as a werewolf no matter what his form. If he did not taste the blood of an innocent at least every six weeks or so, the blood lust would be almost unbearable.

This was not, as many thought, because he was a werewolf. No, Grayback had embraced being a werewolf because it fit into his psychopathic mentality. Now, a little after 7:00, he was walking the streets of a Berlin suburb, whistling a little tune from **Peer Gynt** and looking for a small child to kidnap, terrorize to death, and cannibalize, for he had not killed since before the incident with the

Master's portkey at the end of June, and he could not wait until the next nighttime full moon.

Grayback's whistle missed a note before the tune came smoothly back.

The werewolf knew someone was following him. Whomever it was must not realize how acute his senses were. 'Adult blood', he thought. While not as satisfying to his perverted tastes as a child's, it held other compensations.

Grayback wandered out of the neighborhood and into a small business district. He turned into a dead-end alley, as if preparing to apparate. His shadow, who must be under an invisibility cloak or perfectly disillusioned Grayback reasoned, followed.

Grayback turned as quickly as his enhanced reflexes could manage, but his swipe totally missed. Grayback didn't even have time to be startled, to realize that whoever was attacking him was even faster than a werewolf, as a silver alloy knife sliced between two vertebrae in the middle of his back.

A cleaver then chopped off the werewolf's head in three blows and carefully wrapped it in a leak-proof sack. The entire attack, from Grayback's swing until the bagging of his head, took less than thirty seconds.

The disillusioned attacker then dropped some bio-hazard flyers around the body to warn off any Muggles, although the powerful Muggle-repelling spell on the mouth of the alley should keep them from coming in from the street, if not from any of the back doors. The powerful spell should also attract the German authorities to the spot.

With a faint 'pop', the alley went quiet.

The next day, Harry was called away from the rest period after lunch by a rather agitated Headmaster, flanked by Moody and Remus. "Is there a problem, Headmaster?" Harry asked coolly.

"Fenrir Grayback's body was found yesterday morning outside of Berlin," Dumbledore said, watching Harry closely. "Not his head, mind you, but his body."

"I would imagine someone took the head for the reward," Harry answered.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said in turn. "An interesting point was that some flyers were left, which would have discouraged Muggles from getting too close to the body."

"Even though there were some amazingly powerful anti-Muggle wards cast nearby," Moody added.

"It's good to know there are responsible bounty hunters," Harry responded.

"Harry . . . no magic was used on Grayback," Remus said. "He wasn't stunned first, he was incapacitated by a silver alloy knife through the spine. To out-manuever and stab Grayback wouldn't take more than human strength, given the sharpness of the knife, but it would take almost superhuman reflexes, and I don't think Grayback would have allowed any powerful werewolf near enough."

Harry merely looked at them. No one said anything for several seconds.

"Did you execute Grayback, Harry?" Moody finally asked.

"Yes."

That blunt statement froze the trio.

After a moment, Moody asked, "And Macnair, last December?"

"Yes."

"Planning on doing in anyone other than Lestrage and Riddle?" Moody then asked.

"I hope not."

The three looked at Harry, then Moody said, "Fair enough."

As Moody started to walk away, Remus said, "I'm sorry it came to this, Harry." Moody stopped to listen.

"Believe me," Harry answered, "so am I."

"I suppose I should just be glad someone killed that monster," Remus said.

"We're just sorry it had to be you," Moody added.

"Thanks." The two men walked away. Harry glared at the Headmaster. "Something to add, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore sighed. "No." Then he too walked away.

Saturday, August 28, 1993

"Are you alright, Neville?" Harry asked, sitting next to his friend out near the woods abutting the Dumbledore cottage. Neville had been almost as clumsy had the Neville Harry had known in his original time-stream the last two days.

Neville looked at Harry with a very frightened look on his face. "I overheard you talking with Professor Dumbledore, and Professors Moody and Lupin for that matter."

Harry paled.

"I just don't understand, Harry," Neville said. "You killed two people?"

"I'm the Boy-Who-Lived," Harry said bitterly. "I'm partially responsible for Quirrell's death, too. Remember?" Neville winced at the reminder. "Do you know why Voldemort went after me? There was a Prophecy, saying a wizarding boy born under certain circumstances would have the power to defeat Voldemort. Two infants met the criteria -- you and me."

Neville looked like he was about to pass out.

"Would you have preferred it was you he went after first?" Harry asked bluntly. Neville quickly shook his head 'no'. "My life is cursed by that bloody Prophecy, Neville. Even if I win, all that means is that dark-lord wanna-bes will be after me for the rest of my life, and the wizarding world will kick me and spit at me because they're afraid of me, until there's some crises, when they'll demand to know why I didn't prevent it and ask how I'm going to solve it."

"Do you really think we would turn on you?" Neville asked.

"You probably know me better than anyone in our year, other than Hermione," Harry said. "Aren't you afraid of me?"

Neville looked down in shame. "You're right, I was." He looked at Harry straight in the eye. "Now I'm more afraid for you."

"Thank you, it's good to know you're still my friend," Harry said sincerely.

"So, who was this Grayback?" Neville asked. "I remember he was on that list on the wanted posters last winter."

"He was high on that list," Harry said. "He was a mass murderer of Muggle children. He was also a werewolf who periodically would maul and infect magical children."

"Like Professor Lupin?" Remus' condition was something of an open secret, barely tolerated by many because of his connections with the redeemed Sirius Black and young Harry Potter.

"Like Professor Lupin," Harry agreed. "He also worked with Voldemort. I don't know if he was a

marked Death Eater or not."

"And the other person they mentioned?"

"Macnair? He was a marked Death Eater, working in the Ministry as a spy," Harry said.

Neville wanted to know how Harry know all this; how Harry had managed to get to Germany, kill a werewolf, and get back. Ron would have demanded answers. Neville thought about it, and decided he was better off not knowing. What he didn't know, he could never reveal accidentally.

Of course, what he also wanted to know was, "And the name on the top of that list? Why are you after her? I know it's not for the money."

Harry gave Neville a small smile. "Nev, who do you think put up all the reward money?"

Neville's eyes went wide. "You?" he whispered in shock.

Harry nodded. "As for Lestrage . . . she's truly evil. She's at the top of that list for several reasons. One is, she helped bring Voldemort back to a body. Believe me, you do NOT want those details."

"I'll believe you." Neville tried to ask the next question, but couldn't.

"Yes, another reason is because of what she did to your parents, and what she and the others did to you," Harry said.

"Thank you, Harry," Neville said. "If . . . if you learn she's dead, and it isn't announced. . . ."

"I'll let you know," Harry said.

"I wish I had the guts to kill her myself," Neville said.

"I hope you're never put in the position were you have to kill," Harry said. "I know, by the time I'm done training you, all of you will be able to not only defend yourselves, but strike back in force. And I promise you, I won't consider my job done until both Voldemort and Lestrage are dead."

Neville nodded, then asked, "What about Malfoy's father?"

"He was a Death Eater the first time around," Harry agreed. "He's backed off. If we find out he's gone back to Voldemort, he goes on the list."

"Is all this why you cast silencing charms at night at Hogwarts?" Neville asked.

"I do have nightmares," Harry admitted. They were nothing like the ones he had had in the original time stream, but they were often bad enough. Harry was very pleasantly surprised to have learned that he slept very peaceably in Hermione's arms.

"I'm sorry I invaded your privacy," Neville said.

"I'm glad we could work things out," Harry said. "We have, haven't we?"

"We have," Neville agreed.

That night, as Harry and Hermione cuddled together in bed, Harry finished telling Hermione about his conversation with Neville.

"Are you going to tell the Headmaster or Remus?" Hermione asked.

"I don't think I should," Harry mused. "If they told Alastor, he'd want to Obliviate Neville and even if he wasn't allowed to, he'd probably spook Nev by watching him too closely."

"Didn't you tell me some of Neville's problems came from being Obliviated?"

Harry made an affirmative noise and went on, "At the age of two, he was forced to watch his parents being driven insane under the Cruciatius, and was even hit very briefly by the spell itself by Bellatrix. Fudge was in charge of the clean-up detail, and tried to help Neville by Obliviating the

memory, but Nev was just too young to be hit by a spell like that. He was very lucky that the damage was surface only. It took five years at Hogwarts the first time around for Neville shook off the effects as well as he has now after two."

"Three," Hermione corrected. "Two years at Hogwarts, but three years being friends with you. In both cases, you were at least the catalyst."

"Maybe," Harry said.

"Certainly," Hermione said, crawling on top of Harry. Harry was very glad he was wearing boxers and Hermione panties, or else they would have a difficult time not breaking their 'no actual sex' vows.

"Anyway, with Grayback gone, where do we stand?" Hermione asked.

"As far as I know, Voldemort only has Bellatrix and maybe two wild dementors on his side," Harry said, trying to look Hermione in the eye -- a difficult task, since she was only wearing panties -- and wondering why Hermione was asking him to review facts that she knew as well as he did.

"Then we have to worry, but not be obsessive," Hermione reminded him. She leaned over and lightly kissed Harry on the lips and then started to kiss her way down his neck to his chest. "Let me give you something else to obsess about."

By the end of August, everyone was quite happy with the progress of the Third years. Their defensive spell work was easily equal to the average Sixth year. Some, like Draco and Neville, were equal to Sixth years at the end of that year; others, like Parvati and Lavender, were still equal to most Sixth years at the start of that year.

Harry had tried to teach them the Patronus, but only Hermione (whose defensive work was that of the typical Seventh year) could even produce silvery sparks.

Harry was more leery of teaching them offensive magic. He remembered too well how uncritical he and his friends had been as Third years. Therefore, they only learned the offensive spells they would have usually learned over the next year.

The students least satisfied with that arrangement were Draco and especially Ron. Draco had at least picked up some interesting hexes from the older Slytherins, which he was only willing to teach other Slytherins and Harry. It was only Sirius' promise to teach them some more offense during the dueling club over the next year that quieted Ron down. Ron was terribly worried that Draco or Hermione, who had placed a strong second and third the year before, would be able to replace him at the club champion.

Harry was happy that Ron had seemed to have gotten over his jealousy of Harry's superior abilities, at least for the moment.

On August 31, this band of twenty-six thirteen year olds descended on Diagon Alley en masse. They went from shop-to-shop as a group, including Ollivander's. Harry had insisted that anyone who didn't have a professionally-matched wand had to at least have theirs tested against one which was. Neville and Ron were not the only two who came away with new wands, purchased by Harry if the family would not cough up the Galleons needed.

Since the full moon would occur around 2:30 the next morning, Remus was not with the group. He was already at Hogwarts, getting ready to be dosed with the Wolfsbane Potion and locked in the Shrieking Shack with Sirius that night. Sirius and Tonks were therefore run-ragged, trying to keep up with their twenty-six charges, as Harry was having too much fun with them to try to keep them in line.

Meanwhile, deep under a mountain in the southern Alps, a very stunned Voldemort had just been given some very startling news.

"Are you certain, Bella?" he demanded for the third time.

"Yes, Master," Bellatrix answered. "I am two months pregnant, with your daughter."

Voldemort considered his parody of a body, and wondered what his spawn might be like, if it would resemble this body or some other.

"Do we keep it alive, Master, or should I abort it?" Bellatrix asked.

Voldemort had to think about that. After all, the girl would not be the blood heir of Slytherin, for this body of his was a mixture of his Muggle grandparents, the Order woman and Potter's blood, and Bellatrix' flesh. Still, that would make the girl relation to both himself and to Potter. And Potter might have a soft spot for any baby related to him, especially a girl.

That could be useful. If not, he had a very desperate plan to end Potter's charmed life.

"What problems do you anticipate in having the child, if any?" Voldemort demanded, unwilling to concede that he knew next to nothing about pregnancy.

Bellatrix only knew a bit more, and that only from casually observing her younger sister's pregnancy. "I will have to forego apparating and my dueling practice if you wish the child born healthy," she admitted. "Also, since I sacrificed my breasts to you, we will need Muggle formula or a wet-nurse."

Voldemort nodded. "It might be good to have a hostage to fortune, one that is as much Potter's blood relative as my own. If you do not give birth before hand, we will induce you to have it as close to the equinox in March as possible. Equinoxes and solstices are good times for magical children to be conceived or born."

"Yes, Master."

"When the time comes, we will simply kidnap some nursing Muggle who has an extra abundant supply of milk. As long as she feeds and cares for our spawn, we will allow her to care and feed her own."

"A powerful inducement for the weak, Master," Bellatrix acknowledged.

"So it is," Voldemort answered, the wheels inside his devious brain already spinning out possible plots. "So it is."

Chapter XXVII

Wednesday, September 1, 1993

This time Harry was able to share a train compartment just with Hermione. "You look happy," Hermione commented. It wasn't that Harry was mopey or even usually depressed, it was just that he always had a lot on his mind. Those weeks in Australia had truly been the most relaxing period in Harry's lives. Only the two weeks he had spent in Diagon Alley in the original time line had come close.

"I suppose I am," Harry answered, and with that, Harry frowned. He had just realized that those two relaxing weeks in Diagon Alley had also been before his Third year.

"What?" Hermione asked, seeing his mood change. Harry explained.

"Well, I doubt if that's anything more than a coincidence," Hermione retorted when he had finished. "Yes, Voldemort is out there, and more dangerous in real terms than he was the first time. But in all other ways, things are more in our favor this time. If he has any brains, he's in hiding. He knows he can't create any more Horcruxes, and his major goal is to be immortal. Coming after you is NOT going to enhance his life expectancy."

"Maybe not," Harry acknowledged, "but he might not accept that yet."

"Besides, Sirius is safe and sound, and the dementors are afraid of you. The curse on the Defense position seems to be broken, and Sirius, I mean Professors Black, Lupin, and Moody will be there to help us, along with the Headmaster and everyone else. Even Professor Snape seems to be slowly coming around."

"True," Harry had to admit. "Voldemort still has that loon Bellatrix, not to mention at least two dementors. I might be able to fight them off, but they might attack you or someone else. We can't let our guard down."

"Harry, the only bad thing that's going to happen this term is that we can't sleep and snuggle together every night," Hermione said firmly.

"And we still have to wait eleven months," Harry almost growled.

"Three hundred and thirty-three days if we wait until the morning of your birthday, three hundred and thirty two days, twelve hours, and forty-one minutes if you let me jump you one second after midnight," Hermione stated. "Not that I'm looking too forward to the event."

Harry smiled a very silly smile at that, and hoped that the year would indeed go off well.

That evening, when the Sorting Hat sang a song asking for the Houses to continue to work together, it actually got a solid round of applause from all the Houses.

This time around, Hermione settled for taking ten courses. She didn't even try to take Muggle Studies or Divination. Harry had wavered, but had finally decided to take the same ten courses as Hermione. He wasn't thrilled by Arithmancy, but decided that he could use the background. He was only taking Care of Magical Creatures to be close to Hagrid, whom he had somewhat ignored in his first two years at Hogwarts. Ron, unsurprisingly, was taking the same two courses he had chosen the first time around.

This time, with nothing to prove since he had been teaching for a year, Hagrid did not start things

off with Buckbeak. The nogtail (a demon which resembled an evil, stunted piglet, and which brought bad lucks to farms) was a nasty little creature, but not nearly as dangerous as a hippogriff. Since a few of the students' families actually kept livestock on farmsteads, this was indeed a practical lesson.

The students were less happy with their first Defense class. At Remus' suggestion, Moody had all his Third, Fifth, and Seventh year students face a boggart. The Fifth and Seventh years were scheduled to go in small groups of friends, so that their fears would not be broadcast to everyone, but Remus had thought the Third years' fears would be more generalized, as mummies and trolls and such. Harry, however, had pointed out that while that had indeed happened during his original Third year, it was possible that students besides himself might now have fears too personal to show everyone.

Remus scheduled the small groups for the Third years as well.

Harry went with Neville, Susan, Ron, and Hermione. Harry of course did not know what Susan's greatest fear had been the first time around. Harry never had thought Hermione's reaction would have been so profound had hers really been Professor McGonagall saying she had failed, and she had refused to talk about it at all in later years reenforcing that idea.

Harry knew his greatest fear would not be a dementor, and that Neville had no reason to fear Snape. Ron's was likely still to be spiders, but since he had not been faced with a nest of acromantulas Harry wasn't sure what form his fear might take. In any event, he had warned Remus what everyone's was that he knew about.

"Who's first?" Remus asked.

They all looked at each other. "I shall," Hermione stated. She walked towards the box where Lupin had captured a boggart. As she got close, she saw Harry, lying dead before her on his back.

"Yes," she whispered. "That's what I remember." She backed off a step, shivering slightly. "How do I make that funny?" she pleaded with Remus.

"Make me snore," Harry hissed from behind her, reminding her that this was merely an illusion.

"Riddikulus!" Dead! Harry suddenly let loose a loud snore.

"Next!" Remus called.

Neville stepped forward, and Snoring! Harry transformed into Neville, lying senseless and drooling in a hospital bed. Harry recognized this as an extreme version of Neville's parents. "Riddikulus!" Neville said after a moment, and Boggart! Neville started hiccupping.

Ron stepped forward, and Boggart! Neville transformed into a large spider, about a yard across the longest legs, and so much smaller than the ones Ron had faced in the other timeline. "Riddikulus!" Ron said firmly, and it transformed into a teddy bear. Harry smiled, remembering what had triggered Ron's fear of spiders in the first place.

Before Harry could move, Susan stepped forward, and the teddy bear transformed into naked! Susan, exposed to the world. While Neville and Ron gaped open-mouthed, Harry and Remus averted their eyes. Very red-faced, Susan said, "Riddikulus!" and Boggart! Susan was wearing a very silly, babydoll dress and too much makeup. She made a little courtesy as Harry turned and talked towards it.

"Gits!" Susan hissed at Ron and Neville.

"Sorry," Neville said.

"Uh . . . right, sorry," Ron agreed.

Harry was confronted by the cupboard under the stairs at the Dursleys, to the confusion of Ron,

Neville, and Susan. "That's your biggest fear?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry said. "My biggest fear is in the cupboard. That's the 'room', where I lived, did my homework, stored the few clothes given me when my whale of a cousin got tired of any, which was often. This is my biggest fear." Harry opened the closet, and there was a scrawny, shorter version of Harry sitting on a child's cot, dressed in clothing way too large, rocking back and forth, his eyes blank. "My greatest fear is that's where I still am. That this is all an illusion, a psychotic dream and that this Harry is what's real. That I should be seeing us from his eyes and, realizing this is all a dream. . . ."

And with that, that is exactly what happened. Harry was lying on the cot in Dudley's old clothes, hungry, bruised, and looking out at a world he had dreamed up. "Only one flaw in this illusion," Harry said. He was still holding his wand. "Riddikulus!" He was back looking at the scene, and skinny little Harry had been replaced by Dudley, Vernon, and, squashed in the back, Petunia.

They didn't really fit, but with a flip of his wand, the door shut on them. "I think that's funny, anyway," Harry growled, and he walked away.

Remus hurried forward, and the scene turned into the full moon. He put the boggart back in the strong box. He turned around and saw Hermione had stopped Harry at the door.

"Well done, all of you," Remus said. "Five points each. Ron, Neville, one point off for disrespecting Susan's privacy." He looked at Harry. "Harry. . . ." Remus was obviously worried.

"If this is the illusion, I prefer it to reality," Harry said, and with that he went out the door.

Friday, September 10, 1993

Remus was not able to really sit Harry and Hermione down privately for tea until a week from that Friday they had confronted the boggarts. "What's up?" Harry asked.

Remus looked at Hermione and said, "You made a slight slip last week when you first saw your boggart," he said. "Am I wrong in assuming Harry knows?"

"He does, but no one else does," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Know what?" Harry demanded.

"That I'm partly the other Hermione," Hermione said.

"Oh," Harry said. "right." He looked at Remus. "Then yes, I know. While Hermione is physically almost a year ahead of me, I'd say she's only at most four years behind me emotionally, not six or seven."

"Do your parents know?" Remus asked.

"No, why?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Well, it might make them feel a little better about your marriage, if not the consummation," Remus said frankly, which the two students blush.

"I suppose I should tell them, now that they're fairly safe," Hermione admitted. All she had to do was decide if she should let them know before Christmas or not.

Saturday, September 18, 1993

Harry was very glad to meet with the Headmaster, Snape, Sirius, Remus, and Moody. He was almost as surprised to see Rufus Scrimgeour as Scrimgeour was to see him.

"What's the boy here for, Albus?"

"According to Prophecy, he is the one who will finish off Voldemort," Sirius said sternly.

"And he's the one who managed to scare off the dementors," Moody said, making Dumbledore wince.

"That's the Light One?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"I'll match my Patronus against yours," Harry said softly.

Scrimgeour made a face. "Not if Dumbledore confirms what Black and Moody have claimed."

"I do," Dumbledore said with a sigh.

"You play things too close to the chest, Dumbledore," Scrimgeour scolded. "If you want information, you have to share some."

"True," Dumbledore admitted. It was clear that while Dumbledore agreed, he did not like it one little bit. "Now, what is the information you could only reveal to 'the Light One'?"

Scrimgeour grinned a very nasty grin. "Well, Potter, if that's you the dementors were going on about, perhaps I should only tell you."

Harry very briefly considered asking Dumbledore to leave the room, but decided that it would be a very petty form of revenge. So, Harry shrugged and said, "Unless they said that only I should know, we might as well let them stay." He nearly laughed at the sour look Dumbledore had at that and the amused looks the others had.

"No, they didn't say to exclude anyone," Scrimgeour said. "The dementors at Azkaban asked to meet with me and to pass on a message to you. Two of their wild cousins had joined with You-Know-Who. They left last week."

"Were they the only two?" Harry asked.

"They were, according to the dementors at Azkaban," Scrimgeour said simply.

"Did they say why their cousins were dissatisfied?" Harry asked.

"They weren't," Scrimgeour admitted. "Supposedly, they were guarding Voldemort's hide-away, essentially keeping Muggles away." He held his hand up to forestall any questions. "Voldemort thanked them for their services, and sent them off . . . because they were affecting the baby."

"BABY?" everyone in the room demanded.

Scrimgeour nodded. "Lestrage is a few months along, it seems, and yes, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is apparently the daddy."

"I think I'm going to puke," Harry muttered, turning an interesting shade of off-green.

"Bad images?" Sirius teased.

"Don't you remember what he looked like when he stood up in that cauldron?" Harry demanded. "Like a rotting slug? And Lestrage, with all that . . . blood. . . that little rotting sausage. . . ."

"Oh . . . yeah," Sirius said with a shudder.

"I mean, why do you think I talked the elves into removing spotted dick from the menu?" Harry demanded, looking a bit more green.

Sirius then realized he had suppressed the complete image of the newly 'risen' Voldemort.

Then the others remembered what they had suppressed as well.

Down in the depths of Hogwarts, the head elf frowned. "Midgy, Squidgy! Quickly! Buckets and mops to the Headmaster's Office!"

Forty minutes later, the Office scrubbed and aired, the meeting resumed, with all of the participants supplied with weak mint tea.

"The question we must discuss is not if this is was planned from the start, but what Voldemort will do now that it is happening," Dumbledore said. "He will no doubt use the infant for some advantage."

"Or even the fetus," Harry suggested, drawing everyone's attention. "What? Aren't there Dark Rituals which would use a fetus?"

"There are," Scrimgeour growled. "Interesting that you would know that."

"Let's have some Dark loony chase YOU your entire life and see how you react," Harry retorted. "I intend to win, so I need to know what he might do."

"There is little we can do, unless we locate him," Remus pointed out. "Did the dementors give any clue?"

Scrimgeour glared at Harry one last time -- the child did not know his place -- but then turned his attention to Remus and nodded. "Gave us the exact location. It's being checked out now."

Harry rolled his eyes.

>

"What?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"On the off-chance he's still there, he'll wipe out whoever you or your allies sent," Harry pointed out. "If he's gone, he'll have booby-trapped everything, and will hardly have left a forwarding address."

"These are professionals, boy," Scrimgeour snapped. "Why don't you run away and play somewhere?"

"Fine," Harry snapped back, standing. "You play your childish games here. I have work to do."

Harry was not in the least surprised that night to learn that the auror team sent by several Ministries to investigate the site had taken over ninety percent casualties -- half killed and most of the rest very seriously injured from the traps.

No evidence of Voldemort's next location was ever found.

Meanwhile, Harry and Hermione had come up with a list of a dozen rituals which Voldemort might use a fetus or infant for, including a reference in an especially Dark reference work that one of the two best ages for killing someone and using that death to create a Horcrux were at approximately 15 months and the other was at 17 years, while using infants' blood to increase the power of a Horcrux-making was under six months.

Equally likely, they thought (and Dumbledore and the others quickly agreed), was the possibility that Voldemort would use the child as a hostage, trying to draw Harry to them to rescue the child, which would be, after all, genetically related to him (perhaps like a great-great grandchild at best, in genetic terms).

"We need to bring about the final battle soon," Harry said as they concluded. "Yes, I'm getting stronger and stronger. I can already do most of the Fourth year material, not just wandlessly but motionlessly as well. But each minute he's free, his evil might spread. Now some other innocent will be born to two insane, evil people. We can't let them corrupt her worse than I was ever treated by the Dursleys, worse than Riddle was ever treated at that orphanage."

"We know that, lad," Moody assured Harry. "Still, how do we do it?"

"There has to be some way to use the dormant link between us," Harry said.

"We can't, not without risking links and leaks that neither of you can control," Dumbledore pointed out.

"Isn't there some way for some third person to follow the link?" Harry asked.

"If there is, I never heard of it," Dumbledore admitted.

"What is it?" Harry asked Hermione, who had made a face.

"If it's possible, we would probably need a Seer," Hermione said. "Someone with powerful Second Sight."

"And we don't know any for certain, and only possible one we know of whom we could have trusted would have been, well. . . ."

"Luna," Harry agreed. "You don't know anyone else with Second Sight?"

"Nowhere near the level which would be required," Dumbledore said sadly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, o Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump, do you think you might get off your rump and find us one?" he snapped. "Why is it that we are always so reactive?"

"It is always tempting to act," Dumbledore retorted. "It brings opportunities but also carries greater dangers than reacting to the Darkness."

"So, you're saying acting carries greater possibilities of Darkness?" Harry demanded.

"Yes," Dumbledore said simply. "Each time we act directly, we are in danger of taking away choices. We have to at times, of course, but each one carries dangers."

'Repetitive prick,' Harry thought. "In that case, I need to destroy him as soon as possible, and then leave the magical world as soon as I can," Harry said, standing. "That way the 'delicate balance' won't be hurt. Now, find me a damn Seer or some other solution!" With that, Harry left, followed by Hermione.

"Oh, that went well," Remus said.

"I love him, but he frightens me," Sirius said. "You know perfectly well what Albus was trying to say."

"I know," Remus agreed. He stood and his face darkened. "We mustn't use too much magic, except in a few special areas, which just happen to be all be controlled by old Pure-Blood families or the Ministry, which is also controlled by those same families. We mustn't be too active in fighting the Darkness, because that leads to Darkness. Why, that must be why Barty Crouch Junior went bad, because Higher Magic exacted karmic revenge on Barty Couch Senior for being proactive in the War." He glared at the three stunned men. "Shame on all of you! Light is NOT passive! There are shades between passive and aggressive. It's as if . . . as if. . . ." Remus's eyebrows shot up in shock.

"What?" Moody demanded.

"What went wrong with your plan the last time around?" Remus demanded of Dumbledore. He mentally went over all of Harry's notes of the original time line. "It was that you trusted Snape too much, wasn't it? You believed that even with you dead, Harry would still have the luck to track down the Horcruxes, and, aided by Snape, both Voldemort AND Harry should have died, right? If needed, Snape should have helped Harry administer the coup de grâce . . . and if Harry wasn't killed by Voldemort as well, Snape would have finished off Harry, wouldn't he?"

"WHAT!" Sirius roared.

"Only if Harry were a danger to become the next Dark Lord," Dumbledore stated.

"Oh, like the Snape of the last life-time wouldn't have just used that as an excuse!" Sirius shouted,

jumping to his feet.

"Oh, like you're all that much better," Remus almost snarled, "with this plan of yours and Malfoy's to steal Muggle-borns away from their families."

"You two are behind that?" Dumbledore asked, impressed.

"So you approve?" Remus asked. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"It is regrettable, but necessary," Dumbledore said. "It will help keep us separate from the Muggles, and that in turn will lessen most peoples' fear of Muggles and the Muggle-born. I regret you figured things out, but you are a remarkable researcher, Remus." He frowned. "What do you think, Sirius? Can we trust Remus not to spread these tidbits of information around? A contingency plan which was never used and a plan to improve the wizarding world?"

"Improve?" Moody demanded.

"Improve," Sirius said. "I started off just wanting to use this position to draw the Pure-Bloods a tiny bit closer to the center, to get them over this foolishness that only blood matters. It's not blood, it's culture! With the addition of the Muggle-born in a form all but the most rabid Pure-bloods can accept, our numbers won't continue to decline. And it will further isolate us, protecting us as the Muggles' rush head-long into the industrial, polluted world." He shook his head. "So many of their ideas and inventions are wonderful, but they have no control."

"Control? That's rich coming from you!" Remus shouted.

"Maybe it takes someone like me to understand that our world is too fragile to accelerate at the pace of the Muggle," Sirius snapped. "I was gone for less than ten years, and in many ways the Muggle world I returned to no longer made sense, and that after only ten years!"

"Shame on the pair of you!" Moody shouted.

A new voice said, "It hardly matters." Sirius and Dumbledore jumped a bit, and were a little shocked to see that it was Harry, although how he had appeared, neither could figure out -- which meant that Dumbledore was especially surprised. "First, Remus did not figure any of this out, but you have to grant he is a very good actor."

"I'm sorry I doubted you on either point," Remus said.

"Aye, lad, I do as well," Moody agreed.

"I sussed out your plan, Headmaster, and Sirius? Hermione saw through all the false leads you and Malfoy set up in about thirty minutes of research." Harry's face hardened. "The magical world is a wonderful place, but the people in it are mentally lazy, even the brilliant ones, like you two. With no Muggle-born, wizarding Europe will atrophy away in about ten generations. With no Muggle-born or Half-bloods raised at least partially in the Muggle world and learning the concepts of innovation from the Muggle world, I doubt the society would last any longer even if the population didn't crash. The rest of the wizarding world is changing, only Europe is trying to fight it. You and the rest of them can be as stubborn as centaurs if you want, but don't try to do it to me or mine!"

Remus and Moody walked over to Harry. "And don't even think of using memory charms on any of us," Harry said. "They won't work on me, and I will NOT be happy if you try them on anyone else." Harry placed his hand on Remus' and Moody's arms, and the trio faded from sight.

"Do you think they're really gone?" Sirius asked.

"I do, but they could be back, or could be listening in." Dumbledore shrugged his shoulders. "I did not detect Harry before, but then, I was not looking for him."

"You really did use Harry as a weapon before, didn't you?" Sirius demanded.

"It started off that way," Dumbledore admitted. "Things went out of control in Harry's Fifth and

Sixth years. There were too many threads unraveling. However, I do not know enough about it to know why they unraveled." He sighed. "I have tried to learn from my mistakes, but I have a lot to unlearn as well as to learn." He frowned at Sirius. "And what is your excuse?"

"Alright, alright, I don't know if I really believe in the idea or not," Sirius admitted. "Sometimes, it looks as bad to me as it does to Harry and Remus, and other times it makes a lot of sense. And like I said, if it's the most extreme thing being called for, it's a lot better than the old Pure-Blood agenda. I want to see where the argument takes us."

Dumbledore shook his head. Here was a good example of why you didn't let ideas loose.

Chapter XXVIII

Monday, October 4, 1993

Voldemort looked up from his arithmetical formula. He had been checking it for possible errors for the fifth time, and had found none. He smiled to himself. He had solved the puzzle of how make one final Horcrux with a fair chance of success in several different ways. Seven ways in fact, which also pleased him. Granted four of those ways gave him barely a 50-50 chance of success, but that was higher than he had hoped for at first. And granted, the chance which gave him the highest probability (90%) was also improbable of actually being possible to implement -- still all this meant that there were two plausible courses.

He needed to use the death of Harry Potter and only Harry Potter in his ritual, but he saw no way of being able to claim that life himself. With the link between them created by the girl growing in Bella's body, however, perhaps Bella could kill the Boy while he was nearby. But how to get them close? It wasn't like she, or he, could just challenge the child to a duel before he was 17.

Well, either of them could, of course, but the Boy would be unable to accept such a challenge without the permission of his guardian, and even Sirius Black couldn't be that foolish.

Still, perhaps stringing the Boy along for four years could have its uses.

Of course, Voldemort had forgotten one thing.

For his perfectly logical, arithmetically correct formula to be valid, all his assumptions had to also be correct.

One wasn't, because he had not seen the true prophecy but one with a false ending, and even if he had seen the true full prophecy, he would have misinterpreted it.

Voldemort had not made Harry Potter his equal by marking him.

He had added an equal amount of power to a wizard would have been very powerful even on his own.

Sunday, October 31, 1993

Harry was coming out of the dungeons after his dueling and conditioning practice. He was slightly surprised to be confronted by none other than Professor Snape.

Harry had not spoken to Snape since the previous spring, when the Potions teacher had given him, for the first time in either time stream, some really good advice. Harry studied the Potions Master for a few seconds. Harry's wand sprung to his hand.

"What's that for, Potter?"

"I don't know what's in the satchel on your shoulder, but it's extending a compulsion field of some sort on you, Professor."

"It is," Snape agreed, to Harry's surprise. "I, and it, cannot harm you, but I can hardly blame you for not knowing that."

'Wanna bet,' Harry thought.

"Potter, since you made that crack about my being the master spy, I have been doing my utmost to track him down. I have failed. However, perhaps because of my activities and because of my . . . well, my Mark, I was sent this. I will withdraw the item very slowly. I will understand if you decide to stun me."

"Very slowly, Professor."

Snape merely nodded, and slowly took off the shoulder bag and extracted a large piece of slate. "Do you know what this is?" Snape asked.

Harry ran a diagnostic spell on the object. "It's a moderately enchanted piece of slate . . . I see the compulsion charm, some sort of Oath, a powerful communications spell, a recording charm, a . . ." Harry looked at Snape in surprise. "Is that a Challenge Slate or just some other sort of communications slate?" Before a slice of slate was given a final split, a set of charms and spells made them forever twins (so long as they were unbroken). Whatever was written on one would appear on the other (although it took a further spell to reverse the writing so it was legible, unless one could read backwards).

"Very good," Snape said. "I didn't know Black had been that thorough." While most slates were used for secure communications (if you could remember which slate matched whose, assuming you used more than one), another type was used to issue and negotiate challenges with -- a set of Challenge slates.

"Vol, err, Riddle is challenging me, a thirteen year old, to a formal duel?" Harry was surprised, to say the least.

"Do you know anyone else who would challenge you to a formal Ultimate Duel?" Snape demanded.

Harry frowned. "That's the one where you fight to the death, and then the winner of the first round has to fight the dead person's second after one minute's rest, right?"

"Correct," Snape agree.

"Then Riddle isn't challenging me," Harry said firmly.

"What?"

"No, he might be having Lestrage or someone else challenge me, and will likely then act as the second." Harry stared at Snape. "This is also the one that can only be held in one of the thirteen great dueling circles, right? The one where the contestants cannot be arrested on their way to or from the duel, or for their actions at the duel, correct?"

"Correct, along with a great many other rules for what goes on before and after, but not during, the actual fight," Snape agreed while pondering this information. "Yes, other than the fact you are underage, I see the idea. He may have run out of plans less wild than this, or does not expect you to be able to accept the challenge for nearly another four years, perhaps throwing us off-balance for that time." He looked at Harry keenly. "If you are correct, you cannot fight Bellatrix while she is expecting or nursing."

"She can't nurse," Harry said, "the mammary glands she cut out cannot be magically restored." Harry grinned. "I wonder if Voldemort, being made from her tits, can give milk?"

Snape made a face. "I didn't need those images, Potter. Now, this was delivered to me, and I am under a compulsion to deliver it to you. I have checked it for traps. . . ."

"So have I."

"I take it you have acquired Mage sight at some point?" Snape asked wearily, used to the fact that Potter seemed to have just about every magical gift known.

"Over the last few months, yes," Harry answered.

"I'll leave it here on the floor. I may not divulge this until you have answered the Intent to Challenge and then either you or the Challenger gives me permission."

"We'll meet at the Head Master's Office at Two."

"I shall be there."

Harry walked into the Headmaster's office, a very concerned Hermione trailing slightly behind him. Harry sighed as he surveyed the room and saw Snape with the remains of a magically-healed black eye. "Sirius, can't you two ever play nice?" He knew that Sirius wouldn't have liked that Snape had been used as a conduit, even if they did not yet know for what purpose.

"I didn't hit him in the eye," Sirius proclaimed.

"No, your wolf did that," Snape spat. "You kneed me while I was recovering."

"Shame on both of you," Harry stated. He saw that Moody, McGonagall, and Flitwick were there was well. "Hopefully the two of you have vented your spleen. Now, as Professor Snape and I surmised, Bellatrix Lestrange has challenged me to an Ultimate Duel, at any point between now and a month after my seventeenth birthday, with T.M. Riddle acting as her second."

"He used that name?" Hermione asked.

"He would have to," Flitwick said. "He must use his real name, not any title."

"I had wondered," Harry admitted. "In any case, I told her that I was aware that she was pregnant and that I wouldn't even think about dueling her until we had agreed on how the baby would be taken care of after her and Riddle's death and of course after the baby was born. If she wasn't prepared to meet my terms on those points, she should go ahead and break her slate and end her challenge. I also informed her that I wouldn't be looking at the slate again until next Sunday." Harry looked at Professor Flitwick, who gestured for Harry to lay his slate on the table.

Harry did so and Flitwick started to check the slate.

"We can't talk you out of this, I take it," Sirius said sadly.

"It has to occur sooner or later," Harry said. "I've hit two of the three power jumps we all go through a second time, and I don't want to wait until the third hits my Seventh year. The longer we put off these confrontations, the more chances he has to figure out some other way to cheat death again."

It seemed as if everyone in the room except for Harry and Snape heaved a sigh of regret and agreement at that.

"I just don't understand why he would do this," McGonagall stated, aggrieved.

"Let's assume he isn't doing this to annoy and confuse us," Harry said. "After all, what are the odds that Sirius would normally agree to letting me do this, which would be required of an underage wizard?"

"Zero," Sirius growled.

"But you will," Harry stated firmly. "They cannot get out of this." Harry pointed at the slate. "If they agree to a duel and we all, including Sirius, sign off, it will be a magically bonded oath. They may be trying a trick, but we might be able to trap them."

"And who will your second be?" Dumbledore asked, obviously hoping he would be the choice.

"Under these circumstances, it must be Sirius," Flitwick said firmly. "To do anything but risk his own life, since he will be allowing his ward to risk his, would violate several statutes of the dueling code of honor."

"So, if you risk your life, you have to risk mine, Pronglet," Sirius said.

Without a movement towards Sirius, Harry flipped Sirius upside down in his chair. Harry really didn't like that name. "Do you really think I'm taking all that much a risk, providing I don't get too cocky or careless?" Harry asked softly.

"Voldemort is almost as powerful as you are," Dumbledore pointed, "and still with, say, fifty years

of actual experience as opposed to your three or four."

"I'd say maybe forty against four, since he was out of body for more than ten," Harry said, "with most of his time being spent tracking down magical artifacts, torturing people for fun and sadism, trying and failing to run a successful terrorist organization, and looking for more ways to dehumanize himself. I spent a year studying him, and three years studying my own magic, having major power spurts again at ten and thirteen, just like I did last time and studying how to kill him specifically. I have had a special plan in place for Bellatrix LeStrange for some time, and if I use it on her in a duel, it will make Moldishorts crap his pants."

"Really, Potter?" Snape drawled.

"Since I would imagine you'll be there, I'll bet you a Galleon that you'll fully agree it was a least a good possibility," Harry said. "Too bad we can't check to make certain."

"The dueling circle is a carpet of freshly mown grass with no rocks within ten yards of the surface, set against dark stones guarding the parameter," Flitwick said. "It is a hundred yard circle, which seats six thousand. Specify all four of you have to wear white basic dueling costumes -- pants, trousers, shirt, and regular leather boots. Everyone will see if you are successful, as the seconds must stand within plain view."

Harry grinned and smiled at Snape. "Give me odds, and I'll place the bet."

"Five to one against he does? If I think he should have, we cancel the bet."

"Done."

"And if you do?" Sirius demanded. Harry, seeing his godfather was still upside down, straightened him out.

"I'll pay ten," Snape said distastefully. "If you do, I want ten for me and ten for Potter."

"Done."

Near to tears, Hermione protested, "You're all being rather, cavalier. . . ."

"Hermione, my dear," McGonagall said with a kind look, "from now on, this is the best attitude for all of us to take, or else we'd worry ourselves to a frazzle."

"One of my terms will be that we don't announce this until the end of the school year," Harry said. "I want this year to be as normal as possible, since my life never will be again."

"Why do you say that?" Sirius asked, to which everyone except Snape rolled their eyes, while Snape merely looked curious.

"A fourteen year old wizard, killing someone with Voldemort's reputation, not to mention LeStrange? Do you think the wizarding world, at least wizarding Europe, would ever leave me alone?" Harry demanded. "I am not doing this because I want any fame or fortune or recognition. I want to be left alone. If I can finally cast a glamour on this damn scar once Riddle is gone, I'm doing just that and will be off to one of the Australian or New Zealand schools, or one of the school in North America to do two or three more years."

"Four," Hermione hissed.

"Fine, we can do all four," Harry agreed. "Then we're setting up housekeeping someplace quiet, within easy apparation distance of a research library for Hermione, and raising crups or kneazles or puffskeins."

"And about six children," Hermione added.

"And if the scar isn't so easy to disguise?" Snape asked, now actually curious.

"We'll figure out some way to hide it," Harry said.

"Actually," Dumbledore mused, "I could arrange for you to be tested on your O.W.L.s anonymously and in secret. You went through them once, you should have little trouble with most of them."

"Really?" Snape asked. "What did you get in Potions?"

"An E," Harry answered. "I should do a lot better in Runes than I did in Divination, and should do better in History, not that any knowledge about inventions, conventions, and goblin rebellions would be very useful in any other school's curriculum."

"Come to me over the Easter holiday," Snape said. "I'll go over advanced ingredient preparation and theory with you, just to remind you."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said, a little surprised.

"You will have no difficulties in the practical applications in Charms or Transfiguration, let alone Defense," McGonagall mused. "A little review on theory of the first two and a bit extra on Dark Creatures that same week might not be remiss."

"I agree," Flitwick said. "I'll be going over all the dueling protocols as well, starting this week."

"Thank you," Harry said. He turned to McGonagall and assumed an innocent expression. "When I took the O.W.L.s, I got extra credit in Defense for producing a corporeal Patronus. Would I get extra credit in Transfiguration for being an animagus?"

Three jaws -- Snape, Flitwick, and McGonagall's -- dropped in shock. McGonagall recovered first, and asked, "I take you mean you might wish to become. . . ."

Harry turned into a fairly large Kodiak bear and back again.

"Yes," McGonagall said in a very small, shocked voice, "that would earn you extra credit."

"Let me guess, you're not just an animagus but the only known one with multiple and magical forms, and also a Seer of both Prophecy and Second Sight, a metamorphmagus, a Parselmouth with other forms of animal magic, an enchanter, an elemental mage, and what else?" Snape said, exasperated. "A Major Gift of Languages, perhaps?" These wizards, like Barty Crouch, could often speak over 200 languages.

"No, I only have the one animagus form," Harry said. "I don't think I'm much of a Seer of any kind, or an elemental of any kind for that matter. I am a very limited metamorph -- I haven't had a hair cut since I was nine." He could also change his eye and color, but didn't mention that.

"And you settled for that one?" Sirius asked. "OW!" Remus had punched him on the arm while Hermione had kicked his shin.

"I don't really even have a minor gift in languages," Those who did, like Hermione, could usually acquire between fifty and a hundred languages, "although I have managed a total of twenty-seven. Still, that seems to be the most I can cram into my head. I am a Parselmouth, and yes, I think I some animal magic, although not on the level of, say, Hagrid. And yes, I am an enchanter." Only about one out of ten magical people could permanently enchant an item. Still, that was a fair number, and included the Weasley twins.

"And you are also a natural flyer, rich, and famous," Snape said. "Yet you wonder why some people who do not know your burdens are jealous of you."

"I just don't get fame," Harry said. "Muggles are just as bad, wanting to know personal details and gossip about people like actors and athletes and politicians. The only thing I care about actors are can they act; about athletes is how good are they, and how honestly politicians act and believe in their policies. I don't care about their sex lives or their finances, I don't care about what they eat for breakfast, and I don't understand why anyone else does, either, especially about the first two groups."

Harry turned to Sirius, who was about to speak. "And no, I don't about what any politician has for breakfast, either. I only care about their sex lives and finances because it tells you a little about how honorable a person they are."

"We're leaving Hogwarts after this year," Hermione said. "If the Headmaster's plan works, then we'll be hiding as a Sixth year and Fifth year . . . I think I have learned enough to skip a year."

"And if you can't hide?" Snape asked.

"Then I shall retire," Dumbledore said. "I shall teach them Potions, Defense, Charms, Runes, Arithmancy, and Transfiguration. For anything beyond that, I shall find them a tutor."

"Now wait a minute. . . ." Sirius started.

Remus placed his hand on Sirius' arm. Sirius frowned, but sat back, nodding. Harry looked like a fourteen, maybe even a fifteen year old, taller than his father had been (and certainly much taller than he had been the first time around), rather than his official age of just over thirteen. Still, in real terms, he was over twenty. Harry had the right to decide what to do with his life.

"What?" Harry asked, surprised. "You don't think I wouldn't visit you two?"

"Well, you would, but it wouldn't be the same," Sirius said.

"True," Harry had to admit.

Chapter XXIX

Sunday, November 7, 1993

Professors Moody, McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, Black, and Lupin sat attentively in the Headmaster's office, at the Headmaster's request. Dumbledore frowned, since they all looked innocent, and he knew that no matter what brilliant qualities this group had, none of this group were innocent. He considered reprimanding them, or trying to find out whatever the joke was, but decided that that could wait. He held out a stack of parchment. "Since Mister Potter is going to be fighting for his life, probably next summer, it behooves us to make certain that his training increases to meet that expectation."

Before he could draw breath for another sentence, the group started silently passing Knuts around. After a few moments, they stopped, and Dumbledore demanded, "What buffoonery is this?"

"Well, Albus, it's like this. . . ." Moody started.

"We all agreed what you were calling us here for, so we laid bets on how many sentences it would take before you said something stupid, and which stupid possibility it would be," Sirius broke in.

"I would have come out ahead if you had at least said 'hello' first," McGonagall complained.

"This is no time for levity!" Dumbledore protested.

"Of course it is," Moody stated. "Being constantly vigilant doesn't mean being a gloomy arse all the time."

"We all know how crucial, how critical, the situation is," Remus said. "And, as aware as we are, as aware as you think you are, Harry is even more so. He has known what he is doing for longer than you have known him."

"You really should have told us about this entire situation before last year," McGonagall said, not for the first time.

"Ignoring that, and going back to the original question," Flitwick interrupted, "normally you would of course be correct. Letting two people stand in a magically protected circle and blast away at each other is a stupid way to decide anything, let alone a nominally thirteen year old student against a crazed-but-talented psychopath like Bellatrix Lestrange, never mind Tom Riddle. Riddle has obviously got something crooked up his sleeve . . . probably some new plan to extend his worthless life. Harry is ready to end it. You can either stand in the way and be run over, or help."

"But. . . ."

"But you want to know what Riddle is planning before Harry gets into this duel business too deeply," Moody said. "Aye, so do we. But we'll never know. And, unless he can subvert the magic of the dueling circle, it doesn't matter, because Harry will destroy them both."

"But. . . ."

"But as powerful as Harry is, he is not that much more powerful than Riddle, or yourself for that matter," McGonagall agreed.

"He is much faster, however," Sirius pointed out.

That no one could argue with. Still, "When Harry finishes his final major magical growth spurt at seventeen, he will be powerful enough to deal with Tom with less chance of being killed," Dumbledore argued.

"Actually, I suspect that as powerful as we know Harry to be, he might just be holding back," Remus mused.

"In any event, Harry will have driven himself to distraction with over-training by that point," Moody argued, and the others, especially Sirius and Remus, agreed loudly.

The group sat silently for a few moments.

"I loathe the fact that you are most likely correct," Dumbledore acknowledged.

Saturday, November 27, 1993

It was the third of four Hogsmeade weekends for the autumnal term. The nine Third year Gryffindors and one Ravenclaw were gathered at one long table, some as formal couples, some informal (Harry and Hermione, Neville and Susan, Ron and Lavender, Dean and Padma, Seamus and Parvati). The girls had gone as a group to the ladies' room, while Dean and Seamus were standing in line to buy warm butterbeers for the table.

"Alright, Harry," Neville said, "We know something is up. what is it?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Ron and Neville rolled their eyes. "We're doing about half as much dueling as we used to, and we're doing more of those 'team-building' exercises of Professor Lupin's."

"You're still trying to turn us into a cadre," Neville said, "but instead of fighters, you're trying to get us used to working together as a team, and getting input from each team member. You're making us into something, but I'm not sure what."

"Harry's making us into a kernel of a political movement," Dean said, sitting. "When we got started, you thought we were going to be fighting the Death Eaters when we finished Hogwarts, maybe even before. Now you want us to learn to work across House and Blood lines in general."

Harry nodded.

"Why?" Seamus asked.

"Not 'why do you want us to work across House and Blood lines," Neville amplified, "but why less emphasis on fighting?"

"Voldemort is down to himself and one crazed follower, as best they can tell," Harry answered simply.

"You don't think he's going to still come after you?" Ron asked. No one (except for Neville and of course Hermione) knew why Voldemort was after Harry in particular, but they all knew he was.

"No, he's still after me," Harry said. "In the end, it will come down to him or me, sometime. The difference is, we won't have to fight through his Death Eaters for that to happen."

"And?" Ron prompted.

"Every one to three generations, some loony has come along and tried to make himself the new Dark Lord or Dark Wizard or Dark Pooh-bah or some such nonsense. We need to work to turn wizarding Britain, and influence wizarding Europe, to move towards a more integrated community. Merlin knows that the Wizarding Confederations outside of Europe are far from perfect. Their politics are just as dirty and they are probably almost as corrupt. What they do have are systems of checks and balances that we just don't have." Harry made a gesture. "No one person can get so much power to start some Dark movement."

Harry grinned. "And we're too economically primitive to create the huge multi-national corporations that undermine Muggle governments. If the Muggles ever learned that we collectively own about three percent of the Muggle economy and that it's mostly that money that generates our entire economy, they would be controlling us economically even more than they do their own governments."

"We're getting away from the point," Neville said.

"No, we really aren't," Harry said.

Ron Weasley was an excellent chess player, although intellectually lazy in many other ways. Every once in a while, his ability to see many moves ahead jumped from the chess board to the real world.

This was one such time. His eye brows went high and he whispered, "We need to talk about this somewhere more privately."

Harry froze, and then nodded. He dug into Hermione's purchases from earlier that morning, taking a sheet of parchment and one of his own self-inking quills. He was still writing when the girls arrived.

He ignored their whispers. "Have these people at the base of the main stairs at Three. Hermione, bring them to the Room of Requirement. Ron, have Fred and George bring the Map."

"What map?" Ron asked.

"They'll know," was all Harry would say.

Harry looked at his cadre of Third years, all gathered in the Room of Requirement, plus Fred and George. "It's time to tell you things about the magical world that you haven't learned, from Binns or even from Professor Black," Harry said. "Hermione did a lot of the digging, with a fair amount of help from Professor Lupin and some others." Harry sat and gestured to Hermione.

"Does anyone know the current ratio of magical to Muggle?" Hermione asked.

Most of the students shrugged, as this was something Sirius covered. "About 2000 to 1," Neville finally said, willing to state the obvious.

"That's roughly the ration in Europe," Hermione agreed. "There are some sixty-two million Muggles in Britain and Ireland, and just over thirty thousand of us. For the North American Confederation, or the United States and Canada, there are somewhere just over two hundred and ninety million Muggles. At the European ratio, that would give them roughly a magical population of a hundred and forty-six thousand. Instead, they have about the lowest Muggle to magical ration and have about two hundred and forty thousand magical people. Or if you prefer the index, we have an index of .048 while they have one of .083."

"I don't think that makes things any clearer," Ron said.

"The point is, the natural index, that is how many magical people there would be if we didn't come together and have children would be .02, or one magical for every five thousand Muggles. In societies where there were no organized magical life, where populations were small and magical gifts often unrecognized and left untrained or merely supplemented other priestly or healer training, we had no impact. Take a group of hunter-gatherers, operating for much of the year in extended family groups of twenty-to-fifty. Only with the entire group met would there be any chance of more than a few people with magical abilities to discover each other and trade learning."

"All that changed with the coming of agriculture and settlements, A cultural group might live in, say, thirty villages of one to two hundred people with at least one town of a thousand people. Now when a Muggle-born came along, there might be a family nearby as well with a magical tradition of some sort. When they saw the Muggle-born, they would either see as it as a chance to bring more magic into their family, or a threat which must be destroyed."

"Time frame?" Padma asked.

"To start off with, say ten thousand years ago in some place like the Middle East, a few thousand years later in Egypt and India, and by six thousand years ago everyplace from northern China down to south-east Asia, across India to the Middle East. From the Middle East, down to Egypt and across north Africa and down the entire east coast of Africa, and also into most of southern and

western Europe. Some places stayed in that mode for another three thousand years -- villages and small towns -- like western Europe. Other places quickly built the first large civilizations, as in parts of China, northwestern India, the Middle East, Egypt, and the east African coast, while others were somewhere in between."

"As these cultures matured over a few centuries, magical cultures developed, all combining magic with elements of the local religion. Their magics, especially the Chinese, Indian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and the Druidic, form the basis of magical cultures today, with more local traditions as well in some areas. Here at Hogwarts, it's Druidic, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian magics that form the underlying basis, with several thousand years of additional developments from them."

"Meanwhile, out of the development of the magical cultures came what we would now call the Dark Lord or Dark Sorcerer or Dark Wizard, someone who wanted to use magic to control others, Muggle or magical or more commonly, both."

"So having two Dark Lords in a century in any general area isn't uncommon?" Lavender asked.

"No," Hermione said. "Usually what happens is that a Dark Lord arises because there are always people unhappy with the way things are in their lives. Having magic doesn't take away our problems. Just like tyrants in Muggle societies, they twist the problems around and fool people into believing that if they give up their freedom, if they give up their free will, to a leader or to a movement, that will solve their problems. Where the movement is based on controlling the thoughts, even the lives, of others, it can't really work for long. Of course by the time someone might realize that, it's difficult, even impossible, to back out without risking death."

"When a Dark Lord is defeated, people's problems, other than that particular Dark Lord, remain pretty much as they were. The conditions are still there. They then either have to band together and work hard to maintain their freedoms and take responsibility for their problems, individually or as a group, or give away their freedoms to the next person who comes along and offers the trade."

"Now, whenever the holders of magical power could work with the holders of Muggle civil power, the societies were usually fairly stable over time, although somewhat to fairly oppressive by our standards. By the standards of their own times, they weren't all that bad, although not all that great, either. Some examples would be the Old Kingdom of Egypt, about half of classical Chinese history, and the two cultures that dominated Europe from about 4000 bc to the turnover towards the Roman culture two thousand years ago."

"Some were able to use their magical people as a subordinate, usually hidden part of their state, like the Etruscans, the Roman Republic and Early Empire, and many of the states of classical India, the Middle East, and east Africa. However, in every case we know of where a Dark Sorcerer tried to control an entire population, Muggle and magical, everyone one of them came down hard."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Sometimes, they were brought down by their own greedy or fearful subordinates, sometimes by Light Sorcerers, sometimes even by Muggles or some combination. Quite often, there was a prophecy about the end of the Dark Wizard. These almost never said that a Dark Sorcerer would fail, but how it could happen or who could do it. When a prophesied champion or event failed to dislodge the Dark Lord, after a time a new one would emerge, and sooner or later, one would be fulfilled."

"And Harry is the one currently under a prophecy," Ron stated.

"I am," Harry agreed. He pushed up his bangs, showing the scar. "When he tried to murder me as a child, because he had found out I was one of the two possible toddlers predicted to be able to kill him, his curse rebounded off me, marking me as the Chosen One of the prophecy. Did it happen because I needed to be Marked or because the magic of my mother's sacrifice protected me? Or did her sacrifice work because that would protect me long enough to be Marked?" He shrugged. "That doesn't matter. As far as it goes, my first real chance to kill him -- and that is what must happen at some point, I kill him or he kills me -- will be this summer. I'll grow in knowledge and magic after

that, but having this hanging over my head is, well, it's driving me crazy."

In the silence that followed the remark, each student at least dimly realized the pressures Harry was under, and was glad (especially Neville) that it wasn't they who were under such a burden.

"So, there are four possible outcomes when Voldemort and I face each other down. One is, neither of us wins, and we have to fight some other time. Two, we both die. Three, he wins. I think I can at least make certain that he will be weak enough not to be a major threat for a while, giving the wizarding world another break from him and hopefully time for a new Chosen One to emerge, if necessary."

Everyone nodded silently.

"But what happens if I win?"

That was also met with silence, this time a puzzled one.

"How much power must I have to take down Voldemort?" Harry asked.

"We've seen how much power you have," Ernie said.

"And how much influence would I have? Especially here in Britain?"

"Quite a bit," several students agreed.

"So, if I were to say that I think Draco would make a fine Minister of Magic, that Ron would make a Fine Head of the Department of Magical Sport, that . . ." Harry went on and named one or two positions for every student there, and a number of other students (including Percy). When he concluded, Harry said, "Now, I do believe each of you would do a great job in any of those positions, and they're all positions you'd like, right?"

"Right!" they all chorused, even Fred and George, should they not start their joke shop.

"So, since word of this will leak out, what has just happened to all of your chances of someday being at least in line for those positions if I beat Voldemort?"

"They've all risen dramatically," Draco said with a satisfied air.

"They wouldn't happen automatically," Ernie said, "but if we have any ability, if we all back each other, and with Harry's backing, we've all got good shots."

"Right," Harry said. "Now, what if I instead went to the Wizengamot and said, 'if you don't put these people into these positions, you're on your own when the next dark lord comes around'? Or, 'you owe me, here's what I want as a pay-off'?"

"They might tell you to bugger off, but if there's any fear that a new dark lord was arising, they'd give in," Blaise said.

"And that would be wrong," Neville said firmly. "For you to do that, I mean. You might even be moving towards being the next Dark Sorcerer."

That caused a minor uproar, but Harry soon settled them down. "Neville's right," he then went on. "That's why Dumbledore has always worked behind the scenes after defeating Grindelwald. A benevolent dictator is still a dictator. Is that what you'd want me to be?"

"I want to be the Minister of Magic," Draco said. "I would want to work with you if I was. I would know I can't command you, but I wouldn't want the job if it meant being your stooge, either."

"So, if you don't want me to risk being a grey, if not dark, wizard, should I become Dumbledore, playing wizarding chess with peoples' lives?"

"Harry," Ron spoke up, "I've played chess with you. Please, don't even try to play with peoples lives."

"I agree with both of you," Harry said. "Where does that leave me if I win?"

Silence, but one person was turning red. "Yes, Ron?"

Ron sighed. "You already know."

"He might, but we don't," Parvati almost snarled.

"You'll be leaving after you beat him," Ron said. "Oh, you'll be seen from time to time, and if things get rough you'll show up to help, but you won't be influencing things to the degree that Dumbledore has."

I didn't realize I couldn't be here until a few weeks ago," Harry said. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be," Daphne spoke up. "Remaking wizarding Britain is not your job. It's our job to lead wizarding Britain from the inside after we leave Hogwarts, to change the attitudes of those who still have the attitudes we all had before we met Harry. No more Pure-Blood pride, no more 'Muggles-might-not-have-Magic-but-they-are-so-wonderful' attitudes from people who know about electricity and computers and automobiles. It's our job to catch up wizarding Britain to the levels of the Americas and India and Africa and Australia."

"And Korea and Japan," Su Li added.

"Exactly," Padma said. "Just as we want Voldemort to be the last really Dark Sorcerer, we need for Harry to be the last Light Wizard."

"And for that to happen, as Percy Weasley would say, the government has to safe-guard the rights of all the wizarding world, and the magical peoples have to make certain their government gets the right job done," Harry said.

"Percy would never have put things that simply," Ron said, drawing a small group of laughs. Everyone knew the Head Boy, after all.

"What I'm asking you all to work hard for isn't glamorous," Harry said soberly. "Unless Draco or some other one of you becomes Minister, you probably won't ever be more than a footnote in the history books. But I while might be able to save the wizarding world from Voldemort, I can't save it from itself. That will take all of you working together, and the ripple effect of your working together, to make it happen."

"Then you kick Tom Riddle's arse," Draco said. "You open up the chance, and when the Ministry and The Prophet and all those old farts get complacent, you come back and remind them you have followers, people already working in the Ministry and at Hogwarts and St. Mungo's and Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley and the Wireless and in Ireland. And we'll take care of the rest."

Chapter XXX

Saturday, December 4, 1993

"I take it you've finished at least one plan for our escape," Harry said to Hermione. The pair had just snuck into the Room of Requirement for a little private time.

"I'm just glad you've never argued about my coming with you," Hermione said, sitting on the overstuffed sofa which had appeared and patting it so Harry would sit next to her.

Harry shrugged. "We're bonded, my love. Why would I be that foolish?"

Hermione leaned forward and kissed his nose. "I'm just glad you aren't. As for the plan, I have finished, but we'll need a little help," Hermione admitted.

"Who will we need?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked a bit worried as she said, "The Headmaster, Snape, Winky, and Dobby."

Harry sighed. "Do we really need Snape?"

"We need either Snape or Slughorn," Hermione said simply. "We don't know anyone else with the necessary skills, except perhaps Dumbledore. After all, we are going to have to change our appearances if we're going to have any privacy over the next few years. Now Snape can produce the basic potions, and I can finish off the details. He'll know we've changed, but won't know how. I know you don't like Professor Snape, and you've told me why you don't like him. Still, since he is already in on your secret, it's safer"

"How much will we change?" Harry asked.

"If this new theory of mine works, we'll grow taller, and we should put on a little more mass, as in muscle, since we'll be taking some concentrated protein and nutrient potions as well. We should go through about a two year, controlled growth spurt in less than two days. It will be tiring, but at least the bone growth will be permanent. Our features will change, but over about a seven year period, it will mostly wear off, but not completely. People we're around that entire time won't notice that we're changing back towards our real selves. Someone observant, like Padma or Remus, would certainly wonder at the end of say four years if it might be us, but for the first two years at least, they wouldn't recognize us. In addition, I'm letting my hair grow a lot this year. Afterwards, I'll wear it short. You can change your hair with your limited metamorph abilities, and your eye color as well. Too bad you can't do more."

"Actually," Harry said, "there is one other thing I can do."

"And what's that?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Apparently, I don't really need glasses," Harry said.

That puzzled Hermione, to say the least. "What? I thought your magic was changing that any way."

"It might be that, or it might be this other reason Tonks thought of. For some reason, my subconscious might have used my morphing abilities to make me need glasses, just like I didn't need a haircut." Harry shrugged. "She thinks I was I was probably trying to recreate my dad." Harry's hair went flat and then sprung back up. "I don't even know if my hair should be like this or flat, or if my face is right. Maybe I shouldn't even look as much like my dad as I do, although Tonks thinks it would be close no matter what. But after all these years, my bone structure and tissues have adapted to this shape no matter what."

"I wonder if that will cause any problems," Hermione pondered.

"Probably not, as I'm not all that complete a metamorph as Tonks is in any case," Harry said. "The

important thing is, by Christmas I will have trained my eyes to be better than normal. My glasses will have plain safety glass in them, so I won't need contacts. With flat dark brown or dark auburn hair, blue eyes, slightly different features, and no glasses, who will be able to tell it's me? especially if I'm a few inches taller?"

"I suppose Remus could tell you're you by scent," Hermione pointed out.

"True," Harry had to agree. "Back on subject, I guess we'll need the Headmaster to fake our records."

"Exactly, and he has some contacts in the Government." Hermione's expression changed. "And he's even better at memory charms than Lockhart." Even after all this time, only a small fraction of Lockhart's victims had had their memories restored. Lockhart was a poor wizard in many ways, but he did know his memory charms. He had been forced to give up his alleged career in chasing Dark Creatures (and half the profits from his old books) and was now making even more money off of a line of hair care products.

Harry nodded grimly. He knew that the Headmaster had memory charmed any number of school and welfare people to keep his abuse at the hands of the Dursleys quiet. Dumbledore could fake them a paper trail in the Muggle world with some guidance.

"And Dobby and Winky?"

"That involves one other item we need, one from the Department of Mysteries. With a little help, we can lay down an alibi, so that the people we become won't be connected to the people we were." Hermione finished outlining her ideas.

"Hermione!" Harry said, pretending to be shocked. "Having house elves steal? I am shocked!"

"Actually, all things considered, they'll have the time-turner back before it can be missed," Hermione pointed out.

"You are brilliant as well as beautiful," Harry said.

"And you're as sensible as you are handsome."

"Thank you," Harry said. "Still, that doesn't get you out of sitting with me for the Ravenclaw-Slytherin game." Hermione pouted.

Friday, December 17, 1993

"You'll be happy to know that everything is going quite normally, Madame Noir," the Swiss physician said. He knew there was something very odd about his patient, but as it didn't seem to be affecting the health of her baby, he didn't particularly care.

As Bellatrix left the office smiling, she let her rage come back towards the surface. How she loathed entering the Muggle world. How she would have loved to have taken those cold steel gynecological instruments and used them on the old Muggle healer in ways not envisioned by any sane person.

Prudence managed to calm her somewhat, and she decided there were some vermin in the deserted building she was using as an apparation point she could torture instead.

After her initial (if slight) interest, Bellatrix now resented the baby growing inside of her, its connection to her beloved Master notwithstanding. Potter had been firm in refusing to fight her while she was pregnant, which would have been a handicap for her but since she knew she would be sacrificing the child and herself in some manner, that did not matter to her. It would have made Potter look bad, dueling a pregnant woman, and she resented that he had the sense to refuse. Worse, that he known in the first place, but there was little she or her Master could do about that except fume.

The Dark pair had their plan worked out, at least as far the results -- the execution of their plan would have to wait upon events. They had both learned that the more detailed a plan was, the more likely it was to fail.

Bella needed to take Harry quickly and then set him to bleeding to death. Once he was beyond help, she would kill herself. Harry would then die and the two seconds, Sirius and Riddle, would confront each other. Using the life forces of Bella and Harry and the Dark magic from killing Sirius Black, Riddle could make one final Horcrux (he hoped). That would overcome (Voldemort believed) the Prophecy he had stolen, although he believed it likely it had been at least partially faked (as it had).

He would be Voldemort once again.

He would then disappear from the world for a hundred years. Then, Voldemort would start making appearances, perhaps every two or three years, for a hundred or so years, building his legend, building his fame as the sorcerer who had conquered death.

Then, he would recreate the Death Eaters.

Since Potter would not fight right away, the pair had considered aborting the fetus. They had not, only because Potter was, after all, concerned with it. Once the child was born, it was to be given unharmed to a (somewhat) 'neutral' party. Once they had been told the name of the guardians, even Voldemort and Bella withheld any objections. The child would be raised without knowledge of its parents until the age of sixteen, and then would be told all.

In their egotism, neither Voldemort nor Bellatrix seriously considered that their child would do anything but come to Voldemort's aid, just as Tom Riddle had embraced the most extreme version of Salazar Slytherin's agenda.

After that, the two sides had come to terms for the duel very quickly, which confused Voldemort and Bellatrix, who had not really believed this plan would work. The duel would be in late August of 1994, and would be announced late in the day after the students left Hogwarts. When they had started this plan in motion, the pair had nearly decided that the faux Prophecy had been just that, but now they wondered if there might not be some truth to it. Still, Voldemort was convinced that even if it had been totally true, his new plan would work around it.

Bella would have preferred getting rid of the growth inside her and having the whole thing over by the end of the year, but her constraints on the matter were made by Voldemort. He knew that if he were to rebuild his reputation over time, he needed to follow wizarding custom to some small extent. The youth of the primary opponent would be damaging enough without rushing into things and without sacrificing another infant.

An added incentive to agree to the terms was an appeal to Voldemort's vanity. The Quidditch World Cup was being held in Britain, and hundreds of thousands of fans from across the world were expected. Voldemort was assured of an international audience. He had even sworn an oath that should he win the duel, he would immediately leave the British Isles for at least one year, to insure that international audience would come to see his power.

Christmas, 1993

The small group of people who had some idea of what Harry was up against (the Dumbledores, Diggle, Moody, Sirius, Remus, Snape, Flitwick, McGonagall, and Tonks) met with Harry and Hermione in a small room off the Headmaster's office Christmas night. The final terms of the duel had been worked out to everyone's satisfaction. Riddle was still puzzled over how easily Harry and the adults around him had agreed to the fight. He had basically again come to the conclusion that Dumbledore and the others were simply putting too much faith into the Prophecy. He had correctly decided, on very little evidence, that the ending of the Prophecy he had stolen from the Hall of Prophecies was fake, but now suspected that Dumbledore had only seen the faked Prophecy.

Of the group that met that night, only Dumbledore, Snape, Sirius, and Remus had known that Harry and Hermione were planning on disappearing after the duel was over. Harry and Hermione had to spend over half an hour explaining his reasons. Only Snape was really happy with the basic decision, but by the time Harry and Hermione had finished, the others could only agree. Of the group, only Dumbledore already knew where they were planning on going, and only he and Snape knew about the growth and aging formulas Hermione had thought up and which Dumbledore and Snape were creating together (with a fair amount of research input from Hermione, as well as the finishing touches). All but Dumbledore currently believed they were merely planning on skipping one year of schooling with Harry trying for two, while in reality they were hoping to skip two (although Snape would come to suspect this). Both were putting many hours into advanced readings across the magical curriculum, and Hermione was trying to get some extra basic work in Muggle subjects as well.

Sirius was slightly resentful that he wasn't being given more information, but he also knew that was largely his fault for his dealings with Lucius Malfoy. Sirius was still up in the air about how he felt about the magical world. He was certainly against the traditional Pure-Blood agenda, but the more he learned about the Muggle world as an adult, the more he wanted to keep the magical and Muggle worlds separate.

As for Remus, he understood that as much as he wanted to know where Harry and Hermione were going, it would be easier to keep it a secret from Sirius and even Tonks if he didn't know. Dumbledore did promise to set up some form of communications between Harry, Hermione, and their their friends and mentors. When Moody objected that anything could be traced, Dumbledore put Moody in charge of outlining options which Dumbledore could use later on.

After the meeting, Harry stayed with Dumbledore and Moody, discussing the Triwizard Tournament. Harry encouraged them to keep the same three Tasks that he had faced, while pointing out how the Tasks might be improved for excitement while if anything lessening the danger. One example of this was Gillyweed. While native to the Mediterranean, Professor Sprout would be adding it to the green house where exotic aquatic plants were grown. There was a list of all plants grown which students could access, and which would be available to the visiting students as well. It would be up to the champions to put the ideas together. Harry also made certain that the clue for the Second Task was a bit less threatening. Smaller improvements were made for the First Task (substituting fake eggs to insure none would be broken for example, while the real eggs were kept safe) and Harry suggested a number of possible traps for the Third Task.

Harry also pleaded with Dumbledore not to allow Hagrid to illegally breed the Blast-Ended Skrewts during the up-coming summer. While no student would ever know about it, Harry felt that it was an important contribution to the safety of Hogwarts' students.

Harry and Hermione were the only Gryffindors staying over that Yule break. The pair therefore cuddled down together on a sofa they had transfigured to they could easily lie down together. "It's not going to be this easy getting together once we leave Hogwarts," Hermione said, nearly pouting.

"Hermione, whichever school we end up at, we are hardly going to be the first couple there," Harry said. "They would have figured out ways to snuggle at some point. We'll just need to figure out who we can trust enough to ask."

"I suppose you're right," Hermione agreed. "We should ask Sirius how difficult it was to make the Marauders' Map."

"Good point," Harry agreed. Then he smiled. "Maybe I should ask Sirius and you should ask Remus, just to compare their answers."

"Are you that mistrustful of Sirius?"

"When Sirius was a student, he knew he hated what his family stood for," Harry said simply. "He saw the Muggle world as a source of fun. He never understood how dangerous the Muggle world

could be, either on its own terms or in relation to the magical world. His parents loathed Muggles for all the wrong reasons, therefore he thought Muggles must be good."

"Well, they aren't bad," Hermione stated.

"The Dursleys to the contrary, that's true," Harry agreed. "The point is, people are people. Some people are good, some people are bad, and most people seem to be basically decent but rather short-sighted and somewhat selfish, unless outside pressures send them in one direction or other."

"Isn't that a bit cynical?" Hermione asked.

"I don't think so," Harry said. "It's not that I think people are basically bad, honest. I think people are basically more on the good side than the bad. But most of us are pretty much concerned with our own affairs and problems, and we often let bad behavior of others go by unless it affects us. We can't fix everything, so it's sometimes easy not to try and fix enough. Sirius is a good person. He doesn't dislike, let alone hate, Muggles. He's just been able to recover his magical roots without his family's bigotry, and realizes that the magical world could easily be overwhelmed by the Muggle."

"Well, I can't really argue with that," Hermione had to agree. "I like what I've seen in Australia, and what I've read about Australia, New Zealand, and North America; how they're trying to bring Muggle ideas into the magical mainstream while allowing the Traditionalists room to honor their full customs."

"But it's all new," Harry pointed out. "It could all backfire, even if we both hope it works."

Hermione sighed, and hugged Harry tightly. "Life just isn't ever easy, I suppose," she said.

"I suppose not," Harry agreed.

"Harry. . . ."

"H'mmm?"

"Let's not wait until your birthday," Hermione said in a small voice. "We're going to be worried about the duel then. If we do it tonight, we can make it extra special."

"It will be special whenever we 'do it' for the first time, but I know what you mean." Harry smiled and for once looked his mental age rather than just his physical age. "I love you, Mrs. Potter."

"You've never called me that before," Hermione said breathlessly.

"We've been bonded for well over a year," Harry said. "We're legally married, but once we consummate the marriage, well, that's the last step to making things official, other than making a public announcement."

"Then claim me as Mrs. Potter," Hermione nearly begged.

Five minutes later, the pair lay entwined, sweaty and content. "Happy Christmas, Mrs. Potter."

"Happy Christmas, husband," Hermione answered.

"You seem restless."

"I loathe having this growth," Bellatrix growled. "Just three more months and I can be rid of this."

"I take it you have no desire to raise the child after Potter dies," Voldemort asked mildly. Bellatrix shuddered. The Cruciatius was out during the pregnancy, but Voldemort was endlessly inventive.

"I shall, of course, if you command it," Bellatrix whimpered.

"We shall see," Voldemort stated regally. While he certainly did not want a small child, let alone and infant, around, it would be necessary to teach the child her heritage. No matter what the deal

made with Potter, the child could always be found and reclaimed.

Chapter XXXI

Harry did his best to relax and enjoy himself during the spring term. His confidence allowed Hermione and the staff who were in on his secret to relax to some degree, although they were all still on edge. His core of followers, not really knowing the fine details, were somewhere between Harry and Hermione in their various reactions. All, however, managed to keep Harry's plan a secret, although there were a few close calls.

Hermione was also on edge because she and Snape were working closely together on the potions which would age and mature her and Harry's bodies after the duel, plus another set to change their appearances. While Snape was doing much of the raw research, only Hermione would know how the end-products should end up affecting the pair of them. In fact, Snape knew they could not be planning on taking all the altering potions, but was left in the dark as to which ones the pair might take.

Being a good Slytherin, Snape approved of Hermione's caution.

Diggie, Sirius, and Remus were also working hard. When the announcement of the duel came out, there would be an uproar, due in part to Harry's legal age and in part because of Bellatrix' and especially Riddle's participation. They had to make certain that all legal loopholes were closed or at least resolved in their favor.

The afternoon of the leaving-taking feast, Harry threw a small party for his closest supporters in the Room of Requirement. He didn't remind them of what they hoped to accomplish in the future, but thanked each one in turn for their support over the previous years. Each knew they would not be seeing Harry again for several years (all believed Harry would win, after all), and might not be seeing Hermione either.

The groups' somber mood somewhat affected the general leaving-taking mood at the feast. Afterwards, Harry thanked the staff members who were in on his secrets, and even managed a short talk with the Sorting Hat.

Harry and Hermione were the first two out the door the next morning, and stood just apart from the carriages as the students slowly made their way. "What are you thinking?" Hermione asked.

"Just how much I'll miss this place," Harry answered.

"Did you know there's a whole other section of the library, just for staff and authorized researchers?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. "In the mid-dungeons, under Ravenclaw Tower," he answered.

"Well, maybe some day you'll be teaching here, and I'll be researching," Hermione answered.

Harry smiled, and they walked hand-in-hand to their carriage.

As predicted, the up-roar and criticisms, not to mention total outrage, had been loud all across the magical world. It had been almost 200 years since an underage wizard had fought a legalized duel and over 400 since it had involved anyone younger than 16, and even then the youngest participants

had been just a few weeks shy of 16.

Of course, they had all been seeking satisfaction from those involved in ending a blood feud, which this battle also could be seen as. Harry was the last of the Potters. If he died, his blood feud with Riddle would be over. If Harry won (odds makers were laying 300-1 against his surviving against Bellatrix Lestrange, 2000-1 against his winning, and the odds were only that low because so many people were betting on a miracle, plus because of the serious money that Sirius was laying down on Harry -- the majority of betters, betting on Lestrange-Riddle, where more doing so sadly but hoping that if this meant Voldemort did gain any sort of power they could use their bets and the money they won to prove a sort of loyalty), baby Electra Black would officially be raised under the joint fosterage of Sirius and Harry, even if a different couple would actually be caring for her no matter what the outcome.

The British Ministry had raised the greatest objections, and it was only ancient customs which prevented them from arresting Sirius for child endangerment. Throughout July, public opinion expressed its outrage. By early August, however, while the outrage remained, another attitude was also forming. Voldemort had been partially knocked off the pedestal of fear he had managed to erect in the early 1970s by the revelations of his biography and by the fact that his attempt to rebuild the Death Eaters had failed so spectacularly. Voldemort's part and participation in the duel (under his real name of Tom Marvolo Riddle no less) had driven home the lesson that this might be a very dangerous, evil, and powerful Dark Sorcerer, but he was nothing more.

For all intents and purposes, Riddle had traded his Voldemort persona for one last attempt at a form of immortality.

Sunday, August 20, 1994

The seating at the oval was of course nearly full. With tens of thousands of people coming to Britain for the Quidditch Cup, and with officials from all over the world coming as well, there was no end of demand for a seat.

There was only one block of a hundred empty seats. Those were for the guests of Bellatrix Lestrange and her second.

No one had dared accept an invitation.

It wasn't that there weren't several organizations in Europe which sympathized with Voldemort's stated beliefs, it was more that they no longer trusted that Riddle/Voldemort represented those beliefs. Riddle had even seen several faces in the VIP seats which belonged to those he knew he would have to deal with once the ridiculous fights were over if he were to lead the Pure-Bloods of Europe. The primary duel was scheduled to start at noon, sun time, and Riddle hoped everything would be finished within thirty minutes, since it would take some time for Potter to bleed out.

The crowd settled in one hour before the start of the fight. There was little of the boisterousness of a sporting match -- at first. Thirty minutes before the duel started, the seconds appeared in small box seats on either side of the arena. Almost instantly, total silence fell as the crowd beheld the inhuman Voldemort. Then, from Potter's friends' seats, a matching pair of red-heads started a chant which within thirty seconds was echoing around the entire arena as 95% of the audience chanted it.

"SNAKE-FACE!"

"SNAKE-FACE!"

"SNAKE-FACE!"

Voldemort could do nothing but endure the ridicule. Had it been mostly hate and anger, he could have in some small sense fed off of it, but this ridicule he could not.

The chant continued until the duel principals came out to join their seconds fifteen minutes left before the start. Instantly, wards went up, blocking all sound from reaching the dueling pitch (and the various small areas where the principals, seconds, and officials were seated). The crowd quieted, and the chief mediator walked out to the pitch. Anything said there would be heard by all.

First, each principal and second lit a small 'life candle' near their seats -- magically linked to larger now flaming cauldrons ringing the stadium, these would show when one of the participants died by extinguishing themselves. Then, the two main participants walked out to the field itself.

"Bellatrix Black Lestrage, you may make an appeal to the challenged to end this duel."

"Potter!" Bellatrix called. "This is your last chance to follow my lord! Join us, and we will someday rule the world! Join us, and I will move to become his left hand while you may become his right!"

"Harry Potter, your response?"

"No, thank you. Besides, why would you want to be his left hand when you know what he uses it for?"

"Final statement, Madam Black Lestrage?"

"You will die, Potter!"

"Harry James Potter, you may make an appeal to the challenger to end this duel."

"Surrender or die," was all Harry said.

"Bellatrix Black Lestrage, your response?"

"Little boy, you should have waited another three years!"

"Final statement, Mister Potter?"

Harry raised his hands and shouted, "Bellatrix Black Lestrage! I declare you to be a Wicked Witch, the Wicked Witch of the East in fact!" Harry lowered his hands and grinned. "That was a Muggle curse, Bella! Let's see if I can translate it into a form of magic you and your Master can understand."

That confused nearly every person in the stadium. It prodded the memory of Tom Riddle, as he wondered where he had heard the phrase before. For some reason it made him think of a cinema, where he had had to endure some very odd Muggle movies with the other orphans.

Meanwhile, the two principals went and stood on their marks, twenty-yards apart. When a gong went off, they could start hexing.

"Is da wittle Potter weady to die?" Bellatrix mocked.

"Arf arf woof," Harry replied.

"What?" Bella demanded, confused.

"Just speaking your language, bitch witch!" Harry pointed out, just as the gong sounded.

Bellatrix quickly launched her best cutting curse, a powerful, almost dark curse that was not easy to defend against.

Harry's reflexes allowed him to merely dodge, with little difficulty.

Frowning, Lestrage sent off another, faster but less powerful cutting hex. Harry dodged again. Another hex, sent more quickly.

Another dodge.

Snarling, Bellatrix sent off a barrage, which quickly escalated to the fastest, longest cursing set she had ever put together. For nearly five long minutes, she sent everything she had at Harry Potter.

He dodged or blocked everything with ease.

Ignoring her orders, but so frustrated she could think of nothing else, Bellatrix screamed the killing curse.

A clear metal shield appeared between them, ringing like a gong when it was struck, but holding.

Bellatrix and Riddle both went wide-eyed at that. Bellatrix had never heard of such a thing. Riddle had, but had not imagined anyone in Britain other than himself and Dumbledore capable of casting it.

Bellatrix stood still and glared at her opponent for a moment. She snapped off a spell which ignited a huge fire in front of Harry and sent three killing curses through the flames.

Before the flames died down, a pair of large bells appeared on a frame about twenty yards away. Bellatrix took six steps back, so she could keep an eye on where Potter had been as well as whatever he was up to with the bells.

DING DONG they rang.

That meant they were either real, or a brilliant and powerful illusion.

There was a simple conjuring trick, where you could seemingly vanish an object and make it reappear at will with no damage, if you were powerful enough and the object had not been alive. The average well-trained wizard could 'disappear' any object up to the size of a school trunk. However, duplicating the object was a different thing all together. For something simple, like a non-magical trunk, the first replicated item would usually be fine, if a bit structurally weak, and nothing which had been inside the trunk was likely to have been duplicated well, if at all. Generally, two or three replicas would be the most a wizard could achieve before it failed all together.

A few, more powerful wizards, could duplicate small things more easily. Mrs. Weasley, for example, had perfected the replication of several sauces and gravies, disappearing, replicating, disappearing, and replicating so fast that she could expand the amount several times with no loss of taste and only slight loss of nutritional value.

A truly powerful sorcerer, Dumbledore, had once conjured the idea of a sleeping bag, and had then disappeared and replicated it so quickly that he had supplied his entire student body with the item in just a few seconds.

Of course purely conjured items vanished fairly quickly, if not as quickly as replicated items. That Dumbledore's sleeping bags had lasted several days had also been a testament to his power.

Riddle wondered if Potter had for some reason disappeared the bells, impressive since they and their frame were quite large, or had conjured the items. Either bespoke more power than he himself had had before the age of 20 or so.

The flames disappeared, showing that Harry was still alive and healthy. Harry called out, "Do you know the penalty for being a wicked witch, Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Lestrange glared back. At the first real movement of Potter's wand, she would charge and attack. She did not count the slight waver it made, which was a mistake.

Suddenly, she was in shadow. Had she been able to hear the crowd, she would have heard them scream in terror and surprise. Involuntarily, she looked up.

Floating thirty feet above her head was a very large concrete slab. What she couldn't see -- and everyone else could -- was that above the slab was a two-storey, twelve room (four bedroom, 2 1/2 bath, dining room, play room, parlor, inglenook, and kitchen) brick suburban villa.

And two long seconds after Bellatrix looked up, it was no longer floating.

Bellatrix was crushed into a pulp. The candle and cauldrons showing her life force went out.

"Ding dong the witch is dead,
Which old Witch?
The Wicked witch!
Ding Dong the wicked witch is dead!" the now-enchanted bells sang.

"Be careful, Riddle!" Harry called out as he vanished the bells, "Or else someone will drop a house on you!"

"Well," Snape said in awe, "there might not be any brown stains down there, but I bet there are a few around us. I won't even try to collect on that bet!"

"At least we now know how those nine houses disappeared," Dumbledore said. "But I do not understand the reference, and must worry a bit about the ethics of stealing houses."

"The reference means something to most Muggle-born or raised," Remus said. "And if you traced the paperwork, the houses were being built by companies Harry owns, and none had insurance claims filed. He can hardly be accused of stealing from himself, can he?"

"I just can't believe he could disappear an entire house successfully," Sirius said, finally finding his voice.

"The first four were failures to some degree, and the next two were successful practices," Remus said simply. "If he needs them, he has two more in his wand."

The seconds ran through the small hour-glass shaped timer, and Tom Marvolo Riddle had to step into the arena. He still had the option to surrender.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle!" Harry called out. "You killed my parents! You tried to get your witch-slave to kill me for you! You coward! You, who claim to be the greatest sorcerer alive, who claim to be the heir of Salazar Slytherin, are nothing more than a coward who relied on bully-boys, surprise, and terror to defeat your enemies. You couldn't have defeated either of my parents in a duel, and you were too afraid of dying to challenge me, then only thirteen! -- directly. If you take the coward's way out, I swear I'll post a half-million Galleon reward for your head before the end of the day!"

Voldemort realized that if he had any chance of pulling his life back together, he would have to be careful. Whatever he had been expecting, this boy was not it. He watched Potter, and looked for the right moment.

"Hey, Tom!" Harry went on. "How does it feel when you know you're about to die, and are so terrified of it that it's consumed your every action for the last fifty years? How does it feel to know that instead of going down in Hogwarts: A History as a brilliant-but-disadvantaged former Head Boy who did great things for the magical world, you're going to be a footnote in the history books as a blood-thirty, crazed half-blood who dishonored Slytherin and who died at the hands of a fourteen year old boy? How does it feel. . . ."

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry's enhanced reflexes easily allowed him to avoid the curse, and as he did so he murmured, "Accio Riddle's right eye." Summoning charms could easily be blocked and they had to be voiced (Harry had managed to get his down to a murmur after a lot of practice). On the positive side, they could not be seen and were very powerful when not blocked.

"AVADA K . . . **AAaarrgggh!**" Riddle screamed as his right eye was ripped from his head. He quickly retreated, fortunately for him (in the short run) just far enough that a falling house just missed crushing him.

Harry put everything he had into a medical charm, again something easily blocked -- and also very visible. However, Voldemort was unable to really see his surroundings as he staggered away from Harry, missing one eye and in great pain. Harry was using the charm as a hex. Healers used the charm on patients who had just lost a limb or a digit, as it made a clean cut and cauterized the wound at the same time. Riddle, however, had both straightened up moved in an unexpected direction. The charm therefore missed his head and caught his left elbow, removing his forearm and hand cleanly.

It took several seconds before the stunned nerves told Riddle's brain what had happened. Riddle howled in pain and grasped for his missing forearm.

"Accio Riddle's wand," Harry murmured. He caught the wand and snapped it.

Outside the dueling area, a sigh of relief whispered through the crowd.

"Don't get too confident," many of the spectators whispered, some silently and some aloud.

Harry removed Riddle's right arm at the shoulder and then both his legs at the knee. Then Harry burned the limbs to ashes in front of Riddle's writhing torso and remaining eye.

Harry knelt and managed to catch Riddle's remaining eye just long enough to think to himself, 'Legilimens!'

Inside Riddle's mind, beyond the incredible amount of pain, beyond the anger and the fear was a remarkable amount of self-pity.

'You are pitiful, but not pitiable,' Harry thought at him. Then he both said and projected (since mere words were unlikely to register with the agonized Riddle, the thoughts would, while the spoken words would carry to the spectators), "From the day after you murdered my parents until the day I received my Hogwarts letter, I was more despised and treated worse than you ever were in that Muggle orphanage. Where ever you go after I kill this body, remember that you could have been great. You could have despised your magical heritage, not your Muggle, or better yet embraced them both. You could have made yourself into the hero of the average wizard, defender of the Muggle-born and Half-bloods and Mixed-bloods and made your mark as the greatest of the Light since Merlin. No, you're here because you're a sick, twisted, sadistic loon, just like your uncle. You're a pompous, arrogant wanker, just like your Muggle father. You're the worst of both the magical and Muggle worlds. You're a murderous piece of scum." He then projected the thought, 'I'm just glad that, with only one seventh of a soul, you can't become a ghost.'

Riddle ignored all that, and merely asked mentally through the pain, 'But how. . . ?'

Harry gave Riddle a few brief images of the original time-stream, and Riddle saw that, despite having caused more mayhem, he had still gone down to defeat. He saw that Harry had been brought back by the willing sacrifice of two women, one of whom had never even met Harry or his parents beyond a nod at the younger students while the three had been at Hogwarts together.

Riddle still didn't understand. Why hadn't witches that powerful simply backed him and made his plans for world domination easier?

"Because life isn't about you or any other individual," Harry said, again both aloud and in Riddle's head (so it would by-pass the pain). "Because we matter to ourselves. You're too selfish for any sane person to want to help, if they have the brains to see that the only thing that mattered to you was you."

And with that, Harry removed Tom Marvolo Riddle's head. The candle and cauldrons representing his life-force went out.

With that, most of the wards went down and Harry could hear the screaming, cheering, spectators. He stood and motioned for quiet, which took several minutes to achieve.

When it finally went quiet, Harry amplified his voice (since the wards were down, it was no longer automatic), and admonished them, saying, "WHY DIDN'T ANY OF YOU STOP THIS MAN FIFTY YEARS AGO?" The crowd went very quiet. "ANSWER: BECAUSE YOU THOUGHT ALBUS DUMBLEDORE WOULD PROTECT YOU. THAT YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO DO

ANYTHING EXCEPT LIVE YOUR SELFISH LITTLE LIVES, ARGUE ABOUT WHO IS BETTER THAN WHOM, AND, FOR MANY IN THE MEDIA AND MINISTRY. TAKE YOUR LITTLE BRIBES WHERE EVER POSSIBLE. WELL, GUESS WHAT? YOU CAN'T RELY ON ME TO PULL YOUR CHESTNUTS OUT OF THE FIRE! IF YOU WANT SOMEONE TO SAVE YOU, WORK TOGETHER AND YOU CAN BLOODY WELL SAVE YOURSELVES!"

And with that, Harry disappeared from the dueling circle.

Chapter XXXII

Harry stopped briefly at Grimmauld Place, where Hermione, Dobby, and Winky were waiting for him. "You scouted everyplace?" Harry asked Dobby.

"Yes, sir," Dobby said. "Miss has the list."

"Are you ready, Miss?" Harry asked, trying to lighten his mood.

"I finished the potions Snape started," Hermione said, trying to hide her own nerves, for she had been worried about the duel and hadn't attended. "I think you'll be pleased."

"I know I will be, since this was your idea. Let's go then."

Harry touched the first old sock he had made into a portkey, and the pair was gone. Dobby and Winky disappeared a few moments later.

Harry and Hermione appeared in an empty alley in Pompeii. Hermione pulled the extra-powerful time-turner Winky had taken from the Department of Mysteries over them, and they went back two days in time. Then Harry activated the next port key. At each new destination, they would go back two days in time, a safe-limit on the device for multiple use. From Pompeii they went to a ruined temple, usually off-limits to tourists, in Egypt. From there, they went to a deserted beach in Yemen, then to one in the desert of the Iranian/Afghani border, then to a forest in eastern India, then one in Laos, then another forest in Indonesia, and finally to the Grangers' in Perth, putting them some 16 days behind time.

After greeting the Grangers, they retired to a small suite located in an extension to the house, where they took a series of potions. The first set were partially based on human growth hormone, a substance unknown to the magical world until Hermione had made it known to Snape, and some heavy-duty nutritional potions. Harry grew to become six foot even and added thirty pounds of muscle mass over the next three days. Hermione grew to be five foot seven, added ten pounds of muscle, and to Harry's delight (and her dismay) went from a b-cup to a dd.

Using his limited metamorph abilities, Harry was able to change his hair color (to dark brown) and eyes (to a brilliant blue, nearly as startling as his green eyes were) and managed to move his scar from his forehead to the top of his head where it was completely hidden. Harry's eyesight had already magically improved due to his power, so he could do without glasses in his new identity, and merely don glasses with plain safety glass when he wanted to become Harry again.

Harry finished changing Hermione's teeth (and doing a perfect job, much to the dismay of her parents, who realized that most of their skills were useless in the magical world). Hermione also had her now-huge mop of wild bushy hair cut very short and slightly straightened at a Muggle hair salon. Still, they also took another set of potions which would slightly change their features. After a few days rest from all the changes, they would be off to California, again using the time-turner, although for one-day jumps. In the end, they would end up in San Francisco on July 31, a pair of orphans of mixed heritage from Britain, just coming out of their O.W.L.s. Their faked records would not need to directly follow them, as they would be tested on the American equivalents.

Monday, August 21, 1994

The magical world of Western Europe, especially Britain, was in an uproar. The threat of Tom Riddle/Voldemort was over, but Harry Potter's last words were still stinging many as they pondered them.

Most would let the words slip past them -- although it took some time for that to occur for many. For others, especially for the incoming Fourth years at Hogwarts, Harry's speech were words they meant to live by.

The California School -- Northern California

The California School was an excellent school, and was also considered to be the most liberal school of Magics in the world. The faculty was meeting for the first time since the end of the school year in late June, and discussing the incoming students.

"Finally," the Principal, Peter Bredon, said, "we have two new Juniors, transfers from Hogwarts. They are childhood friends, and at least for now, I'm sure, something more. Barry Green is a first generation Magic user on one side and mixed on the other, just like his girlfriend, Jane Seymore. She is from a more mixed background on both sides, several magical users in her family but not her parents." 'Squib' was a politically incorrect term, and the condition was talked around. "Their parents were friends and they were all attacked and murdered some time ago by followers of that Dark Sorcerer who was killed yesterday. I asked if they were going to stay here, and they said they didn't want to go back to a place where blood might still matter more to many than ability."

The whole staff shook their heads at European backwardness.

"Anyway, their parents all died in the same attack. Mister Green's uncle -- his mother's brother -- and Ms Seymore's aunt -- her father's sister -- are married and but have moved in Western Australia. While the students had considered attending one of the Aussie schools, they received permission to come here instead."

Convinced, as most faculty are, of the superiority of their school, this made sense to everyone.

"Their records were destroyed in shipment, something about that Voodoo cartel attacking the wrong shipment, but as they're coming in as Juniors, that hardly matters, since they had to take the Standard Magical Exams for placement in any event." These were of course similar in content to the O.W.L. To pass a subject, a student had to have at least a 70 on the relevant SME. To continue the basic subject, a student needed an 80. To take the Honors Level, a student had to have a 90.

Bredon picked up Barry's file. "Since they are from another country, we asked them to take the remedial 'Mundane Living' course. They actually asked to be tested in all our subjects, magical and Mundane both. Mister Green did fairly well to brilliantly in most of his magical areas, not terribly well in most of the Mundane. He scored 75 in Arithmancy, 87 in Astronomy, 90 in Care of Creatures, 100 plus in Charms, 100 plus in Defense -- he nearly managed a corporeal Patronus! -- 75 in Divination, 90 in Herbology, 84 in History of Magic, 90 in Mundane Living, 99 in Potions, 96 in Runes and Magical Languages, and 100 in Transfiguration. As for the Mundane, well, he easily passed multiple languages. He scored 75 in Maths, 72 in Mundane History, 75 in Science, and an 87 in Writing. He will be taking Honors Charms, Defense, Herbology, Potions, Runes and Languages, and Transfiguration. He'll also be taking Remedial Mundane Living for a year, just to get used to

America, plus the Remedial Maths, in case he wants to go on to a Mundane University. He'll also be in the Junior Literature class. Oh, he easily passed his broom and apparation exams." Limited apparation in North America was allowed for those between 16 and 18.

"Impressive young man, I take it," one of the instructors said.

"He is," Principle Bredon agreed. "Ms Seymore is even more so, academically. She scored a 100 plus in Arithmancy, 99 in Astronomy, 100 in Care of Creatures, 100 plus Charms, 100 in Defense, an 81 Divination, 96 in Herbology, a 90 in History of Magic, 96 in Mundane Living, 100 plus in Potions, 99 Runes and Magical Languages, and 100 plus in Transfiguration. She has the Minor Gift in Languages, and scored 90 in Maths, 87 in Mundane History, 90 in Science, and a 99 in Writing. She just managed to pass her broom test, and did well enough on apparation." He smiled. "It was quite a battle to get her to only take ten courses. In the end, she'll be taking Arithmancy, Astronomy, Charms, Defense, Herbology, Potions, Runes and Magical Languages, Transfiguration, Physics, Calculus, and Junior Literature. She'll also audit the Remedial Mundane Living for the fall term."

One of the younger witches, an Arithmancer, picked up their photos. "Good thing they're already a couple. Otherwise, they might break a few hearts."

One of the more matronly, elderly witches demanded, "If you talked to them since the duel yesterday, I take it they are not in Australia? Are these two young people wandering about unescorted and unchaperoned?"

"Oh, no, Emily," Bredon assured her. "They spent two weeks at the Ponderosa." This was a magical 'dude ranch', where the students rode horses and acquired other old-fashioned or Mundane skills, including how to drive a car. Harry and Hermione, or Barry and Jane, would have an air-tight alibi for the time of the magical duel, plus they were meeting a number of their fellow students as well as other students from all over North America. "Right now, they're with that tour of the west that Salem organized for its students."

"Oh," the witch said, "never mind."

The California School did not believe in Houses, or open dorms with rows of beds. Their dormitories were high towers, although not nearly as high as the neighboring redwoods. Unlike Hogwarts, which had seven years of instruction for ages 11 through 18, the California School had three neighboring campuses, with some recreational areas (playing and flying fields, a large swimming pool, etc.) in common, and the central campus had libraries, classrooms, laboratories, etc.

The South Campus had four years of classes for ages 10 - 14. The first year was mostly basic academic courses for the first term, although they would be given training wands in the second term and taught basic wand movements and fundamental concepts of magic. The next three years covered much the same material as the first three years at Hogwarts plus some Muggle subjects. These students lived two to a room.

The North Campus also had four years of classes, ages 15 - 18, roughly corresponding with the Fourth through Seventh years at Hogwarts. The Fourth and Fifth year students also lived two to a room, the Sixth and Seventh years lived in single rooms.

The West Campus held faculty and staff housing. The East Campus was for older students, as the

School offered advanced training in several areas. These students usually lived in singles, although there were some larger rooms for couples.

Into this more boisterous environment, Barry and Jane found that they could thrive, although it took several weeks before they could easily find locations where they could pursue their intimacy. They wished they could have easily reproduced the Marauders' Map, but that was a complicated piece of magic, which required many hours of scouting. It had taken the four Marauders more than a full school year to produce it.

Barry was fairly popular with the flyers, and he proved to be a decent Quodpot player and a fantastic flyer and broom racer, using a brand new Devil he had brought with him from Australia. He claimed, however, that Quidditch had always bored him, as the catching of the Golden Snitch ruined any real strategy. A few disliked him because it was clear that he and the very well-built and smart Jane Seymore were a solid couple. He was also not popular that academic year when he cleaned up betting on the Triwizard Tournament being held over in Britain, correctly predicting the tasks would be grabbing a clue from a dragon, confronting the merpeople under the lake at Hogwarts, and a maze, not to mention correctly betting that Cedric Diggory would emerge as the champion, when most of the money had been on Viktor Krum, with some of the boys also succumbing to Fleur Delacour's charms, and some of the feminists feeling that they should back her on principle.

Jane's beauty and brains generated some jealousy in the female dorms, but her solid relationship with Barry at least assured them that she would not go after any of their boyfriends. Both of the new students' dueling skills also insured some respect, although Harry kept his abilities as Barry toned down to just enough to win the tough matches without showing off too much.

Dumbledore had arranged a triple-blind magical mail drop. Harry and Hermione received mail from Sirius, Remus, Tonks, the Dumbledores, and the Fourth year students (Moody refused to write, citing security reasons even though he had partially designed the system, although he often added long postscripts to Remus' letters 'Since you're ignoring security anyway'). Obviously, their letters back were very circumspect, especially to the students. Only Dumbledore, Remus, Sirius, and Snape knew they were not Fourth years and even what continent they were living on, and only Dumbledore knew they had been advanced to their Sixth year, not Fifth. They did promise to stop by the Burrow in 1998. The only other person in on most of the deception besides Dumbledore, the Grangers, Dobby, and Winky (the elves were working at Hogwarts again for the time being) was Principal Bredon and two people in San Francisco.

Harry was amused to learn that Ron managed to get up enough courage to ask Lavender to the Yule Ball, while Neville had asked Ginny. Viktor had asked Susan before anyone else could, including Ron or Neville.

At the California School, there were six dances for the 'Freshmen' through Seniors -- three informal dances (two in the fall and one in the spring), two semi-formal (a Yule Ball the Saturday before the Christmas Break started and the other the first dance of the spring, on the Saturday nearest to Valentine's Day). The final dance, held with some of the older students, was a formal Prom.

Many of the teen girls sighed as they saw how Barry and Jane danced together. They weren't the best dancers (although they were fairly good), but they were the most obviously in love.

One thing that those few in school who noticed wondered was where the pair was allowed to go one Sunday morning per month. The answer was to the small wizarding community outside of San Francisco, where they visited a late middle-aged looking couple, alleged refugees from Europe.

They had also used a time-turner to show up in their new home a week before the duel in Britain. Using the name of Nick and Pam Fleming, the Flamels (who had had enough elixir over the centuries to insure they had at least a normal wizarding life-time to look forward to) were raising a loving infant 'granddaughter', with the typical California name of Star Lilac Fleming, who would not know she was the missing daughter of Tom Riddle and Bellatrix Black-LeStrange until she turned sixteen.

The pair spent their entire Christmas and summer breaks in Perth, making up for the previous summer, when they had stayed in Britain the entire time until their escape. The Grangers' Muggle friends and family were surprised to see how much Harry and Hermione had grown (Harry did change his eyes and hair back, while Hermione had taken a potion which had grown her hair out). None of the neighbors knew what Harry and Hermione had really looked like to see the other differences.

They did have three visitors towards the end of the summer: Sirius, Remus, and Tonks, now Dora Lupin. The British magical world was still reeling from the confrontation with Voldemort. The anti-Pure-Blood factions were placing all the blame for Voldemort on the traditional, pro-Pure-Blood agenda and the 'old-wizard' network that ran the Ministry. The Pure-Blood factions, led by the returned Lucius Malfoy, were trying to blame the whole mess on being duped by a devious Half-Blood and demanding legislation to restrict Half-bloods.

While Harry and Hermione had not had the entire inside story on British politics before, they had come back to Australia fairly well prepared. By the time the trio returned to Britain, they had a long statement signed by Harry condemning both sides (although more-so the Pure-Bloods) and pointing out that both sides were being unfair to the Muggle-born and those of mixed ancestry (such as those with part-giant or part-veela ancestry), and aligning Harry firmly with the pro-reform movements which were operating in most of the Ministries outside of Europe.

'Barry' graduated with High Honors. He achieved his Advanced Magical Certificate in all his subjects (Honors Charms, Defense, Herbology, Potions, Runes and Languages, and Transfiguration), and took High Honors in all but Herbology. He also did well in his two mundane subjects. 'Jane' did even better. They stayed at the California School an extra two years, receiving Masters of Magic Certificates ('Barry' in Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration; 'Jane' in Arithmancy, Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration). 'Barry' also received an Associate's Degree in Liberal Arts from the California Community College associated with the School, while Jane received her two ADs in Mathematics and General Science.

They had decided to go to University in Australia, where the academic year would start in January. 'Jane' would be studying Physics, 'Barry' Accounting, although he quickly turned to Anthropology. They would, however, first visit Hermione's parents in Perth, where they would formally be married under their real names (they would be married under their assumed names in Las Vegas just before they left). They would then go on to Britain as Harry and Hermione.

Thus started the dual lives of Harry and Hermione Potter. They ended up living most of their lives in New Zealand, although Hermione had earned MS and a PhD in Mathematics from UCLA, and Harry his MA in Cultural Anthropology. Under their assumed names, Hermione taught at a Muggle University in Christchurch and became an authority on Arithmetical theory, while Harry played househusband and did most of the raising of their three sons.

Hermione never returned to Britain again after their brief trip in 1998, but Harry made frequent trips, usually spending 60-90 days there after 2001. It would take most of the century for Britain to catch up with the rest of the magical world in terms of its policies and social concerns, but while always lagging behind, by the end of the century the British were at least in the same general area as the rest of the magical world. In the end, while Harry did gain the credit for being the inspiration for the reform movement, most of the credit for the actual work went to Draco Malfoy (Minister from 2046-2103) and Percy and Ron Weasley.

Harry never had to face down a would-be Dark Lord on his own again. He did join in with others in law enforcement groups in putting down three Dark movements over the years.

Just before the year 2200, as Harry's long life drew to an end, surrounded by his grandchildren and their children and descendants, and the descendants of his god daughter Star (who had never taken up her Dark heritage, or told her children about it), he reflected that his life had been worth living, and living over in part, despite the traumas. He would and rejoin his friends and loved ones, especially Hermione, Sirius, Remus, and Luna, and perhaps, in the next great adventure, even get to know his parents.