

Smoke

by

DrT

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Chapter I

The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a very large place. There are towers and turrets, corridors and secret passageways. There are rooms which are hidden, and rooms which have just plain been forgotten, some in obvious places and some off corridors which are so far off the beaten path that they have barely been set foot in since a group calling themselves the Marauders had mapped most of the castle in the 1970s.

This was one such room, mid-way up what most students now called the 'divination tower,' unoccupied except by paintings and one fairly eccentric divination teacher. This room had a lovely view out of two windows looking towards the northwest, overlooking the Forbidden Forest. There were two stuffed chairs (one a rocker) and a small set of shelves. Every evening at 8:00, one staff member climbed the stairs to indulge in his two vices.

On rare occasions, the Headmaster might join in. Sometimes the Muggle Studies or Potions professor might join him as well. One year, to his great annoyance, Gilderoy Lockhart had shown up a few times.

John Russell taught 'Runes' -- magical symbols and languages. Muggle-born students sometimes asked if he was related to the famous Muggle noble family of the same name. His branch, the magical branch, was actually the senior branch of the family, emerging from the Muggle commercial class in the late 1300s.

In appearance, Muggles would think he was a thick-set man in his early forties. In actuality, he was in his early sixties. His wife and two sons had been killed in a terror attack early during Voldemort's First Rising. His daughter, his youngest child, had survived (mostly because she had been a student at Hogwarts, leaving in 1982), and the first of his three grandchildren would start Hogwarts in just over a year.

Even after all these years, he had a difficult time associating Voldemort with the teen who had been Head Boy his first year. Russell had not paid much attention to Voldemort until the terror attacks had escalated in the mid-1970s. He had been a well-known magical scholar by the early 1960s. Voldemort had sent three Death Eaters after him, to coerce him into helping decipher some Dark Magic scrolls. Russell had destroyed the scrolls and killed two of the three Death Eaters. He had survived six attacks on his own life, taking down six of his attackers, but his wife and two sons had not been so lucky.

Neither had the three Death Eaters he had learned had been in on the attacks, although the others had escaped him. Russell had proven himself a very dangerous wizard.

After Voldemort had disappeared in 1981, Russell had sat down and thought through what little information had been released. He had gone to Dumbledore, who had confirmed Russell's own suspicions -- Voldemort could someday return. When the Runes job had opened up in 1984, he had taken it, and he now spent a fair amount of his free time at night tracking intelligence for the Order of the Phoenix.

Except between 8:00 until approximately 9:30.

This night, the night the students had left for home, Russell was a bit surprised to see Severus Snape already in the room, fussing with his hookah. "Good evening, Severus," Russell said. Snape merely nodded in return. Russell glanced at his shelves as a large carafe of iced water appeared, cutesy of the house elves. "What is it tonight? Tobacco, cannabis, or hashish?"

Most of the times the man indulged, he knew, Snape smoked tobacco. On rare occasions, marijuana. Once, after he had returned from the ordeal of meeting the risen Dark Lord, it had been hashish.

"Cannabis," Snape replied.

"So he won't be calling for you tonight."

"No," Snape stated. "I do not know what the Boy did to him a few weeks ago, but it did hurt him. He is still recuperating, and calculating his next move."

"Well, it could be worse news. Would you like anything to drink?"

"A glass of water, please. And what are you indulging in tonight?"

"A nice Honduran, with a Cameroon wrapper," Russell answered, handing Snape a glass of ice water. He glanced at his book shelves. The top shelf just held the carafe and a large ash tray. The second shelf down had three cigar boxes, a rack of 8 pipes, two canisters of pipe tobacco, and the paraphernalia of the serious smoker (pipe cleaners, various pipe tools, three different cigar cutters, matches, etc.). The third shelf down had a variety of glasses. The tall bottom shelf had just six bottles: a bottle each of Scotch, Brandy, Calvados, Malmsey, pastis, and absinthe. "And, since it's a warm night, I'll start with a pastis." He opened both windows with a wave of his wand.

As Snape fired up his hookah, Russell mixed the clear pastis with the iced water, making the usual milky green drink. Russell then cut the cigar and carefully lit it with a match, and sat in the rocker.

"I believe you're the only Pure Blood I know who would use a match like that," Snape commented.

"The wand burns too hot," Russell said simply. "I have two vices, two pleasures. I may as well take them seriously and enjoy them."

"Well, there are worse vices, as we know," Snape acknowledged.

"You seem to have mixed emotions tonight, Severus."

"It's been a hard year," Snape said.

"It has. At least that bitch is gone."

Snape looked at Russell with surprise. "You know, I believe that is the first time in twelve years I have ever heard you use language like that."

"I had a very nasty temper, and a very sarcastic tongue, when I was young," Russell said. "I learned to tame it. Believe me, I would have liked to have said worse about that woman all year."

"At least she didn't try to fire you," Snape said.

"True. However . . . now please don't take this the wrong way, Severus. You know I think very highly of your potion skills."

"Thank you, but I think I am about to be insulted."

"Come now, you are not the world's most gifted teacher."

Snape grimaced, but said, "True. At least she didn't fire me or send aurors after me."

"Also true. I do wish she had gotten rid of Binns, though."

"Agreed. Was he already dead when you were here?"

"Oh, yes. He died when my father was here. He said there was no change in the lecture style."

"I suppose she didn't say much to you," Snape commented.

"I have important relatives, I still have friends in the Ministry, I'm an internationally known scholar, and she knows I've killed people before," Russell pointed out.

"So she said nothing?"

"I am not the world's most inspired teacher of adolescents, either," Russell admitted. "As much as I hate to admit it, she did have some pointed comments about my teaching which had some truth behind them. As nasty, interfering, and generally useless as she was, she did point out some genuine deficiencies here. Odd that she was likely the worst teacher on staff. Speaking personally, I rather wish we had the equivalent of a Muggle university. I'd prefer to teach young adults who are serious about the subject."

"There's not a large enough population base," Snape said automatically.

"There is for all of western and central Europe," Russell retorted.

"And what language would the instruction be in?"

"Latin, of course," Russell stated. Snape just shook his head.

The two smoked in silence for five minutes.

"What else is bothering you, Severus?"

Snape sighed. He would hold that he had no friends. Russell was, however, at least close enough, and experienced enough, to act as a confessor of sorts. "You can likely guess," he finally said.

"Potter and Black."

"Exactly. I loathed Black, and he returned the feeling. The only thing we had in common was a common enemy. I know there was nothing I could have said or done to prevent him from going to the Ministry that night, so I do not feel any guilt over his death. Still, as much as I hated him, I wish he was still alive."

"For his own sake, or the sake of Potter?"

"For the sake of the struggle," Snape retorted. "And it was his fault he died as he did. I do not mean running off; Merlin knows that that was merely a glaring flaw in his character, and I realize now I can no more be critical of that than I can be about my own shortcomings. No, he died because he spent most of his time for the last year feeling sorry for himself and drinking. I doubt he practiced at all. As much as I hated him, he was once a skilled wizard. If he had kept in training, he either would not be dead, or he would have at least taken some of those people with him. There is not one of them, except perhaps Lucius, who should have had a good chance at beating him if he had been prepared. Then that Boy would not be depressed at best, and I hate to think of the state he might be in at worst."

"And of course you admit no guilt in this."

"Over Black? No, none at all."

"How about over Potter?"

Snape scowled, and drew in a large relaxing lung full of smoke.

"Don't scowl. Surely there must have been a better way of teaching the Boy Occlumency."

"Why don't you teach him?" Snape almost snarled. "Do you even know how difficult a skill it is? Few can master it."

"At your level? No, I am not close to your level. If you consider yourself still sober enough, you may try me."

"Legilimens!" Snape ran into images he didn't understand, and a language he didn't know. He scowled yet again.

"See, I do know the basics. I am rather sensitive to Legilimency, in fact. I meditate and do the basic Occlumency exercises at night, otherwise I would sleep even worse than I do. Still, I must fill my

mind with something. I cannot present blankness, or selected memories at will, like Albus says you can."

"I can."

"Well, I cannot. I have trained myself, therefore, to automatically recite the Catalog of Ships from the Iliad. That's boring enough to stand up to any attack, although of course the attacker will know that I know I am under attack."

Snape shrugged. "Then I'll suggest you teach the Boy the basics if the Headmaster cannot, and we'll see if the Headmaster or I can take it from there."

"I am willing to try. How is he? He wasn't at the Feast last night."

Snape shrugged. "Who can say? You should have asked Granger, assuming she's still not nattering on about her O.W.L.s."

"She is. She made, she says, one major error. If true, she will not score an O+. However, since she writes grammatically and has some rudimentary sense of style, she should still score well."

"Does she write at least twice as much as she needs to for you?"

"At times. Fortunately, most of what she writes now are translations, and those she does not overdo -- once I talked her out of adding end notes."

They smoked in silence for some time. Russell then asked, "How much of your treatment of Albus' Golden Trio is an act?"

"The opinions of them which I express are all accurate," Severus said with a sniff. "Granger is an insecure, overly-excited, know-it-all. She has very little wisdom."

"How many Fifth years have you ever known with any wisdom?"

Snape scowled at that, but said instead, "She does not know her place, and I am certain even you must admit that she is annoying in class."

"She is annoying in class, but she also knows that she will not have a place given to her in this world," Russell argued. "She will have to struggle to achieve what that twit Malfoy will be given as a right."

"Draco. . . ."

"Draco Malfoy is a lazy, sloppy, spoiled, mean-spirited twit. Every time he fails, he blames someone else, instead of his own lack of drive."

"Oh, and you don't think Potter and his lackeys are overly indulged?"

"Malfoy has lackeys, Potter has companions. And don't scowl like that, or argue. I choose my words carefully. Draco Malfoy could not inspire anyone to follow him. Neither could Granger, for that matter. Neither could you or I as far as that goes. Potter is a leader, more so than even his father was. Certainly more than Black ever was."

"You say that like it was a good thing."

"It will be," Russell stated, "and it will be none to our credit when it happens. Albus has spent so much time sharpening the boy into a tool that he has neglected every other aspect."

"He's spoiled the boy," Snape insisted. "Any other boy would have been expelled!"

"Oh, and Malfoy shouldn't have been? Half your upper years should have been expelled for their actions under those inquisitorial squads, and we both know it is unlikely that they'll even get a slap on the wrist. So yes, Albus may have over-indulged Potter, but he is hardly any stricter with any of

the students."

Snape inhaled deeply, and held the sweet smoke for some time.

"Now, as I said, Potter showed himself to be an inspiring leader, and a better teacher than either of us, this last year."

"Granger put him up to it, I believe."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Russell agreed. "Despite your murmurings and grumblings, Potter is anything but spoiled. . . ."

"Like I'll ever really believe that!"

Russell glared at Snape full-faced. Snape choked on his smoke under the power of that glare. "You were inside the boy's mind. Are you going to tell me he was anything but abused as a child?"

Snape looked at Russell. "How did you know?" That was supposed to be a secret. Snape had not known until he had invaded Potter's mind

"I am an intelligence officer. I did my research. If someone, the description of whom fits Albus, hadn't interfered, those relatives of Potter would have found themselves under investigation from the Muggle authorities several times."

"If the Headmaster knows Potter is just a tool, then why. . . ?" Snape was speechless for once.

Russell shrugged. "I think he's come to like the boy. Since the Second or Third Task, he's had a difficult time thinking of the tool instead of the boy."

"And now?" Snape asked.

Russell leaned back in his rocker, and sent three perfect smoke rings to the ceiling. "We'll have to see."

"I need a drink," Snape muttered.

Russell held up the absinthe bottle. "Shall we?"

"Indeed."

Chapter II

Monday, June 24, 1996

Severus Snape arrived at the room in the Divination Tower at a little past 8:20. For a moment, he thought a fire must have broken out in the 'smoking room'. Then he realized that the rich smoke was from Havana cigars. "Merlin! How many of those things have you smoked already?" Snape demanded, amazed. Professor Russell, he knew, kept cedar boxes containing two types of cigars, and a third with an assortment. He rarely smoked Havanas, let alone enough to fill the room with this much smoke. It was almost unheard of to even see the smoke hang about in a room this size, even with the windows shut.

"This is the second one," Russell growled around his cigar. Snape saw there was a third cigar in a cedar sheath laying atop the book shelves. It was the longest, thickest cigar Snape had ever seen, yet the cigar Russell was smoking was barely two inches long.

"What the devil is the matter with you? You'll make yourself sick! Open the windows, man!"

"I can stay angrier this way!"

Snape was preparing to undertake some special projects outside of Hogwarts. This would be his last chance to relax, and he did not want to spend it playing games. "And why are you angry?" he demanded.

Russell stopped pacing and glared at Snape. "I have just received the worst dressing down I have ever had, that's why!"

"The Headmaster?"

"Well, since I'm not under arrest for using Unforgivables in retaliation, it must have been!"

Snape winced. He knew himself to be a very powerful wizard. Russell was certainly in his league. Russell had also come out a generation which had taken its dueling seriously, and his name was listed on several of the old dueling cups in the Trophy Room. For a wizard as basically decent as Russell to even be talking about using Unforgivables was more than a definite sign of anger. "May I inquire as to the reason the Headmaster's ire was raised?"

"Because I offered to tutor Potter!"

"In Occlumency?"

"Exactly!"

Snape frowned. "But that is exactly what the whelp needs!"

"That is what I said, although in more polite terms," Russell retorted. "Dumbledore looked at me like . . . like . . . like I was some sort of pervert, who had offered to deflower the First years!"

Snape winced. He tried to speak, but nothing came out.

"Exactly!" Russell proclaimed. "Imagine he had looked at you like that! 'Russell,' he said after he had finished looking at me like some rotting dragon dung he had stepped in, 'I hardly believe you would be appropriate. Certainly we cannot have you taking up Harry's summer with his family, and I doubt it would be appropriate later on'. Then he turned his back to me!"

Russell threw the remains of the cigar to the stone floor. "How dare he! He knows damn well that I know that Potter is abused at home! How dare he talk to me like I'm some ignorant whelp!" Russell glowered. "I know his bloodline is five hundred years older than mine. I know he's more powerful than I am, I know he knows more about most areas of magic than I do. That is still no reason to

treat me like . . . like a Malfoy would a Squib!"

Russell ground his heel onto the poor cigar, poured and tossed back a double shot of Scotch, looked at the remaining Cuban with disgust and then turned his attention back to Snape. "I am going home for a few days."

"Is that wise?" Snape asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Russell snarled.

"There will soon be Death Eaters looking for targets of opportunity. . . ."

"If anyone DARES look at me cross-eyed, I'll rip their balls off and give them to you for potions ingredients!"

Russell was about twenty-five years older than Snape, but although the two men were of a similar height, Russell probably had forty-five pounds on the younger man, nearly two-thirds of it muscle. Snape decided the man could defend himself if anyone could.

When he had left Hogwarts, John Russell had been angrier than he had been since the murders of his family. That did not mean he went to the quiet manor he owned in a temper. The professor had knowledge that few others had, and he had employed it to ward and alarm his property very well.

Therefore, he had apparated to a very secure place on his property in northern England. He first surveyed the scene before him.

The building before him was a double-winged manor, with a smaller, earlier building between the 17th century wings, which slightly went back in a 'U' shape from the original building. Russell frowned. It looked right, in the long shadows of the long-northern July day, but it did not feel right.

Russell very gently tested a few threads of the wards. All the obvious wards were still present, but his was a sensitive touch -- he could tell that while these were the same wards, they had been put up by someone other than himself.

Testing a few of the more obscure spells protecting his property, Russell was able to piece together what had happened. His eyebrows furled together as he thought:

No one had any cause to have come to this land, unplottable since the mid-1400s.

Whoever had broken his wards had to be a brilliant curse breaker.

Whoever had replaced the wards had been skilled and powerful.

No one had any cause to replace the broken wards, and remain on the property (as one person had, his spells told him), unless they were an enemy.

The only enemies he had were Death Eaters.

Russell smiled as he reached the conclusion on what had happened, and what he should do, in less than five seconds.

William Flint sat quietly at the top of the main staircase. In many ways, he had not been happy to have been recalled by his family. He had been working for Gringotts as a curse breaker for ten years, and had enjoyed the work. He had learned to work with a wide variety of people, both magical and Muggle, and even a wide variety of beings. Still, he had been raised to a belief in his family, and his family had called.

Breaking into this house had been much more taxing than he had imagined possible when he had

first been told his assignment. He had studied the wards and other spells for a week, and still worried that he might have missed something. The Master had actually had to come in early June to help take down and restore the wards, right before whatever had happened at the Ministry had happened.

Flint was very happy he had already been watching here for his old professor to make a visit when the disaster at the Ministry had happened.

He was not happy for much longer.

Thursday, June 27, 1996

"What is it, Severus?" Dumbledore asked impatiently. "You should be either gathering your materials or at work at Spinner's End."

Snape took a seat in the Headmaster's Office uninvited. "Have you seen Professor Russell since you insulted him Monday?"

Dumbledore glared at his Potions teacher.

"You are the most powerful and knowledgeable wizard I have ever known or am likely to meet," Snape stated calmly, "but your glare is nothing compared to the Dark Lord's."

"Professor Russell came here with a suggestion so out-of-bounds. . . ."

"That he teach the Boy Occlumency?" Snape asked incredulously. "The last I knew, that was hardly out-of-bounds. I cannot teach the Boy. The last I knew, you could not teach the Boy. The last I knew, the Boy. . . ."

"Stop calling him that!" Dumbledore snapped.

"Then the last I knew, Potter," Snape stated, spitting the 'p' out, "needed to learn Occlumency. It comes almost naturally to me. Russell had to work hard on his. I thought he might be a reasonable teacher of the basics. Are my premises incorrect?"

Dumbledore sat heavily into his chair. "Yes, they are." Snape's eyebrows went up at that. He wondered why Dumbledore no longer thought Potter needed Occlumency. "I did not reveal everything that happened at the Ministry. When you or anyone else needs to know, I will tell you." Dumbledore did not want the full prophecy to be revealed yet, especially when Harry himself had not really accepted it nor did he want to tell anyone of Harry's driving Voldemort out of his mind when Voldemort had tried to possess the teen. Therefore, Dumbledore was uncertain as to what he should do in the matter of Occlumency.

Snape frowned, but said nothing to that. "Why did you react like John might be a Death Eater?"

"Is that what he told you?"

"No," Snape answered, twisting the knife, "he said you looked at him as if he were a known child molester who had offered to defile next year's new students."

Dumbledore winced. There had been a scandal in one of the small continental schools over the sexual abuse of students just a few years before. Every teacher in the magical world had felt the horror and shame to some degree. "I may have overreacted."

"Oh, do you think you might have?"

Dumbledore looked away. "Very well, I did. He was angry?"

"I knew the man was brilliant, and that he was powerful, but I felt that power radiating in anger. That means he is at least as powerful as I, which is fairly powerful indeed."

"I hired him for several reasons," Dumbledore said. "His magical power was one of them. And yes, I know he is not a traitor, and I also knew he was not under the Imperius. I would say he has slightly more immunity to the Imperius than you do, although not the natural immunity Harry has."

"I had some minor information for him," Snape said. "He has not been to the castle since he left Monday night. Could he have been attacked in his home?"

"No," Dumbledore stated. "Impossible."

"Why?" Snape asked, puzzled.

"He scored O's in all of his subjects for both the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, and he has the Minor Gift in Languages." This was the ability to learn between 60 and 100 languages with ease. Those with the Major Gift, such as Barty Crouch Senior, could sometimes learn over 200. "However, his real talents and interests lie in Old Magic, especially Ritual Magic. He is likely the most knowledgeable practitioner in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Until Voldemort's return, he coached hex breakers for the Ministry and curse breakers for Gringotts as well as teaching here. I assure you, while it may be possible to break into his home, he can not be caught there."

"Well, something must have happened to him!"

Dumbledore opened and then shut his mouth. Just then, a Messenger Spell appeared in front of the Headmaster. "That is from John. He asks that you and I come to your private laboratory."

"His Patronus is a puffskein?" Dumbledore shrugged. Then Snape realized other things as well.

"How did he even know where my private laboratory is?" Snape growled. Then he thought. "How did he know I was here?"

"He knows a great deal about Hogwarts," was all Dumbledore would say.

They found Professor Russell standing in front of the secret door to Snape's private lab, along with an assortment of pails and luggage.

"Planning on moving in?" Snape asked.

"Not me," was all Russell said. Snape opened the door and went in. Dumbledore followed, as did Russell, along with his baggage.

"What is all this?" Dumbledore asked.

Russell ignored the Headmaster for the moment, and instead looked at Snape. "You were right. My home had been violated. The obvious wards had been tampered with and replaced, after three men entered. Two of them had left. One was waiting in ambush for me."

"And you want us to deal with him?" Snape asked, puzzled.

"I dealt with him."

"Who?" Snape asked, while Dumbledore asked in a worried voice, "What is all this?" gesturing at what Russell had brought with him.

"William Flint," Russell answered.

"I didn't know he had entered the Dark Lord's service," Snape admitted.

"How could you?" Dumbledore shouted.

"How could he what?" Snape answered.

"I answered both your questions," Russell stated. "It was William Flint at my home, my HOME, Albus. And this," he said, "is what's left of William Flint." He opened the two trunks and uncovered

the pails.

He had reduced Flint to Potions ingredients.

"His memories are in these six pails," Russell said.

"Those aren't pensieve thoughts," Snape stated. Those were silver, and these were golden.

"They are," Russell answered. "These are the color of memories when they are ALL removed at the same time."

"You . . . you killed him. . . ." Snape said, mostly to himself, in shock.

"He was in my home," Russell said coldly. "He was the spider in a multi-layered trap. Albus and I could have entered that house without being killed and without alerting him, but I doubt many others within several thousand miles could have. They butchered my elves. They desecrated my family shrine. I did not torture him, or even torment him, but yes, I killed him. Such was my right, under the law."

"True," Dumbledore admitted reluctantly.

"I shall be shifting through his memories. Magical human potion ingredients being rare, expensive, and illegal, I thought you might have some use for them," Russell stated.

"True," Snape agreed. He often had to use less effective Muggle potion samples.

"I would like to send his effects, and his face, to his Master," Russell said.

"That might give you a bit of satisfaction, but it would merely raise their desire to get a hold on you," Dumbledore pointed out.

"Not even you could have pulled these memories from him," Russell said. "If we send proof of death, they won't think we learned anything from him. It might also come as a shock to one or two that they won't just be sent to a dementorless Azkaban until they can be rescued. They can be killed, too."

Dumbledore thought about that. When he still said nothing, Snape asked, "Who would you send it to?"

"I'm not certain," Russell admitted.

"Send it to Narcissa Malfoy," Dumbledore suddenly said in a harder voice than either man had ever heard him use, "With no message other than it be turned over to her husband's master."

"Why her?" Snape demanded. Then he remembered why. "Never mind." Narcissa Malfoy had suborned her cousin's house elf, leading to Black's death and Potter's anguish. This was Dumbledore's way of reminding the spoiled Narcissa Malfoy that she would not be forgotten. If Draco was present, it might also scare the boy straight.

Snape was very worried about Draco.

Russell was now addressing his Headmaster and leader. "I have one remaining elf. She will be splitting her time between her usual assignment, my manor, and here, with your permission. I would not like her caught as the others were."

"Agreed."

"If you will excuse me, I have been awake seventy-five hours. I believe the potions allowing me to do so will be giving out soon, and I'd like to shower and eat before they do."

"Of course," Dumbledore said. "See me when you wake up."

"I shall likely sleep around the clock. Until tomorrow, gentlemen." Russell stalked off, the pails of

thoughts trailing behind.

"I believe you would have had the hide of almost anyone else in the Order had they done this," Snape said.

"Had he gone out and hunted down a suspected Death Eater, I would have turned him over to the aurors with almost no qualm," Dumbledore asserted. "However, the ancient laws are clear. Flint was a housebreaker and desecrator, and must also be judged guilty of attempted murder and was at least a accomplice in the deaths of another's house elves. Russell had the right to kill him, even if I disagree with that right."

"I see."

"And, we need him. There were two attacks last night, Severus. Two families were massacred. Returning Flint's face will also serve as a barbaric reminder that there are those on our side who are not as merciful as I."

"But a face?"

"Would you care to look upon the souvenirs Voldemort sent me from last night?"

Snape did not shudder, but only because he was inured to horror. "No, sir. The Dark Lord has stopped hiding."

"The war has truly begun," Dumbledore agreed.

"What is this?" Voldemort demanded that evening, just before he sent out an attack party to kill Amelia Bones.

"My sister sent this on, Master," Bellatrix stated. "There is no magic, other than a preserving spell." Voldemort looked down at the face of what had been a promising young follower.

"May I lead the revenge mission, Master?" Bellatrix begged.

"No," Voldemort answered. "Revenge will come in time."

"But . . . yes, Master," Bella retreated before she was punished. Again.

"Begone," Voldemort commanded. He understood the many messages this represented, from both Russell and the Old Man. Russell would have to wait. There were other targets, but sooner or later, Russell would be in his sights.

Voldemort then decided to go through with his plan for Dumbledore. "Bella!" he called just before she made it through the door. She turned in terror, believing she was about to be hexed. "Bring me your nephew tomorrow. I have a plan for him."

Bellatrix bowed low, and fled.

Chapter III

Friday, July 5, 1996

John Russell stared at Dumbledore, having just been told a most amazing theory. After over a minute, he said, "Do you really think that's how Riddle survived?"

"I believe so, yes. Do you agree it's possible?" Russell was the only person Dumbledore knew whom he knew could both be trusted and who could shoot holes in a theory Dumbledore had been working on for decades, if there were any.

"No one, to my knowledge, no one has ever utilized more than one Horcrux," Russell said firmly. "To do it more than once would . . . it would destroy the humanity of the soul. . . ." Russell's eyes grew in horror and shock. "Merlin! He must have!"

"Exactly. I believe he may have done it as many as five or six times, but that is only a belief."

"He's aiming for seven parts? The magical number?"

"I believe so, but I have no evidence." Dumbledore could not get a hold of Horace Slughorn's true memory for verification. He also was uncertain, no matter the ultimate number aimed for, if Voldemort would have done the last split by now, or if he was still aiming on using Harry's murder for the spur for that last split.

"Who else knows this?" Russell demanded.

"Severus knows a little of this, and knows other portions of what is happening which you do not and need not know. No one else knows any of this."

Russell nodded, "This mysterious project Severus is working on for Riddle?"

"Amongst other things." Dumbledore hesitated. "You are a good intelligence offer, because you are, well, a snoop. True?"

"True," Russell agreed.

"What subjects did I take for my O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s?"

Russell gave Dumbledore a half-smile. "You were in almost the first class to take either. You took Runes, Arithmancy, and Muggle Studies for your O.W.L. electives. You took Arithmancy, Charms, Defense, History, Potions, Runes, and Transfiguration for your N.E.W.T.s."

"And yourself?"

"I took Arithmancy, Divination, and Runes for the O.W.L.s, and Arithmancy, Charms, Defense, Divination, Potions, Runes, and Transfiguration, why?"

"I never took Divination. It has always seemed the most inexact of all magical areas of study."

"It seems as if that is a common opinion amongst Arithmancy and Transfiguration specialists," Russell said drily. Vector and McGonagall were often loud on the subject.

"True," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Still, I now regret I did not formally study the subject. It might have allowed me to feel my way forward with my instincts. I find my intuition pushing me as much as my knowledge and logic at the moment."

"Magic does bring us closer to the currents of magic and fate," Russell agreed. "I'm not asking to know the details of the Prophecy, because I am sure you know it. However, by trying to prevent it from coming true, Voldemort has sown the seeds of his own destruction. Correct?"

"That doesn't surprise you?"

Russell snorted. "I read Oedipus in the original Greek when I was twelve. The Greek and Norse Muggles, among many other cultures, believed that we have a fate, Albus. In struggling against that fate, we bring it upon us. How we struggle against it defines our character. Why would I be surprised to see such things happening in real life?"

"I suppose you would not," Dumbledore acknowledged.

"It was Riddle's fate to be tempted by the Dark Arts, but it was still his choice to pursue them. It then became his fate to be presented with someone -- Harry Potter, shall we say? -- as a possible adversary. It was his choice to make Harry his enemy. It will be Harry's choice if he wants to fight or run away from it."

"Harry will never run," Dumbledore stated.

"Then that is Harry's fate," Russell stated. "The question now is how Harry deals with his fate."

Dumbledore sighed. "I regret to say, you are correct. Now, I need to consult with you on how to break through some defenses on an object. . . ."

"You have found the Horcruxes?" Russell said excitedly.

"Harry destroyed one, when he destroyed Riddle's diary," Dumbledore said. "I have discovered one other."

"Tell me about the defenses," Russell said eagerly.

Almost three hours later, the pair took a break and had some tea. Dumbledore asked, as he handed Russell his cup, "I've always wondered, why did you not take Muggle Studies?"

Russell shrugged. "I spent every July with some Muggle relatives in Devon until I was in my twenties. Therefore, I felt no need to study them. Tell me, did you want to ask your questions about Divination now, or dance around them for a while?"

"Do you ever practice what you learned?" Dumbledore asked.

"You know perfectly well I always have Tarot cards with me, Albus." He reached into his robes and pulled out two packs of Tarot cards. One was slightly used, one was unopened.

"Muggle?" Dumbledore asked in slight surprise, pointing to the plastic wrap on the new pack.

"Of course," Russell answered. "Less chance of getting any hexed cards that way. Are you telling me you want me to predict your future?"

"Not a full spread," Dumbledore answered. "I understand from Filius and Pomona that you have made a speciality of one-to-five card predictions for others."

"The question must be very well phrased, and of course it at best predicts the most likely outcome at the moment of prediction," Russell warned. "I would say it is perhaps 85 per cent accurate. A full spread. . . ."

"Shall we try a few?" Dumbledore asked.

"Are you serious?"

"Totally."

Russell looked at Dumbledore, and decided that the Headmaster actually was serious. "Very well." Russell unwrapped the new deck and handed the pack to Dumbledore. "Remove the actual cards. Touch each one and then hand the deck to me."

Russell took the cards and shuffled them three times, then asked, "Think of your question; do not

tell me and do not look me in the eye."

"Very well."

They went through the ritual of shuffle-and-cut. The card was, "The Page of Swords. Was your question about a person?"

"It was."

"The person is a loyal spy. If it was Severus, it would imply loyalty to you, since you asked the question."

"No, it was about you, and it was merely a test, not my serious question. That is about which of three paths I should take."

"Very well," Russell answered, unoffended. "Think of the first path very clearly. That will be the first card. Tell me when you have thought it through."

"I have it."

"And now the second."

After a few seconds, "I have it."

"And the third?"

"I am ready."

They went through the ritual again. "The Five of Swords; the Chariot; and the Three of Pentacles, reversed." Russell thought. His voice then changed, as he spoke with Power. "The first plan will lead to destruction and infamy. You know how you phrased the question, but the implications are your plan would fail."

"The second means triumph after adversity and pain. It is also the strongest path of the three."

"The third plan is a mediocre plan. It may succeed, but will likely not be a real success." Russell looked at Dumbledore. "Does this answer your question, or shall we throw for clarity of a path?"

"Throw," Dumbledore said in a small voice.

"It would be most accurate for the short term, say the next few weeks. Or do you wish for some other clarification?"

"For over time. . . ." Dumbledore almost whispered, but then nodded.

"There shall be five." Russell picked up the Five of Swords and the Three of Pentacles. They went through the ritual five times.

Russell laid the first card down near the Chariot. "The Knight of Swords . . . victory through pain." 'The first Horcrux,' Dumbledore thought. He was going after it that afternoon.

"The Seven of Pentacles . . . a difficult card. Someone is torn by loyalties, and must make a painful decision." 'I wonder who that might be,' Dumbledore thought. "Severus? Perhaps, but there are so many possibilities.'

"The Ace of Wands . . . either a new beginning, or a powerful young man." 'Harry,' Dumbledore agreed silently.

"The Ten of Swords, reversed. Success, which might look better at first than in the long term." 'Slughorn's return?' Dumbledore asked himself.

"The Two of Swords . . . repose before danger." 'Harry again?'

"Do you have any other questions?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. 'Is my plan likely to succeed . . . and will I survive to see it through?' he asked Fate.

"This is a three card answer," Russell intoned. They went through the ritual three times.

"The Nine of Cups. Success for you."

"The Nine of Swords. Death."

"The Three of Swords. Absence and sadness." Russell looked up. "Are there more questions?"

"No," Dumbledore said. "Maybe some other time."

"I shall only use this deck for you," Russell told his old teacher. "Please, be careful, Albus."

"As long as you are correct about the success, the rest hardly matters," Dumbledore answered.

"I was afraid of that," Russell replied.

"I shall let you know if I have destroyed a Horcrux," Dumbledore replied.

Russell saw himself out, and decided that he needed a large Scotch, even if it was time for lunch.

Dumbledore sent for Snape. It was time to have a quick talk with him.

Russell was partway up the Tower that evening when Fawkes appeared to him. That likely meant the Headmaster needed to see him quickly. Therefore, he took hold of the phoenix's tail, and they were off.

To his surprise, they went not to Dumbledore's office, but back to his own private study.

"Headmaster?"

Dumbledore was huddled on a low chair. "I succeeded in destroying the Horcrux," he muttered in pain.

"One trap got you, I take it?"

"I am not the one fated to kill Riddle," Dumbledore said. "When Harry destroyed the Horcrux-diary, he was not injured. Nearly any other wizard would have been killed. I survived this one, but. . ." He held out his right hand, supporting his forearm with his left hand.

Russell winced; the spell damage affected even his slightly jaded soul. He could only imagine the agony the Headmaster was in. "May I?" he finally asked.

Dumbledore nodded, and Russell cast a number of diagnostic spells. After five minutes, Russell said, "I can stop the damage from spreading, and, if you trust me, I can partially reverse the effects, but that's the most I can so."

"I was hoping you could do something. This is beyond medical magic, and my own skills," he admitted.

Russell used a gold knife to split the Headmaster's sleeve. The visible damage clearly went nearly half way up his forearm.

"This will take about half an hour. You'll have to endure the pain of the wrist and palm of your hand on the table. Just give me ten minutes to prepare."

"Very well," Dumbledore said in a slightly strained voice.

Russell quickly cleared off his table, which was piled high with assorted books, papers, coins and other artifacts, and other miscellany. After Russell proceeded to paw through various boxes, he told Dumbledore, "Are you ready?"

Dumbledore said nothing, but sat in a chair and laid his hand on the table. "Fingers as flat as possible," Russell urged. With a hiss of pain, Dumbledore did as instructed.

Russell placed a perfect, fairly large fossil ammonite on the table as well. It glistened in its mother-of-pearl perfection, atop a rune made of diamond dust. Using seven shades of colored chalk and diamond and ruby dust, Russell drew pentagrams, runes, and connective lines, and wrote spells and charms over the table. After over twenty minutes of work, he began a chant, interspersed with charms and spells.

Suddenly, there was a splash of darkness. Russell sank into a more comfortable chair with a sigh of relief, sweating heavily from the effort. "How do you feel?" he finally asked.

"Much better," Dumbledore said in a fairly normal, if tired, voice. "I believe the full flow of blood as returned, but the flesh still aches a bit, and tingles a great deal." He considered. "It still looks pretty bad, however."

"It should slowly improve in function over the next six weeks or so," Russell said. "The pain should recede almost entirely, although the finger tips will likely still tingle a bit, and you should have full access to your magic. It will still look fully-cursed, however. It won't be cured until Voldemort is dead."

Dumbledore nodded. "It will function. That is what is the most important thing."

"True," Russell agreed. He sat up and looked at the ammonite. It had lost all its luster, and most of its color. It would darken over time, as it absorbed the dark magic from the curse.

"A pity," Dumbledore said. "That was the prettiest ammonite I have ever seen."

"The material is sometimes called ammonite, but the genus are called the ammonites," Russell stated. "I have a number of them, all without any flaws in the crystalline structures." He stood and found a wooden box large enough to hold the fossil. He padded it with rags, and placed the shell into the box. "This should be strong enough to absorb the dark magic for six years at the least."

"I doubt it will have to last that long," Dumbledore said.

"Albus. . . ."

"Do not question me, please," Dumbledore asked.

"I won't." Russell looked at the ruined table top. A wave of his wand sanded the top layer off of it, and he vanished the sawdust, soot, and dust. "Shall I get you a restorative?"

"No," Dumbledore said. He looked Russell in the eyes. "You now know more than anyone else, save my self, of what I suspect Voldemort has done. Do not intrude into Harry's affairs directly."

"I see. Very well, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded. With his left hand, he fished out a small bit of parchment. "Do you know any informative works on Horcruxes besides these?"

Russell looked over the list of fifteen books. "I don't know of any others that have any information not better explained in fourteen of these," he finally said. "I don't know this second Tibetan one."

"There really is no other information in that book which is not found in the other Buddhist sources," Dumbledore said. "Do you own any of these?"

"I actually own all of them," Russell answered.

"Really? I am surprised."

"You knew my great-great uncle Bertie, didn't you?"

Dumbledore nodded. "He was a Ravenclaw prefect my first two years here. I must admit I lost track of him."

"His great-great uncle had gone to India with Clive, and married into an Indian family you know."

"The Patils?"

"Exactly. These Patils are related, but not descended from him. Anyway, Uncle Bertie went to work for what was then called Russell and Patil Imports. He traveled extensively in Tibet, Nepal and other parts of Asia. He lived with us in retirement until he died in 1963. He taught me a great deal, and I have his library, among others. And yes, it is well protected."

"Don't give any of these books to Miss Granger, or give her much help," Dumbledore warned.

"Why?" Russell asked bluntly.

"I worry she will overly-influence Harry," Dumbledore answered. "I believe Harry must proceed from instinct." When Russell tried to object, Dumbledore cut him off. "I am serious, John."

"As you wish," Russell agreed. 'I'll get her any information she needs, somehow,' he swore.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I think I need to rest," Dumbledore said, getting shakily to his feet.

"May I ask what the Horcrux was?" Russell asked.

Dumbledore fished a ring from his pocket. "Slytherin's ring."

"Thank you," Russell answered.

Chapter IV

Sunday, July 14, 1996

"Good evening, John."

"Good evening, Filius. Care for a drink?" He held up the brandy bottle and gestured to the other bottles with it.

Flitwick smiled, but said, "You know I rarely drink alcohol, John." He hesitated, and then said, "Still, I suppose that a very weak pastis wouldn't be too indulgent, and I do need a drink."

Flitwick perched himself on a pouffe while Russell fixed the drink. He handed Flitwick the glass and sat back onto his padded rocker.

"I do enjoy the aroma of your usual pipe tobacco," Flitwick said approvingly. "What most wizards smoke reminds me of dry grass and goat dung."

"Latakia is strong," Russell allowed. "I much prefer Cavendish mixtures. Now that the small talk is out of the way, what did you climb all the way up here to tell me?"

"Direct as usual," Flitwick admitted. "Tell me, have you talked with Albus at all this week?"

Russell shook his head. "No, not since last Saturday."

"Was that after he injured his hand?"

"Yes," Russell agreed, "but I can't tell you anything about it, except that it should improve in function, if not appearance."

"That would have to be a serious curse then," Flitwick said, mostly to himself.

"Albus thought it a necessary risk, and I agree with that. It does account for the fury of attacks early this week." Dumbledore had shown both his hand and Slytherin's ring to Snape as Snape had helped the Headmaster to Russell's office. Voldemort had been outraged that a second piece of his soul was gone, and had sent his Death Eaters, dementors, and giants all on attacks.

"Then I need ask no more. Minerva and I spoke with Albus at dinner tonight, and he spoke fairly freely since we were the only ones there tonight. He asked that we pass his news on to you, since he said you were returning tonight. I volunteered, since Minerva is still working on letters."

"I was meeting an acquaintance from Tibet in Istanbul earlier last week," Russell said simply. "I had an early dinner in Amsterdam tonight before apparating here."

"I hope you had a delightful trip," Flitwick replied. "Anyway, he said to tell you that young Potter left his relatives on Friday night. He has gone on to stay with the Weasleys."

"That should be good for both Potter and the Weasleys," Russell agreed.

"I hope he spends more time with his friend Ronald than with young Miss Weasley," Flitwick said.

"I don't know her," Russell replied. "You don't like her?" Flitwick made a face. "She seems lively enough from the little I've seen, and she's pretty enough. She might be good for Potter, if he's brooding over his godfather's death."

"True," Flitwick acknowledged. "She's always reminded me of her mother, however, and Molly Prewitt had a reputation for both inventing and using a love potion to have her way with boys, before she settled in on Arthur."

"Really? I hadn't realized that Molly Weasley was Molly Prewitt, the inventor of the infamous 'Love Potion Number Nine'."

Flitwick nodded. "Exactly. The subtlest of the love potions. If we had known she was behind that when she was here, she would have been expelled. You can't imagine the trouble that potion has caused! I know I was hardly surprised by the antics of those Weasley twins. They certainly take after their mother."

"Well, as I said I don't really know Miss Weasley, or Potter for that matter. We'll have to keep an eye on the pair."

"Indeed."

"Still," Russell pointed out, "being attracted to Ginny Weasley, even if she uses that potion, is a lot better than living with those Muggle relatives of Potter's."

"Are they really that bad?" Flitwick asked.

"Yes, and I shouldn't go beyond that."

"I understand," Flitwick said agreeably. "That was not my only news. Albus said he has hired a teacher, or rehired a teacher actually, for the autumn."

"Really? Rehire. . . ." Russell thought about that. "Lupin, I would hope."

"Not even close, my boy. Horace Slughorn."

"WHAT?" Russell was surprised, to say the least. "Since when has Slug the Suckup become a Defense teacher?"

Flitwick smiled grimly. "Oh, old Horace isn't going to teach Defense. He's going to teach Potions again."

"But then what is Severus going to be . . . oh, come on!" Russell went from surprise to shock. "You HAVE to be . . . joshing?"

Flitwick shook his head. "I assure you, Dumbledore was serious and so am I. Minerva was even more shocked than you or I." Russell placed his pipe in an ashtray, and now looked both horrified and stricken.

"Yes," Flitwick agreed. "I feel awful as well. Albus has always said to the senior staff that he would not appoint Severus to the Defense teacher unless. . . ."

"Unless Severus needs it for his cover. As a last sop to Voldemort, to stop him from insisting that Severus kill Albus."

"I hope Severus is not killed when Voldemort does insist that he kill Albus," Flitwick said.

Russell merely nodded, thinking of the cards predicting Albus' death. Under the right, or wrong, circumstances, Russell knew that Dumbledore would be willing to make the sacrifice for the greater good, and that Snape would be the most likely Order member able to carry the assassination through. "When did all this happen?" he finally asked.

"He said he had been after Horace for over a week," Flitwick answered.

'Albus' plan', Russell thought. He felt sick. 'I have to pick my own plans up'.

Thursday, July 18, 1996

"Professor Russell, Minister."

"Thank you, Weasley." Rufus Scrimgeour remained seated, scratching away at some parchment. Russell came in, saw what the Minister was doing, shrugged, and sat down. After about two minutes, he folded his hands in his laps and started whistling the March from Aida.

"Do you mind?" Scrimgeour snapped.

"No, Rufus, I don't mind at all."

"I am the Minister of Magic, John!"

"So you are. And you're busier than I am. Still, that does not mean I have time to waste playing games."

The Minister slammed his quill down and glared at Russell.

"Rufus, that glare didn't scare me during the year you were the Visiting Defense Professor, and it doesn't scare me now."

"Well, you were a Sixth year," Scrimgeour allowed.

"True. Now, what do you want, Minister?"

"Is there anything you can do about the dementors?" the Minister asked straight out.

"I have some ideas, but all the previous Ministers turned down my requests for research," Russell pointed out.

"I know. I've reviewed all the files and proposals we have on the damn things." He gestured at a thick stack of parchment on the floor. "The fact that you, and Dumbledore and Moody and a few others, were right about the dangers of using the dementors doesn't matter now."

"I suppose that's true. So?"

"So, can you try out any of your experiments?"

Russell frowned. "How?"

"Search 'em out, and try to wipe 'em out!"

"Fine."

"Don't you understand? If we don't do something about the giants and dementors, who knows what will happen when the Muggles find out!"

"I said I would do it," Russell pointed out.

"Oh. . . ." Scrimgeour said, relieved, "Fine. Do anything you have to, but try not to let the Muggles find you."

"No problem. Make out my credentials and the expense vouchers. . . ."

"Who said anything about any of that?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"What? You expect me to finance this?" Russell demanded in return.

Scrimgeour sighed. "No; no, of course not. I couldn't say this to many others, but I'll give you a blank cheque. Now, go away and do something."

"Well," Russell said, standing. "I'll try at least. Is there anything in particular I should do with any Death Eaters I run into?"

"Capture or kill 'em. Now, get out."

"Right."

Wednesday, August 21, 1996

"Rise, Severus. Severus, do you know why you are before me?"

"No, Master," Snape answered, his head bowed.

"Bella here has been quite insistent that you are not to be trusted."

"So I have heard, Master."

Voldemort glared at Bellatrix, who winced. "Yes, Bella. You have undermined my potions master. You extorted a promise from him which I did NOT want him to make. And for that, I blame you, Bella."

He looked back to Snape. "Since you have been doing the work I assigned you, you might not know that my dementors have been driven away with increasing frequency from Muggle targets."

"I did not know that, Master."

"Bella here believes you have been betraying the location of the attacks." Snape said nothing.

"Nothing to say?"

"No, Master. Unless you command it, I do not answer to Bellatrix. Since our . . . meeting, I have deliberately avoided as much contact with your other servants, so that these rumors could die down."

"Do they concern you, Severus?"

"Only in that they spread disunity among your faithful, my lord."

"I have taken great care that you not know what was planned for tonight." Voldemort's head snapped up. "They are back early."

Voldemort glanced over at Bellatrix. "Say what you are thinking, Bella."

"I was just wondering if any of those who went tonight might not have sought Snape out, Master."

"You may question Fenrir Greyback about his team if you wish," Voldemort sneered. Bellatrix shuddered.

A huge, angry man burst into the throne room. It obviously took some effort on his part to control himself, but he managed to get down on one knee. "Master," Greyback growled. His left arm was covered in blood.

"You are hurt. A difficult evening, was it?"

"Yes, Master."

"Despite my warnings, there was a successful ambush?"

"Yes, Master," Greyback admitted. "Six of the thirty dementors were destroyed, and the others fled back to their gathering spot without Kissing one Muggle. I also lost Marcus Flint."

"Tell us about it."

"We were approaching a Muggle camping area called a caravan park. There was a series of small explosions, which drove off the dementors. I admit I can not describe them. As I was trying to call them back, we were attacked from the rear."

"By aurors, the Order, or a combination?"

"The Order, Master, although I knew none of them by name. With one exception, these were older wizards. I would say they were between Snape's age and yours, Master."

"Tell me about the exception, Fenrir"

"A rather toothsome young man, with red hair and a fang ear ring." Snape reacted slightly.

"You know him, Severus?"

"It was most likely Bill Weasley, Master. He worked as a curse breaker for Gringotts in Egypt."

"He was the second most effective of the attackers," Greyback snarled.

"I see. Yet another Weasley. And the most effective?"

"An older, somewhat stout wizard with a mustache. His few verbalized hexes were in languages I never heard of."

Voldemort considered. "Anything else?"

"Yes. While the explosions drove the dementors off, six passed over an area that seemed to suck them away. That made the others flee all the faster."

"I see." Voldemort had a good idea of who that stout wizard would have been. "And who wounded you?"

"That older wizard."

"What did he do?"

"He shot me!"

"What?" Bellatrix exclaimed.

"He shot me! With a silver bullet! If he had had better aim, he would have killed me! As it is, this wound won't heal until after my next transformation!"

"Then you deserve to rest. Unless you have some questions, Bella?"

"No, Master."

"Then you may go, too." As they left, Snape awaited his Master's orders.

"I'm sure you have a good guess at who this stout wizard was," Voldemort stated.

"Yes, Master."

"Can your potions be left for a short time?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then go ask him what he discovered. Perhaps he will answer. After all, he thinks you are still loyal to the Old Man."

"Yes, Master."

Thursday, August 22, 1996

"You look tired, John."

"I am, Severus." Russell was loading his largest briar pipe with the Cavendish-Burley mixture he used when he wanted to stay awake. "I wonder why you might be taking a break from your own mysterious business to come visit our little aerie."

"Sarcasm does not become you, John."

Russell glared at his colleague. "Let me guess. He said to come and ask me what I've done, because you are, after all, a good member of the Order of the Phoenix."

"Almost word for word," Snape admitted.

"But if I tell you, I won't be able to stop the attacks," Russell pointed out.

"True," Snape said. "How about if you at least tell me how you're driving the dementors off, as opposed to telling me how you know where the attack was coming."

"Dementors cannot stand ultraviolet light," Russell answered. "Muggles have an amazingly large number of ways to project it, even at the levels needed to drive those demons off. Alas, I have not found a spell that does the same, yet." Russell tossed Snape a pair of tinted glasses. "These charmed glasses allow Muggles to see dementors under normal light. Scrimgeour has recruited some squibs who can work with Muggle law enforcement. It will take some time, but between the Ministry and the Muggle Government, they will figure out ways to drive dementors away, if not destroy them, without the general Muggle population learning of us."

"That isn't what you did to the dementors last night!"

"No, that was a nasty little ritual from West Africa. It destroys the physical manifestations of demons, and it worked on dementors quite nicely. I have it down to a three minute ritual."

"And Marcus Flint?"

"Your other Master should be gazing at his face by now."

Snape glared at Russell. "Is this a new vice?"

"No," Russell retorted. "I did not like having to kill that idiot. I got no pleasure from it, and certainly didn't inflict pain on him, like your other master and his followers would."

"That is so good to hear," Snape said, a bit sarcastically.

"Considering I saw that Greyback was there, you should not be questioning my morality, Severus. If I killed every Death Eater there is, I would not have destroyed, disrupted, and ruined as many lives as that sick bastard."

"Should I tell Greyback that the same fate awaits him?"

"Please do so," Russell said. "If he hadn't tripped when I fired last night, I would have bagged him then. I'll have that beast's hide on my floor as a foot warmer."

"I thought hating werewolves was, what was it you called it? A mindless piece of bigotry?"

"Hating werewolves is nonsense. Wanting Greyback's pelt is personal."

"And my dislike of Lupin. . . ."

"I understand why you hated Black even more after hearing about that near-attack on you. Lupin was a mere weapon."

"May I ask what Greyback did to you?"

"He bit my sister. She was one of his first victims. She died during the first transformation." Russell's eyes hardened. "She was twelve when he attacked a friend of hers, and half the family was killed, the others infected."

"I understand," Snape said. Still, he had to ask. "A silver bullet?"

"There are reasons why Muggles dominate the world, Severus. Did you know that a mild mixture of cocaine and a certain Muggle anti-depressant will prevent a Muggle or Squib from freezing up in the immediate vicinity of a dementor?"

"No, I did not," Snape acknowledged.

"Did you know that only one out of three hundred wizards can cast a shield strong enough to stand up to a standard Muggle bullet fired from a rather powerful handgun called a .357 Magnum?"

"No, I did not," Snape had to admit.

"You might also mention that there is a special bullet than can be used that I doubt anyone in Europe, except perhaps Voldemort and Dumbledore, could produce a shield against. However, against the silver-alloy bullets actually issued, probably one in two hundred could produce a material shield strong enough."

"That should be helpful," Snape admitted through clenched teeth. He hated the idea of Muggles and Squibs having an edge over wizards.

"Yes. And it turns out that a number of our Muggle-born students come from families that at least have rifles and shotguns. Once they learn they can fight back, I would imagine attacks will be a bit more . . . undecided as to their outcome."

"Just be careful, John," Snape warned. Voldemort would not like these developments, to say the least.

"I believe I shall be here next August," Russell retorted. "Make certain you are as well."

Snape had no answer to that.

"You needn't ask Dumbledore, either, or any of my team, about how I am tracking the attacks," Russell added. He was lying, as he and his team had cracked the pattern of the dementor attacks together. In fact, it was Bill Weasley and his fiancée Fleur who had found the key. Russell saw no reason to tell Snape that.

"Thank you. At least I have a partial answer," Snape said standing. "I do hope you know what your doing."

"The Ministry is acting somewhat foolishly, but Scrimgeour is no fool. The Muggle Government is not only aware of what is going on, there are segments readying to take action. And this is the fault of Voldemort. If the magical world is destroyed, it will be because of his greed."

"I will see the Dark Lord gets the messages," Snape said, and left the room.

Chapter V

Monday, September 2, 1997

Professor Russell stood in a corner of his classroom, watching. One step would bring him into the visual fields of his students, but the distraction field he was standing in was a strong and well-established one. Despite the fact that the students were well-aware of the use of runes and symbols to create such a field, they could never detect this one.

The original fifteen students of three years before were now whittled down to nine: Hermione Granger from Gryffindor; Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, and Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin; Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff; and Anthony Goldstein, Padma Patil, Mandy Brocklehurst, and Su Li from Ravenclaw. Russell saw Granger sit in her usual seat in the front right desk. When he saw Malfoy circle towards her, he prepared to step out of the zone of protection. The students would think he had appeared at the doorway when he did so.

"How's Potter's nose this morning, Mudblood?" Malfoy hissed. Granger ignored him, which made Malfoy shout, "Your superior is talking to you, you filthy Mudblood cunt!"

"That will be fifty points from Slytherin and two detentions, Mister Malfoy," Russell stated as he appeared in the room.

Malfoy reared up, glaring. He raised his finger and started open his mouth.

"If you say one more word out of turn in this classroom all year, you will out of this class," Russell said coldly. "And unless you intend to do something with that finger, I suggest you get it out of my face." He leaned close and said very softly. "I believe you were at home when your mother got the little souvenir of your old Quidditch captain when it came almost two weeks ago."

Draco's pale face went several shades paler. "I have my eye on you, Malfoy. I would happily do the same to you as I did to the Flint brothers. And if I decide to, neither your Head of House nor the Headmaster could protect you. Remember that."

It was a very shaken Draco Malfoy who took his seat. He would report this to the Dark Lord and perhaps to Snape. Sometime, somewhere, Draco would get his revenge.

Russell took his place at the front of the class as if nothing had happened. "Good morning. Welcome back to another year of Runes, Symbols, and Languages. You have all proven yourselves in the basics, have all learned the three basic magical languages of western Europe and six standard languages, and earned at least an E on your O.W.L. Well done."

"This term, you will be learning one to three more languages through magical learning. We will also continue the basics of enchanting items through written charms and symbols. Next term, some of you may be learning more languages, and you will finally enchant an object, something all of you have been interested in learning."

Russell handed out notes with the languages approved for each student. He saw Malfoy scowl at the mere two languages he was approved to learn for that year (ancient Briton and Old Irish) but ignored it. He saw Granger glance at her note, but she made no further indication about what she had read. "Everyone open The Book of Nilic House Curses, page sixty, please. Mister Malfoy? Could you please read the first six lines, then translate?"

It was only then that Granger looked at her note a second time:

Requested Languages, 1996-1997 Academic Year
Old Irish, Ancient Briton, Celtiberian, Spanish, Coptic

Suggested Languages, Autumn 1996

Old Irish, Ancient Briton, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Spanish

Suggested Languages, Spring 1997

Yoruba, Ibo, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Carib

And underneath the printed suggestions, there was a hand-written message: *Stay and speak with me after class.*

Draco Malfoy hurried from the class as soon as it was possible. Hermione was therefore able to stay without anyone really noticing. "You wanted to see me, Professor Russell?"

"Come into my office, Miss Granger," he invited. Unlike some professors, Professor Russell rarely invited students into his office. This was only Hermione's third visit.

"Have a chair," he suggested. "You may wonder why, if I am suggesting you take ten languages instead of five, two of your choices were not among them."

"Yes, sir. Celtiberian and Coptic."

"Both of which are useful languages when studying antiquities, but of little other use. Tell me, what is your relationship to Harry Potter?"

"Sir?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"I am a member of the Order, Miss Granger. You are close to Mister Potter. Do you know what that will imply this year?"

"Yes," Hermione said firmly. "I may even know more than you."

"You may indeed, in some aspects. Let me tell you, Miss Granger, neither Celtiberian nor Coptic are likely to be of much use to you or to Mister Potter, at least compared to the other languages I have suggested."

Hermione looked torn.

"Tell me, Miss Granger. Are you Harry Potter's friend, or are you prepared to become a companion of the next White Warlock?"

Hermione looked pained. "Harry will have to become the flipside of a Dark Lord, won't he?"

"I believe so. That is about the only title the press haven't bestowed on the poor boy. Still, that is what it will take, even if we call him 'The Chosen One'."

"And these languages will help more than our learning new hexes or something?"

"Potter will likely be learning those from the Headmaster, Miss Granger. You have the chance to learn things Potter cannot. The Sanskrit and Tibetan, I believe will become very important, sooner or later. The others. . . ."

"Yoruba, Ibo, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Carib. . . ." Hermione mused. "Voodoo?"

"That might also be necessary. Voldemort is using the dead and werewolves. At least you will be able to research the first."

"And the Tibetan and Sanskrit?"

"Not until after Harry has learned what the Headmaster must teach him, and Harry passes it on to you," Russell answered. "However, you may need this."

Hermione took the slip of paper, looked at it, and then looked at it again. "An open pass to the Restricted Section? For the year?"

"You may take out any book you want, and have up to three out at any given time," Russell said simply. "Use it well."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"This is not likely to be a happy year, over all. Good luck, Miss Granger."

Hermione stood. "And to you, sir."

At that point, Severus Snape burst into the office, breathing heavily. "If you will excuse us, Miss Granger?" Russell said calmly.

Hermione fled the office.

"Did you threaten Draco Malfoy? And how dare you give him detentions. . . ."

"For calling Granger a quote 'filthy Mudblood cunt' unquote and threatening me?" Russell stood up straight and went nose to nose with Snape. "I've had it with Death Eaters and Junior Death Eaters! That little shite has taken the Dark Mark, and you know it! For some reason, the Headmaster still thinks he can be saved and so do you. Fine. It's time he learned that he does not get a free ride."

"If I treated Potter that way. . . ."

"It would be an improvement!"

"If you kill Malfoy, if you even harm him. . . ."

"Then I will have to kill you, too? I will, Severus, if I have to. Don't force me, and make certain that Malfoy does not force me to, either."

"Your soul is becoming as scarred as my own, John," Snape said. "Beware."

"I won't say that a soul is not injured by taking a life," Russell admitted. "I have not taken a life in hate or anger. I have not tortured. I would have to kill how many in hate or anger to equal you? I would have to treat Malfoy as I did today every class for twenty years to equal the hate you have thrown at Potter and his friends. I cannot deny I am on the same path as you, Severus, but you are far, far, far further down that lane than I am, despite the age difference between us."

Snape nearly hyperventilated before he managed to calm down. When he had, he demanded, "Why only allow Draco two languages?"

"I see no reason to give him more tools," Russell said simply.

"At least add Spanish and Classical Greek," Snape asked.

Russell thought. "If he does well with the first two this term, then he may add those two next term," Russell finally said.

"You are not making my job any easier, John," Snape said in nearly a growl.

"I have 'made your job easier' as well as the Headmaster's over the past five years, doing things the way Dumbledore wanted me to do before this summer, and where are we? At war. As far as I'm concerned, this is an unnecessary war. You coddled the Slytherins and what do we have? A sixteen year old Death Eater! We all suspected that wasn't Moody well before the Third Task. We could have stopped Crouch before he booby-trapped the Cup and then Voldemort would either still be disembodied or weaker than he is."

"The Headmaster believes that having used Potter's blood, the Dark Lord has tied himself to Potter in ways no one understands, and that this will be a weakness."

"Yes, if Voldemort kills Potter, it may also destroy his current body, and perhaps the part of his soul still inside it instead of enabling him to make another Horcrux. However, if all the Horcruxes have

not been destroyed, however many there are, that won't matter, will it?"

"No, it won't," Snape admitted. "Still, that's why I was so glad to hear that the Master still wants to destroy Potter himself. That means he is planning at least one more, and that is almost good news."

"True. Now, you had best tell Malfoy to behave around me. If he can't behave in front of me and his classmates, your other Master will have him gutted for fun when he acts that way with the Death Eaters. Draco Malfoy is irrelevant to his plans. Voldemort is a Half-blood, just like you. He claims to adore the old Pure-Blood families, but he treats them worse than his Half-blood followers, and you know that's true."

"Maybe. . . ." Snape mumbled.

"Now, why are you really in such a worse mood than is usual at the beginning of term?"

"If the Headmaster does not wish you to know. . . ."

"I have a good idea of most of his plans, although of course not all of them, let alone the details," Russell interrupted. He suddenly frowned. "What was it he was mumbling to you about the other night? Something about a book that you and Lily Potter. . . ."

"Lily Evans, if you please," Snape snapped.

"Ah. . . ."

"It was never like that," Snape said defensively. "I never admired her as a woman or as a witch for that matter. She was merely the only person I have ever met who understood the underlying principles of Potions as much as I."

"Not even the Slug?" Russell asked.

"Slughorn is a magnificent brewer," Snape admitted. "Give him a formula, and he can mix a potion perfectly almost every time, perhaps as well as I can. However, he can't usually see how to improve the potions, because he doesn't have an intuitive or imaginative grasp of how the ingredients interact in new combinations. That was something, the only thing, that Evans and I shared. He had us work together for seven years. We found many ways of improving the basic potions we were being taught."

"And?"

"And I annotated my books with our ideas," Snape admitted. "My mother's old books, to be totally honest."

"And?"

Snape frowned. "And the Headmaster has arranged for that book to fall into Potter's hands today, although Slughorn won't realize the significance of what he's doing. Since Potter has some of the worst characteristics of both his parents, he will follow the alternate suggestions without thinking and thereby become the most brilliant potions brewer in his class. And what has he done to earn this? Nothing!"

"That may be true, but I can't imagine Dumbledore arranging this just to boost Harry's performance in Potions," Russell pointed out.

"He wants the Slug to dote on Potter for some reason," Snape said with a revolted look on his face.

Russell understood some of Snape's reasons for being in a foul mood, then. What he said, however, was, "Just remember one thing, Severus. Potter does not have the range of hexes you likely did when you were his age, but he has more raw power. Bait him too much in Defense next period, and I might be scraping you from the walls."

"I can handle Potter," Snape said with a final sneer, flouncing from the room to take his first class with the Sixth years.

'Handle him wrong, and you may find the Curse of the Defense Position is still active,' Russell thought. He went back to his classroom, where the Third year students would be coming soon for their first Runes class.

"Professor Russell, may I have a word before dinner?"

Russell stopped and forced a polite smile on his face. "Of course, Madam Pince. What may I do for you?"

"Did you really give this to Miss Granger?" She held out the pass to the Restricted Section.

"Yes, I did. I know it is more than highly unusual, but there are special circumstances. If you feel the need, please feel free to record what she takes out and forward them to both the Headmaster and to myself."

Pince thought a moment. "Very well, Professor. I shall do so."

Monday, September 16, 1996

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

"Good evening, Professor Russell," she said worriedly. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Any time, Miss Granger." Russell looked at her. "You look conflicted."

"I am," Hermione admitted.

"Let me guess. There are several things which concern you, and at least some of them are not your secrets, but Mister Potter's and the Headmaster's. Mister Potter was either sworn to secrecy or allowed only to tell you and perhaps Mister Weasley. You don't want to tell his secrets, but are afraid of what's going on."

"Exactly," Hermione admitted.

"The Headmaster asked me to give this to you." He handed Hermione a sealed note.

Hermione opened it and read:

Dear Miss Granger:

We have entered very perilous times. While I trust fully Professor Russell, I cannot give you full discretion to disclose everything Harry tells you from our conversations at this time. You may consult with him about Harry's affairs in general terms, or upon any other matter as you wish. This proscription lasts until the end of this academic year, unless I renew it or tell you that you may freely consult with him before then.

As I ask that you keep Harry's secrets from Professor Russell, for at least the moment, so I must ask that you keep the details of Professor Russell's aid from all others.

No member of the Order fully knows all of what other members know, and that must apply to some extent to you and Harry as well. In the matter of Harry's training, you may speak of it only in indirect terms with Professors Russell and Snape. It is they I appoint to help Harry directly should anything happen to me. Similarly, if there is some problem which you feel the Staff or the Order needs to be made aware of, go to Professor McGonagall, or if she is not available, to one of the other Heads of House for the former and Remus Lupin or Professor Snape for the latter.

You may show this note to Professor Russell.

*Yours sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore*

Hermione handed Russell the note. He read it and handed it back. "Having read that, what may I help you with, Miss Granger?" He smiled. "Take your time."

Hermione frowned in thought for almost two minutes, then she said, "Which language should I learn first?"

"I would like you know Sanskrit and Tibetan before Halloween."

She nodded, unsurprised. "I shall have to write home for the money for the extra languages." Magical language learning took an intense weekend of spells and potions, and was not cheap.

"All the languages have already been paid for," Russell told her. "The money for the others is in a Gringotts' vault?"

"Yes, sir." Her parents maintained a small vault for her, since it earned them a better exchange rate, and their own bank could make direct deposits for them.

"Then keep it there. You may need it."

"May I ask where the money came from?"

"Did you know that most magical income comes from the Muggle world, and that it is very under-taxed, compared to Muggle wealth?" Russell asked.

"I did," Hermione said. "I wish more Pure-Bloods remembered that."

"So do I. Now, my paternal Muggle-born ancestor was born in 1314. His father was a tinsmith, although most of the other Muggles in the family were involved with the wool and cloth trade. While the Muggles would not discover the New World or trade in sub-Saharan Africa for almost two more centuries, the Magical world was already exploring the first and trading with the second. The so-called Black Death concentrated wealth in some of the Muggle urban families that survived it. He invested his share of his Muggle inheritance wisely. His investments have been prospering, dividing, and expanding, with some wise additional investments, for over six hundred years. I assure you, paying for your languages, and buying you that stack of books over there, hasn't made any real dent in this year's dividends."

Hermione was speechless.

"Mister Potter is facing at least one difficult task, perhaps many," Russell said. "The Headmaster and I disagree about how to best prepare him. I am currently allowed to help him only by helping you."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said in a small, worried voice.

"Here," Russell said, his hand out. "I meant it when I said you may come to me for help on anything."

"What is it?" Hermione asked, looking at the small oval black stone.

"Touch it with your wand, and I will know you need something important. Keep holding it in your left hand, and you will be directed on where to come, if I can see you."

"Thank you, sir. I hope we won't need it."

Chapter VI

Saturday, October 18, 1997

It had been a hard six weeks for John Russell. In addition to his teaching duties, he had been spending a great deal of time collating intelligence for the Order. He had also gone out on fifteen missions for the Order, engaging in nine firefights as a member of a team. While the number of attacks on Muggles were down, there were still two or three a week. There was also at least one attack on wizarding families per week.

The hardest fight so far for Russell had been the night before, as a dozen Order members had beaten a dozen Death Eaters away from a family who did not yet know their youngest children were a witch and a wizard. On top of being tired, there was still a large pile of documents to go through after dinner. Russell sighed, and tried to decide if he had time for a short nap before dinner.

Russell jumped slightly as someone pounded excitedly on his door. Six quick strides took him from his desk to the threshold, where a trembling Second year Ravenclaw stood. "Please, sir," the androgynous child squeaked, "Professor Snape said you were to come quickly to the Infirmary, sir. A student has been cursed coming back from Hogsmeade."

"Right. Thank you. Off to dinner with you, then," Russell said. He grabbed a bag he kept packed in case of such emergencies and flooded to the Infirmary.

The very tired Snape, Pomfrey, and Russell gathered in Pomfrey's office, where Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Flitwick awaited their report. Snape started off. "She was clearly under the Imperious. It seems to have hit her from the back as she went off towards the girls' toilet at the Three Broomsticks. There is no way to learn who did it, unless we have some sort of witness."

"And if there were any witnesses, they likely would have come forward by now," McGonagall pointed out.

"Exactly," Snape agreed. "Miss Bell just barely touched the cursed necklace. Had she been in greater contact with it, she would be dead. The three of us have stabilized her for now." He glanced at Madam Pomfrey.

"I have made arrangements for her to be taken to St. Mungo's in the morning," she answered. "She should be stabilized enough to move by then."

"Thank you," Dumbledore said. Pomfrey went back out to keep an eye on Katie. "Severus, John, anything else to report?"

"The last I knew, that necklace, or at least one exactly like it, was in a certain . . . curio shop in Knockturn Alley," Russell said. "It was there in early July. I'll arrange for someone to tour the shop when it opens tomorrow morning at Eleven. I doubt if we could squeeze the purchaser out of the owner, but I can try, if you wish."

"No, no that's not necessary," Dumbledore said. "I believe I know who acquired it, and when."

Russell was looking at Snape as this was said, and Snape did not react a bit. It was this non-reaction that made Russell suspect that Snape now knew who was responsible, or at least had a good idea of who it had been.

Russell realized that this meant he now had a pretty good guess as well. After three years, he had a clear notion of how Draco Malfoy's mind worked. However, since it was also clear that both Dumbledore knew and Snape knew for certain, there was little Russell could do, except keep an eye

on Draco Malfoy on top of everything else.

He hoped it would be enough.

Monday, October 20, 1997

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

"You wanted to see me, Professor?"

"Yes, come in," Russell invited. "Since the Headmaster does not want Mister Potter to know about our meetings, I thought we could meet while they are meeting, if they start meeting often enough."

"Yes, sir." Hermione hesitated, then asked, "You don't know what they are doing tonight, do you?"

"The Headmaster merely said that he would be reviewing the life of Tom Riddle amongst other things. You now know as much as I." He smiled. "No doubt, by tomorrow afternoon, you will know a great deal more than I."

Hermione was quiet in thought for a moment, and then: "Why isn't the Headmaster teaching Harry, well, practical things?" Hermione exploded.

"Knowing your enemy is important," Russell reminded her, "but I must admit I am not certain why he is not also teaching Mister Potter other things as well. Still, you have all learned more than you suspect. After next year, all that will be left is merely your learning yourself how to put those ideas together for yourself. Everyone does it slightly differently. You must mature your magic yourselves, with as little interference as possible. That really does cause a power boost when you do it, and you must admit, you and your friends will need that."

"True, sir," Hermione admitted.

Russell smiled at her rueful tone. "However, tonight it is time for you to try your revealing and tracing spells under a variety of situations. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Feel free to vocalize them," Russell said. "Accuracy and power are most important. Silence comes after learning the basics."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said with a determined air.

"Then let us get started."

An hour later, the pair stopped. "Not bad, Miss Granger."

"But it's not good enough, is it?" she asked.

"It's good enough to foil any student here, I would say," Russell said after full consideration. "It would likely be good enough to outdo the concealments of more than half the Death Eaters every single time, if you had enough time. Still, this was your first real attempt under these conditions." He smiled, "If it makes you feel any better, you are probably already at the point where you could start training as a curse breaker now, certainly by Christmas."

"Thank you, sir. . . ." Hermione trailed off.

"Go ahead."

Hermione asked, "Will we have until Christmas?"

Russell shrugged and said, "I believe so. I believe we will have at least until spring. However,

things will likely break one way or the other between the spring equinox and the autumnal."

"Sir . . . the attacks on Muggles seem to have slowed down. . . ."

Russell considered. "Do you believe you keep this a secret from everyone?"

"Yes, sir, I believe so. I have been practicing those meditations you told me to." She smiled. "Those are the first steps towards Occlumency, aren't they?"

"They are. Try not to think about these things when you are outside the Gryffindor common room or here."

"Yes, sir!"

Russell smiled. "It turns out that the dementors plan their attacks in a pattern. Find the pattern, and you can stop the next attack. It now takes just six attacks to find the pattern, and it seems to take at least nine stopped attacks before they come up with a new pattern."

"And how do we stop a dementor attack?"

"We don't. Muggles can use ultraviolet light to both locate and drive them off."

"That's good to hear," Hermione said.

"Your parents' house and practice have been set up with invisible ultraviolet lamps, and there are special cameras going up all over Britain which not only are on the look out for anything suspicious, but which also emit a very low dose of u-v rays. It's not harmful to people or animals, but it drives the dementors crazy. And the best thing is, the Death Eaters take no notice of Muggle video cameras. They probably don't even know what they are."

"Great!"

"We've also driven the giants out of Britain, at least for the moment. They might return, of course."

"So we're winning?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"No, we're holding our own," Russell said frankly. "The Ministry is still leaking like a sieve, although not to the degree it was. The Order has been working with certain segments of British Intelligence and NATO, which is why things are going well on the dementor and giant fronts. However, that leaves the Ministry to deal with the Death Eaters for the most part, and there we're not doing well, although still, better than things were going in July and August."

"If things are going better, why are you so worried, sir?"

"Because Voldemort hasn't entered into the fray in any direct way," Russell answered honestly.

"Right now, only Dumbledore can stand up to him. Perhaps your friend will be ready at the end of this year or the next, but at the moment the most he could do is escape and survive."

Hermione turned slightly pale.

"Now," Russell said, "let's get you started on Occlumency. Pick a focus, and clear your mind of everything else. . . ."

Saturday, November 16, 1996

There was a very tentative knock on the door to the 'smoking room' in the Divination Tower. "Come in!"

A hot and sweaty Hermione Granger came panting into the room. "I do apologize for making you come all the way up here," Russell said. "Your message seemed to have been made in anger, rather than from being in danger, and I thought you might like the chance to think."

"Yes, sir," she panted.

Russell waved his wand twice, opening one of the windows and transforming the other chair into a fainting couch. Russell handed Hermione a large glass of cold water. "Have a seat, and tell me about what's troubling you, Miss Granger."

Hermione gulped half the glass and gave Russell a hopeless look. "Ah, a problem of being seventeen, not a problem of good and evil, I take it. Unburden yourself, Miss Granger. It will go no further, and I had many similar conversations with my daughter and one of her friends."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione gave a huge sigh, gave a small silent prayer that she was doing the right thing, and told Russell all she could about Harry's trick that morning with the **Felix Felicis**, Ron and Lavender's 'sucking face' (as she put it), and the confrontations that evening.

"I know how much something like that hurts, Miss Granger . . . Hermione," Russell said.

"It hurts worse than anything I ever imagined," Hermione said. She would have broken down crying, had she not sobbed herself out coming all the way up here.

"It does," Russell agreed. "It's not nearly as painful in most ways as having your wife and children murdered. Those are far deeper wounds. It's more like a long paper cut than a deep stabbing pain. Instead of bludgeoning you into numbness, being hit like you were made me feel like I was crashing on a broom that was spiraling out of control."

"Exactly," Hermione admitted.

"Did you and Mister Weasley have any sort of understanding?" Russell asked gently.

"No," Hermione with self-loathing. "I've been waiting for the fool since last Christmas. I didn't know all I had to do was grab the git and kiss him in front of everyone. Not that it would have done any good. He doesn't like me."

'Only Granger would come to a teacher with a problem like this!' Russell thought. 'Still, she is here, she's in pain. How do I help?' Russell opted for honesty. "He probably thinks he loves you."

"It's a stupid way to show it!"

"Of course it is," Russell agreed. "Tell me, has Weasley had a girlfriend before?"

"No," Hermione agreed.

"Have you had a boyfriend?"

"Not really," Hermione admitted. "Viktor, Viktor Krum that is, and I almost dated, but not really. I was too young."

"I would imagine Weasley didn't know how to approach you. Believe it or not, if he cares for you, really cares for you, this fling with Miss Brown won't amount to much. They'll kiss a lot for a few weeks or months, and then it will die off." Hermione gave a little snort to stop herself from crying again. "I know. That's of absolutely no comfort to you right now. You're hurt, embarrassed, and angry. Normally, I would say ignore Weasley and everything around and about him, and look around and see if anyone else interested you. Now, though, I have to ask you to make a sacrifice."

"What kind?" Hermione asked.

"Don't make Potter choose between his two best friends. He needs both of you. Concentrate on what you need to learn, for his sake as well as yours and everyone else."

"I sometimes think my boggart would be seeing the dead mocking me because I didn't learn enough to save them," Hermione said with a far away look.

"I know. I know more than you will likely know for decades, and I still feel the same way at times."

Don't overwork yourself like you did during your Third year. Stay available for Potter's sake. Do your school work, and work on these other projects as you were. It will hurt every time you see Weasley and Brown near each other. Just remind yourself that you are doing more important things, even if it would be nice to have that as well."

"Cold comfort, but nevertheless true," Hermione admitted.

"Precisely," Russell agreed. "I regret I cannot offer you any better comfort."

Hermione stared at Russell, seated in the padded rocker, smoking his pipe. "Pardon me for saying so, sir, but that is very bad for you."

"Not really," Russell said. "We really are somewhat different than Muggles, Miss Granger. Did you know that most magical potions either would have no effect on Muggles, or poison them?"

"I had wondered," she admitted.

"Magic changes us, enhances us. In that respect at least, we really are better than Muggles. What we need to remember is, we all came from Muggles, and that we need Muggle culture. We may be the next evolutionary step of humanity, but if so we have not yet come close to completing that step."

"Yes, sir."

Russell conjured a basin of cold water, a towel, and a mirror for Hermione. She washed her face and pressed the wet cloth against her eyes.

"Are you ready to face the world again?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry to have bothered you for something like this."

Russell was not going to allow her to feel bad for coming to him. "In every sense, I have chosen to mentor you, Miss Granger. I promise you, I would rather talk to you when you are troubled about anything, even the antics of Ronald Weasley, than have you face these problems by yourself." He knocked the plug of ash and tobacco from his pipe, then used a pipe cleaner on it. A flick of his wand cleaned and restored the pipe cleaner. After putting the pipe back on the rack, he stood. "Let's see about getting you back to Gryffindor. It's after curfew, and I won't have you losing points."

Hermione followed him out. "Which House were you in, sir?"

"Ravenclaw. You make a fine Gryffindor, Miss Granger, but you would have made an equally good Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff."

"Thank you. Sir, have you spoke with Luna Lovegood this term?"

"Not as such. I must say, she has settled down nicely this year. I think she gained a bit of self-confidence and respect from going with you and the others to the Ministry. Why?"

"I just worry about her."

Russell thought about that. "H'mm. She has the Minor Gift of Languages, and has already learned forty-eight. Why don't you and she spend some time reading the basic Tibetan and Sanskrit material together that I gave you? It might be good for both of you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Feel free to teach her any of the revealing spells I've taught you."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, sir!" She smiled. "What about Occlumency?"

"Personally, I pity anyone who tries to read Miss Lovegood's mind, but feel free, if she is interested." "I hope neither of you ever needs to use these," Russell said to himself.

They met no one except Peeves on their way back to Gryffindor. Peeves said nothing, but fled

before the glare of Russell. He had learned not to trifle with Russell or Snape.

Chapter VII

Sunday, December 8, 1996

"You wished to see me, Headmaster?"

"Ah, John. Do come in and have a seat."

Russell came in cautiously. It was rare to visit the Headmaster in his quarters. "It was good to see you at dinner tonight, sir," Russell said.

"It was a good dinner, wasn't it? I've always enjoyed pheasant. It is a shame we cannot share it with the students, and build their palates."

"The pheasant was good, but that wasn't what I meant," Russell pointed out.

Dumbledore sighed. "I know."

"No luck, or shouldn't I ask?"

"As a rule, you should not ask. I must share this news with someone, for I do believe I have located a Horcrux. However, the enchantments on this one are very strong."

Russell hesitated, and then said, "I was wondering, is Voldemort halving his soul each time he creates a Horcrux?"

"Do you mean that the first, most likely the diary, had half his soul; the second a quarter, the third an eighth, and so on?"

"Right, leaving him currently with either a sixty-fourth or a hundred and twenty-eighth of the original."

Dumbledore shrugged. "If so, I am surprised he has not torn himself into oblivion. I do not believe a sixty-fourth of a soul would have survived being blasted from its body. I believe it is more likely each piece is more-or-less equal, although of course they wouldn't be precisely equal."

"That's what I thought, but I thought I should ask," Russell said.

"I can say no more on the subject," Dumbledore warned, to which Russell merely nodded. "I asked you here to throw for me. First, to determine the state of mind of an individual, and secondly to decide between three courses of action."

"Of course," Russell answered, taking the deck he kept for Dumbledore's use out. "Shall we do the state of mind, first?"

"Alright."

"It's not you or a lover, correct?"

"Correct," Dumbledore said with a twinkle. "I have not had a lover in nearly a hundred years, John."

"It does matter to the interpretation," Russell said defensively.

"I know."

"A one-throw, then," Russell said. When they had gone through the ritual of shuffle-cut-deal, the result was, "The Eight of Wands, Reversed." Russell looked at Dumbledore. "A troubled mind, jealous and filled with internal divisions and at least one major matter of conscience."

"I had thought as much," Dumbledore said. "I am glad for the reassurance."

"So no follow up?"

Dumbledore thought, and said, "No, no follow up, at least not tonight."

"Three paths of action, you said?"

"Indeed."

"Your action?"

"Yes."

"Clear your mind of all but the first path." The result was, "The Five of Swords. Not a very favorable card, perhaps even death."

The second result was, "The Three of Pentacles, Reversed. A mediocre result at best."

The final result was, "The Four of Swords, Reversed. A wise approach, I would say."

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall continue my general search for any remaining Horcruxes, and shall study the puzzle of the one I found last night at my leisure, until I am certain I know what to expect. I suspect in this one, he placed as much as he could of what he would call the weaknesses of childhood, not realizing that those vulnerabilities actually are what makes us human, what make us something more than greedy, intellectual animals."

"Thus the higher level of protections, you mean?"

"Exactly. I wish I could tell you more."

"I don't need to know more," Russell admitted, more to himself than to Dumbledore. "Tell Potter."

"I cannot yet tell him, I fear."

"Then write down everything place you've looked and every place you suspect, including this place, and charm it so that only Potter can read it. Albus, if something were to happen to you. . . ."

"Then you and Severus would need to take over," Dumbledore said firmly, "just as Remus and Minerva would take over the Order."

"Potter would still need to know where you have already looked and where you suspect you need to look still. Otherwise, he may end up wasting time following in your footsteps."

"And in doing so, he may learn what he needs to know to win."

"Or he may be delayed, and therefore be caught and killed, and if he isn't, who knows how many Muggles and others will be killed? The Order, with just a little help from our Muggle contacts and the Ministry, have managed to fight the dementors to a stalemate and to temporarily drive the giants out of Britain. If something were to happen to you, both will be on the attack again, and the Death Eaters will step up their random attacks. No one can stop a random attack of terrorism, Albus, other than by sheer dumb luck."

"True," Dumbledore admitted. "I shall begin working on the charms to insure that only Harry can read my notes."

"How about Granger?" Russell asked. "Potter does rely on her."

"True. I shall charm it so that Harry may copy parts of it out after he has read them."

"I understand," Russell said. If Dumbledore did die, then he would want to speak personally to Potter in his writing.

"Thank you, John. You have been a help."

Russell stood and showed himself out after saying his goodnights. He needed a drink.

Snape looked around the tower room with a sneer of disgust. "Is there a problem, Severus?"

"I hate the holidays," Snape stated.

"Do you think I hadn't noticed?" Russell retorted. "Besides, it's only a small holly wreath."

"If it were only a holly wreath, I shouldn't have felt a frisson of power as I passed by it."

"Well, you don't like the Yule holidays. . . ."

"Tell me what it does, or I leave!"

"It's hardly dangerous, or complicated enough to surpass your level of understanding."

"As I thought. It does do something!"

"Yes, and I quite impressed you were able to feel it," Russell admitted. "It was created by the Fifth year students. There are runes on some of the leaves, and it promotes good cheer."

"No wonder it's making me ill."

Russell frowned. "I hope you don't mean that literally. I'd hate to think you were that far down the Dark paths. . . ."

"I wear the Dark Mark," Snape pointed out.

"True," Russell admitted. "Cigar, or would you prefer your own?"

"My own, thank you." Snape sat and fired up his hookah, with tobacco this night.

"How goes your Sixth year class? No more clashes, I would hope?"

Snape grimaced. "I made the error of matching Potter against Zabini last week. Draco was taunting him, and Potter lost his temper."

"How many points did you dock him?"

"He was told to use a voiceless percussion hex, and he did. It was, unfortunately, strong enough to blast past Zabini's shield. It blew him into three other students, and they all went to the Infirmary with broken limbs."

"So, how many points did you dock Potter for doing what he was told to do? Twenty?"

"Five," Snape admitted.

Russell shook his head, built up a smoke screen with his pipe, and then blew three perfect smoke rings.

"Is Draco still doing well in your class?" Snape asked after a minute of silence.

"He is," Russell admitted. "He's also checked out any number of books on enchanting items. I hope you keep a better eye on him than Minerva did on those Weasley twins."

"I'm trying to, but he's making it very difficult," Snape answered.

"He's learned some Occlumency, I take it?" Russell suggested.

"He has. I could probably push past it, but he would know I did so. I do wish. . . ." Snape trailed off, and then looked at Russell.

"What?"

"If I make a request from you, will you never mention it again?"

"If you put it that way," Russell said slowly, "I suppose I must agree."

"Could you throw the cards on Draco's state of mind?"

"I have to admit, I didn't expect that," Russell said.

"I can barely believe I am suggesting it," Snape agreed. "Still. . . ."

"A simple, one card answer, a multiple throw, or one card with follow-up?"

"Let's start with one card," Snape said.

Russell was not surprised to see that the answer was the "Eight of Wands, Reversed. A troubled mind, jealous and filled with internal divisions and at least one major matter of conscience."

"Yes, that does make sense," Snape said. "I need ask no more. Thank you."

The pair and smoked in silence until it was time to leave.

Friday, December 20, 1996

John Russell paid his respects to Horace Slughorn after Slughorn's traditional Christmas Party had gotten well-started. The round wizard smiled at Russell's tribute, a bottle of 'pineapple wine' from Hawaii. "It seems like old times, although you're my colleague now," Slughorn said with a smile.

"It's good to have you here, Horace," Russell said, mostly sincerely. He glanced around. "A fine collection of our students, and of course you have invited some excellent outside guests."

"I know most of the important people in Britain," Slughorn said simply, "or at least those over thirty. I enjoy making these connections."

"And you do it well," Russell said. "Ah. . . ." he said, as Hermione Granger came in with Cormac McLaggen.

"Miss Granger or Mister McLaggen?" Slughorn asked.

"I don't know McLaggen," Russell said. "Miss Granger is one of the six best students I have, perhaps the best who doesn't have the Minor or Major Gift of Languages. She has a good feel for symbolic magic, perhaps the second best of all my current students."

"She is not in Harry Potter's league for having a feel for potions," Slughorn said, "but she is a brilliant brewer. I have the feeling she can do almost anything well."

"I agree," Russell said. "If I were to offer an apprenticeship to anyone, she'd be my first choice. She is a brilliant natural scholar."

"Coming from you, that is high praise indeed," Slughorn said. He filed that away. Granger did impress him, but of course young witches of no family had a very hard path to follow in the wizarding world. She could prove a challenge placing in a good position, but Slughorn felt if anyone could do it, it was he.

Then the student Slughorn most wanted to see came in. He headed for him immediately. "Harry, m'boy!"

Russell faded back and watched with detached amusement as Slughorn dragged Harry around to meet some of the more important guests, and Harry dragged the Lovegood girl behind him.

Russell was very glad to see that. He had entertained some hopes that Potter and Granger might hook up, but it was obvious that she was still entertaining thoughts of the Weasley boy and using the better-looking McLaggen to provoke some jealousy. Still, if Potter was interested in Lovegood, it meant that the odd looks he had seen Potter direct at the Weasley girl were mere hormones after all, and not Love Potion #9, unless the girl had made it poorly or Potter had unusually good resistance to suggestive magic.

Russell frowned as he saw McLaggen grappling with Granger under the mistletoe. McLaggen caught the frown out of the corner of his eye, and the slightly rumpled Granger made her escape. Russell took one step towards the boy, who fled in the opposite direction.

Russell let him escape, as he watched Potter and Lovegood meet up with Granger. That only lasted a few minutes, as Granger broke away from the pair, looking upset. McLaggen headed towards her once again, a gleam in his eye. Russell sighed and went after her. "Not enjoying the party, Miss Granger?" McLaggen veered back out of Russell's line of sight.

"Not as much as I had hoped I would," Hermione agreed.

"Well, let me introduce you to an old friend." He steered Hermione towards Eldred Worple and his tame vampire, Sanguini. "Excuse me, Worple."

"What? Oh, Russell. Nice to see you. Do you know. . . ?"

"Yes, yes, quite well, as a matter of fact."

"You . . . you aren't going to **hurt** him, are you?" Worple whispered so that only Russell and Hermione could hear him.

"No, of course not."

The vampire leapt in surprise as Russell clasped him familiarly on the shoulder. "Who dares touch a . . . oh, John. Hello. . . ."

"May I have a few words with you, **Sanguini**?" The vampire winced slightly, his mask-like facelooking almost like a cartoon.

"Sanguini?" Russell asked as they moved off.

The vampire shrugged. "We do adopt new names for outsider consumption, and Eldred thought that was commercial."

"But 'Sanguini'? And why dye your hair black?"

"It is fairly customary, and my brother did request it," the vampire said. "Now what may I do for you?"

"Hermione, hold out your hand, palm up. Please, take her scent." With matched set of odd looks, Hermione did as she was told and the vampire took her hand and actually licked it. Hermione shuddered -- it was as if a cold stone had touched her palm. "This is Hermione Granger. She stands as an apprentice to me, almost as a daughter in our world, since she is without magical family. Spread the news to your friends. Those who touch her strike both against me and her best friend, the Chosen One."

Hermione gave nothing away, but the vampire's eyes went wide with shock. "The Potter boy?" he whispered.

"Precisely. Any questions?"

"No, none at all." He leered politely at Hermione. "You are very delicious, but you are now one of the safest girls in all of Britain."

Russell recalled the vampire's attention. "Do you see your brother at all?"

The vampire shook his head, "Of course not. Tell me, are there others I should get the scent of?"

Russell looked around, and saw that Ginny was still in the room, while Luna seemed to be moving in and out of a doorway indecisively. "That redhead and the blonde over by the door."

"The blonde is the Lovegood girl, is it not?" the vampire asked. "Her father prints some of the

oddest theories, but they often have a grain of truth surrounded by the fantasy."

"Exactly."

"I will gather and share their scents as well," the vampire said with a bow, and taking his leave.

"Who's his brother, Professor?" Hermione asked.

"Sanguini'," Russell said, shaking his head. "His name is, or was, Jerry, or rather Gerald Scrimgoeur, the Minister's baby brother, or youngest half-brother I should say. He was a year a head of me in Ravenclaw."

"Why did that man Worple think you might hurt a vampire?" Hermione asked.

"There was a rogue coven in Eastern Europe in the late 1950s. They were able to move between the magical communities, which were hiding from the Communists, and the Communists, who had thought they had driven the magical communities out and that there were no such things as vampires. I was part of the International effort to destroy them, and won a small reputation as a Vampire Hunter. I have always made it clear that I only go after rogues."

"I see," Hermione said, slightly impressed. "Happy Holidays, Professor."

He smiled. "Indeed, Miss Granger, Happy Holidays." He handed Hermione a small package.

"Enlarge this when you get back to your room, and let no one see you reading it." He turned and walked away.

Hermione, seeing that McLaggen was heading her way again, slipped back into the crowd after thanking the Professor.

Late that night, as Hermione finished packing and Lavender and Parvati were giggling behind the curtains of Parvati's bed, Hermione enlarged and opened her Christmas gift. She saw it was a book in Tibetan, and when she translated the title, she saw it was best translated as The Dark Night of the Soul: An Exploration of How to Recognize Dark Soul Magic.

She packed it well away.

Chapter VIII

Friday, January 3, 1997

John Russell turned tiredly around to see who was coming into the tower room. "Good evening, Headmaster."

"Good evening, John," Dumbledore said. "You're looking . . . tired."

"I am tired," Russell admitted.

"You have been 'on the go' since the start of the break," Dumbledore pointed out. "It was good of you to take so many shifts of those Order members who wanted to spend time with their families."

"I'm not as fit as I was when I was fighting vampires," Russell admitted.

"That was forty years ago," Dumbledore pointed out.

"True, but you are in some ways in better shape than I am, and you're ninety years older than I."

"True. Tell me, what do you think of the Death Eater confrontations you have participated in over the last six months?"

Russell thought of that, puffing away on a cherry wood-pipe. "Early last summer," he said thoughtfully, "they were tentative but vicious. In late July and August, as the Dementor and giant attacks were starting to be thwarted, the Death Eater attacks became more precise, but were less vicious. They would go in, make the kill, and run. Since then . . . it's as if there are two different team leaders. One is sloppy and vicious, the other precise. The second team makes the kill and leave it at that. The first group spends time torturing the victim, and try to include peripheral targets -- family and even neighbors. The first group tends to be the one that makes random Muggle strikes."

"Go on."

Russell frowned. "I've come up against both, and it seems that some of the same Death Eaters have been used by both teams. So again, it's the team leaders who make the difference."

"This partially agrees with some of my information. However, there seem to be four team leaders, two precise leaders and two sadistic ones. I have the names of the sadists."

"Bella Lestrange and Greyback?" Russell suggested.

"Exactly."

"And who is the fourth leader?"

"I believe I said I only know two, not three, of the four," Dumbledore scolded gently.

"The third leader is likely Severus," Russell said. "I had thought he merely participated in six of the precise attacks, but that was before you told me there were four attack leaders, not two."

Dumbledore said nothing.

"Is there no way for Severus to get out of these attacks, at least as the leader?" Russell asked. "If anyone else learns of what he's been doing, especially the Ministry people, they will have no doubts he has turned back to Voldemort."

"He is loyal to me," Dumbledore said.

"He is loyal to himself, and perhaps to the idea that Voldemort must be destroyed," Russell retorted.

"That is not the same thing, and you should learn the difference."

"He is loyal to **me**, John, as well as being totally devoted to the destruction of Voldemort,"

Dumbledore rejoined. "I know you would wish to know why I trust him, but that you will have to trust me for."

"You would want more than a mere assurance from me if you were in my place," Russell reminded his leader. "And remember, I'm not totally sure of Severus, and I probably trust him more than anyone else in the Order."

"I know," Dumbledore said, and added frankly, "and that worries me at times. Still, what is our greatest priority?"

"Defeating Voldemort without becoming as evil as Voldemort," Russell snapped back. "Would it really be a good thing for Potter to destroy Voldemort and in doing so put himself on the path to being the next Dark Lord?"

"Harry will NEVER do that!" Dumbledore shouted. "He is. . . ."

"The next White Warlock?" Russell asked. That set Dumbledore to pacing. "He is not merely the Chosen One, is he? Harry Potter is to be the next White Warlock, the one with the power to defend Light Magic against evil and all the medieval beliefs that go along with the silly title. He's to be a Gryffindor-type Warlock, a warrior and not a Merlin-figure, the wise advisor, correct?"

"I believe so," Dumbledore admitted.

"Then remember, that path is always a razor's edge," Russell warned. "He will be tempted to take short cuts on his way to becoming the White Warlock, and those short cuts can lead to Dark Paths."

"I know," Dumbledore said. "It is Harry's capacity for love. . . ."

"If that were true, you wouldn't have sent him to the Dursleys or at least you would not have kept him there," Russell broke in.

"I did not know it was nearly as bad as it is when I placed him there as I have learned since, and I did not know that he would be the next White Warlock, instead of merely the Chosen One, until he destroyed the basilisk with the aid of Fawkes!"

"So when Fawkes came to him, it didn't just show that Harry was loyal to you, it anointed him in a sense?" Russell was trying to understand.

"Yes!" Dumbledore snapped.

"And that reminded you that like all wizards, White Warlocks have to pass on the mantle?"

"I was never the White Warlock, although I have been called that," Dumbledore said.

"I didn't realize that anything much went with the title, other than the burdens, the legends, and a phoenix," Russell said. "After all, it was Fawkes' relationship to you, along with your power, knowledge, and defeat of Grindelwald that has made most people think of you as a White Warlock. I thought it merely meant Potter would have those qualities, too."

"All White Warlocks have phoenix companions, but not all phoenix companions are White Warlocks by any means," Dumbledore said pointedly. "Being a White Warlock . . . when you are chosen by Higher Magic you feel a power that enters you, enhances you, to some degree."

"Oh, how I hate the idea of 'Higher Magic'," Russell complained.

"Nonsense," Dumbledore argued back. "It is the same Higher Magic that creates Prophecy and Divination, and if you have no problems accepting either, then you should have no problem with the idea of the White Warlock."

"I have a difficult time believing in Super Harry, or Super Anyone," Russell retorted.

"Harry will not be a Muggle super hero. He will not be invincible or all-knowing. He will not

always listen to the promptings of Higher Magic, and he will at times mistake his own desires for those promptings. Now I was offered that power, and I ran away from it because it also carries responsibilities I did not wish to entertain at the time. I ran here in 1915, and hoped that Grindelwald would be destroyed by others. Instead, he was merely driven underground for a generation. I thought I might regain that opportunity when I destroyed him, but of course that opportunity only comes once, so I have had the responsibilities I tried to flee without all the extra power and knowledge I could have had to make that burden easier."

"Your fate, if you will," Russell offered, referring back to a conversation the pair had had a few months before."

"Precisely. I struggled against it, and now I find that because I struggled and made the wrong choices, some of what should have been my burden has been fated upon poor Harry instead. Harry, I am certain, will be offered that knowledge and power. It is not a huge amount of either, but it also brings you closer to your own magic. You understand it better, and can manipulate it better. I hope he makes the best choice for him, as I did not."

"Are you certain you aren't one?" Russell asked.

"I felt that power, and it did enhance me slightly," Dumbledore admitted. "If he takes it, it will enhance Harry slightly more. That is all."

"He might turn it down, if for other reasons," Russell pointed out. "When this war is over, he might just choose to go away. I certainly wouldn't blame him if he did."

"We shall see," Dumbledore said. "Now, I shall be talking with Harry soon after he comes back. You have not mentioned, you have not given any information at all, on Horcruxes to Miss Granger, correct?"

"No, I have not," Russell said.

"She will ask for such information next week. You are to deny her," Dumbledore said flatly.

"Why?" Russell asked in the same tone.

"Harry must find certain information out for himself. It is important that Harry do so without preconceptions."

When nothing more was forthcoming, Russell had little choice but to agree to the fiat.

Thursday, January 9, 1997

"I trust you had a good vacation, Miss Granger?"

"Considering how unsettled, how dangerous the times are, it wasn't bad," Hermione said. "Sir. . . ."

"Yes?"

"You know what I'm about to ask, aren't you?"

"Perhaps," he acknowledged.

"What can you tell me about Horcruxes?"

"Nothing."

The abrupt answer made Hermione blink. It took a few seconds for her to recover and think things out. "Is that because you don't know what they are, or because the Headmaster has said you can't tell me anything?"

"The latter." It was clear that Russell was not happy about his answer.

Hermione looked at her teacher for several moments. "Can you tell me why you can't tell me anything, other than because the Headmaster doesn't want you to?"

"Not really," Russell admitted. "We are stuck until Harry finds what the Headmaster wants him to find, I'm afraid, whatever that might be. Now, let's spend some time on Occlumency, and then I want to quiz you on the Tibetan theories on soul magic."

"Yes, sir. . . ." Hermione said, disappointed.

"Is there something else you want to talk about?"

"There's nothing useful in the library," Hermione almost pouted.

"There is nothing which would allow the slightest clue as to creating or detecting one in the library. I believe the Headmaster has removed anything you would find directly useful, until after Harry has accomplished his mission."

"Directly useful?"

"Exactly. Is there anything else, Miss Granger?"

Hermione thought about bringing up the 'Half-Blood Prince', but decided not to. She was not about to bring up Ron Weasley again. It had been embarrassing enough the first time.

As the weeks passed, Russell saw no sign that Harry had gained whatever knowledge it was that the Headmaster wanted him to acquire. Things remained quite tense between Hermione and the Weasley boy, and so Potter was a bit on edge as well. Russell was a bit disappointed as January played itself out that Potter took no further interest in Lovegood. On the positive side, Hermione and Luna were spending a fair amount of time together, Luna coaching Hermione in the finer points of Tibetan and Sanskrit, Hermione teaching Luna the revealing charms and similar magic that Russell had been teaching her. Should something happen to both Dumbledore and himself, Potter would have two friends who could help him find his path.

Outside of his brief coaching sessions with Hermione, Russell's only contact with any of the trio outside of class occurred Valentine's Night. All the staff were on extra patrols that weekend, as it was a favorite time 'for couples to couple', as Flitwick had put it.

Russell had heard some soft moaning from a deserted alcove. As he approached, he heard a feminine voice coo, "Oh, Won-Won, that feels sooooo good."

Stepping into the alcove, Russell caught 'Won-Won' with his hand well-inside Lavender Brown's robes. He sent Brown running and dragged Weasley around behind him for ten minutes, lecturing him on proper behavior. Since Russell had done much the same thing during his Seventh year (without being caught), he only docked the pair of Gryffindors two points apiece.

Outside of Hogwarts, the terror attacks continued, at the rate of about once every eight-to-eleven days. Most of the easier targets had been hit by now, however, and that meant that the Death Eaters' success rate went down. The Ministry, of course, claimed this showed that their own anti-Death Eater measures were working.

The Order, and the more intelligent members of both the Ministry and the general community, knew that this was nonsense. At some point, either the Order or the Minister would get a lead on a real Death Eater or werewolf cell and attack it, or Voldemort's plan, whatever it might be, would spring into action, perhaps with Voldemort himself leading it.

Until then, the entire community was under stress, waiting for an attack to happen. General crimes,

which had at first been down, now crept up, especially burglaries, as the less savory members of the magical community tried to take advantage of the fact that many summer homes had been abandoned by both sides, and a number of families had coalesced from far-flung small units into larger groups of the extended family, again leaving some property vacant.

As February faded into March, everyone was waiting for the next development.

Saturday, March 1, 1997

Russell came to breakfast in something of a daze. He had just come back from a stake-out, protecting a Muggle woman and her magical son. (Although she did not know her ex-lover had been a wizard, somehow a list of such children had been leaked by the Ministry to the Death Eaters the year before.) There had been an attack, but on another target, a Ministry official. The aurors had managed to protect the Ministry worker and her family, with three of the team members being slightly injured. They claimed they had hurt the Death Eaters more than they had been hurt themselves.

Russell enlarged his coffee cup into a triple-sized mug. He added sugar and magically removed a fifth of the water to make the coffee strong enough for what he needed that morning. He added just enough hot milk and sugar to make it drinkable and then sat back. He finally let his eyes roam around the great hall.

It was only then that Russell noticed that he was sitting by himself at the head table. He frowned, and then he noticed that there were some notable empty seats at the Gryffindor table, amongst a number of other empty seats. A glance at the Ravenclaws saw that Lovegood was also missing from her isolated seat at the table. A few notable Slytherins were missing as well.

Russell considered who was left, and then flicked his eyes back towards Ravenclaw. He beckoned Padma Patil up.

"Yes, Professor Russell?" she asked nervously.

"Do you know where the rest of the staff, not to mention all the Sixth year Gryffindors, a fair portion of the other Gryffindors, and Miss Lovegood might have gotten themselves to this morning?"

"I'm not totally certain as to what happened. . . ."

"Give me your best guess," Russell managed to say without barking. He decided he needed more coffee.

"I gather Ron Weasley got himself dosed with some sort of love potion that was meant for Harry Potter," Padma said. "Potter took Weasley to Professor Slughorn, and somehow, he got poisoned."

"Potter?"

"No, Weasley," Padma said.

"So, do you know who Weasley desired?"

"Romilda Vane; I think she's a Fourth year Gryffindor."

Russell frowned. "Why is everyone else gone?"

"A third of the Gryffindors are trying to see Weasley and the other third are trying to support them or helping to yell at young Vane. Lovegood always drifts towards anywhere that Potter, Granger, and Ginny Weasley all are. Professor Snape came and dragged some of the Slytherins away, probably to make certain they have alibis for however Weasley got poisoned. I'm not certain why

all the staff went off."

"Well, if they wanted me, they would have called for me," Russell decided. "Thank you, Miss Patil."

"Professor?"

"Yes, Miss Patil?"

"If Hogwarts is closed, will you be offering any correspondence lessons?"

'Spoken like a true Ravenclaw,' he thought. Russell smiled. "If Hogwarts is totally closed down, I doubt if there'll be time for lessons of any kind."

Padma frowned, but said she understood.

Russell finished his triple coffee, and made himself another, wondering who the poison had been aimed at -- Slughorn, or perhaps Potter or even Dumbledore.

At that point, Vector, Sprout, and Flitwick came in, herding all the missing students except for Potter, Granger, and Weasley's sister. "Is the Weasley boy alright?" Russell asked.

"Well," Vector said, "he'll live."

"Things are as bad now as they were in 1978," Sprout said. "Let's hope they don't continue to get worse."

Chapter IX

Sunday, March 9, 1997

"Good morning, Miss Granger."

"Good morning, sir," Hermione replied, a little out of breath.

"Let's see, you're not normally late for anything, so may I take it you were already at the Infirmary this morning?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered, a little nervously.

"And how are Mister Potter and Mister Weasley?" Russell asked. Ron was still recovering from the poisoning, and Harry had been hit in the head by a Bludger bat the previous afternoon.

"Ron is doing really well," Hermione said. "Harry says he's doing well, but it's difficult to tell with him. He's too stoic about such things for his own good."

"That's not surprising, considering his upbringing," Russell reminded her.

"Professor, did you play Quidditch?" Hermione asked, curious.

"I was a reserve Beater in the Fifth and Seventh years, and I played my Sixth," Russell responded. "Why?"

"I know it's mostly me, but I just don't see the sense in putting as much . . . well, as much of everything into a game as so many people do. Even people who don't play invest so much of themselves into their teams." Hermione shrugged. "It just doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Especially a game as violent as Quidditch. I'm surprised it's even allowed, especially at a school."

"I have to admit, I can't get as enthusiastic about organized sports as most people, although I'm not as far along in my disdain for them as you. So far as I know, no one has come up with a really good answer as to why they are so popular to watch, let alone play, although there are plenty of good theories, especially among the Muggles. And," Russell went on, "considering how much more resilient we are than Muggles, Quidditch isn't too terribly violent compared to games like Rugby, American football, and ice hockey, at least not the game I saw in Philadelphia back in 1976. Three fights, one brawl, and numerous missing teeth." He shook his head. "Hogwarts was actually a much more competitive place when I went to school here. Each House had dueling teams organized by year, gob stones and exploding snap were much more prevalent, there were quiz competitions and chess tournaments, broom racing, and so much more." He smiled at the memories, and then looked at Hermione. "You would have enjoyed the competitive potions making. I'm surprised Professor Slughorn did not restart the practice this year."

"Professor Snape ended it, I take it?" Hermione asked.

"I believe so," Russell agreed. "Professor Dumbledore does not have much belief in the value of competition. He ended the dueling clubs in the 1970s when they got too violent, and all the other competitions have died out since, other than Quidditch and gob stones, and not many play gob stones anymore. I rather believe, if he had his way, Quidditch would be ended as well, but the Board and all of his Heads of House want it continued, and he can't fight both."

Russell smiled at Hermione. "Eh, enough of such things, unless there was something else? No? Then, did you invite Miss Lovegood to join us at Ten-thirty?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione said happily.

"Let's start with some basic Occlumency, and get you started on the practical revealing charms."

Then, when Miss Lovegood arrives, we shall see what kind of tutor you have been."

It was 11:22 when Russell called a halt to Hermione and Luna's drills. "Well done," he told them both. "You both have a good feel for the work. If you can spare the time, I'll see you both next weekend. Miss Granger, perhaps I can see you tomorrow evening."

"Yes, sir!"

Monday, March 10, 1997

"You seem to be in a good mood tonight, Professor," Hermione said.

"I am," Russell replied. "Tonight, after all, young Mister Potter will reveal Professor Slughorn's memory, and everyone can get started on some real work."

"Oh . . . well, I don't know that Harry has succeeded," Hermione said tentatively. "I mean, what with Ron being poisoned and everything. . . ."

"Mister Potter had nearly two months before Mister Weasley's accidental poisoning." Russell scowled. "I know some allowances must be made, since he is only sixteen, but if this is how he fights Voldemort, we might as well all curl up and admit defeat now."

"That's not entirely fair," Hermione protested. "I mean, how is Harry to persuade a teacher into revealing information?"

"Have none of you ever succeeded in doing that before?" Russell demanded.

"To be honest, yes, but you must remember that Professor Slughorn isn't as open as Professor Hagrid, and Hagrid is very fond of Harry. . . ."

"I have spent rather more time with Professor Slughorn than I might otherwise have preferred since his return," Russell growled. "I have many other things I could do with my time, but I've been to tea in his rooms, and had him in mine, some two dozen times all told this year. All to very very gently reenforce the idea that Harry Potter is indeed the Chosen One, and that the good Professor will be able to benefit by latching on to Potter. It's his natural state of mind, but I've been reenforcing it. You should see Professor Snape nearly bite his tongue off making certain he does not put down Potter whenever Professor Slughorn is within hearing distance. I assure you, that is not typical behavior on his part."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, we have some work to do," Russell said, "but bend your mind to finding some way to help your friend figure out some way of getting at that memory."

"There must be some other way. . . ." Hermione nearly begged.

"I could take it from him," Russell said. "I'm very good at that."

"Then why don't you? Why leave it up to Harry?"

"Because he has protected that memory well. Therefore, my way would leave Horace nearly a vegetable," Russell retorted. "Would you really want me to go destroy and Horace's mind, just because he's stubborn and because you and your friend can't flatter the old man into giving up his secret?"

"No," Hermione said, slightly aghast at the very suggestion. "That would be horrible!"

"Then I would advise you to help Mister Potter. He has to be able to flatter that memory out

somehow!"

"I'll try, sir."

Monday, April 27, 1997

"Professor!"

Russell turned around and saw Hermione Granger running towards him. "Take a deep breath, Miss Granger, and tell me what's wrong."

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it, looking around carefully. Russell quickly cast some privacy spells. "Now, tell me," he urged.

"We finally persuaded Harry to take a dose of his Felix Felicis potion, to help him get the memory," Hermione said, "but instead of going towards Professor Slughorn's he's gone out to Professor Hagrid's!"

"As odd as that sounds, it will likely work out very well," Russell assured her. He thought a moment. "Still, it won't hurt to keep an eye on this. Go back to your common room and hope for the best."

Hermione gave him a very strong look. "What?" he asked, thrown off.

"I never figured you for a Cannons' fan," Hermione said, before hurrying off.

Russell smiled, took out a piece of chalk, and in less than thirty seconds had inscribed the proper magical symbols on himself and said the correct spells so that he was invisible.

By the time Russell had tracked down Harry, he and Professor Slughorn were just parting company, having made arrangements to meet back at Hagrid's. Russell had been told the story of Aragog and the acromantulas the summer after Potter's Second year by the Headmaster. He was not surprised that Hagrid was mourning the animal. Hagrid was attached to many animals, and having a sentient one as a friend, even one like Aragog, would of course appeal to Hagrid.

'Slughorn must have made a perfect batch of Felix Felicis', Russell thought as he watched Harry manipulate first Hagrid and then Slughorn. 'It's been a while, alright twenty years, since I've attempted a potion that complicated, but maybe I should try.' He almost gave in and made an audible snort as he saw Harry do a decent regeneration spell that refilled the wine bottles.

It took Harry almost two more hours to get the memory, but Russell saw that he had. 'I wish I could see it,' Russell thought, 'then I would know for certain that we're on the trail. No, I had better let Dumbledore do it on his own.'

Russell followed Potter back to the castle. One little slight slip on the grass by the teen showed that the potion was wearing off. Russell moved ahead, and, sure enough, the castle was locked. He undid the lock and slipped through the door just before Potter turned the corner.

"Who's there! Reveal yourself!"

Russell brushed off a rune and appeared. "Quiet, you idiot!" Russell hissed. "Now, get out of here!"

"Who are you telling to. . . ." Snape snarled back.

"If you don't shoo, you'll ruin months of work. The Headmaster will tell you when he's ready!"

Snape scowled, but took himself off. Russell had just managed to reestablish his invisibility when Potter came in. Russell followed as Potter avoided Peeves and made it back to the entrance of the Gryffindor common room. He listened to the exchanges with the Gryffindor guardian and then with the Gryffindor ghost. He only stopped trailing Potter when the boy started up the spiral staircase to

the Headmaster's office.

Tuesday, April 28, 1997

"Good morning, gentlemen," Dumbledore said. "I hope you don't mind being called this early."

Snape and Russell both shrugged and drank coffee.

"Last night, Mister Potter brought me the last clue I needed, the evidence that Voldemort did indeed do what I suspected he had done."

"So how many of these Horcruxes did the Dark Lord make?" Snape asked.

"I am now certain he made at least five before being disembodied," Dumbledore said. "The diary, Slytherin's ring, both now destroyed, and Slytherin's locket, Hufflepuff's cup, and some relic of Madam Ravenclaw's. From Severus' evidence of Voldemort's changing appearance, he made the Sixth Horcrux before being reembodied. I believe that was his killing the old Muggle at the Riddle House."

"Then why would he still want to kill Potter himself?" Russell asked. "I would think he would want to kill him to create the final Horcrux. Why take the risk to split himself before regaining his body?"

"Other than to prove the point that he is the more powerful than his prophesied enemy, that I cannot say," Dumbledore admitted.

"Could he have decided to go beyond a total of seven?" Snape asked.

Dumbledore frowned, and Russell jumped in, "Yes, perhaps he decided the magic number would be seven splits, making eight parts, rather than six splits, making seven."

"That is possible," Dumbledore admitted. "Would anyone around him know?"

"Certainly not," Snape said firmly. "I doubt if anyone even knows about the Horcruxes."

"What about Pettigrew?" Russell asked.

"He would not KNOW," Snape said, "however, it is certainly possible he has figured out something close to the truth. He does have a certain sly intelligence."

"He scored O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in all his subjects, even if most were A's," Dumbledore reminded Snape, "and he was always much better in theory than he was in practice." He stopped in thought. "Actually, his only higher scores were E's in Runes and History and O's on his Arithmancy O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. While one can never rely on his character, you must never underestimate his intelligence."

He turned to Snape. "You know what to do?"

"I do," Snape retorted with his trademark sneer. "I disagree, I resent it, but I will do what I must." He got up and left.

Dumbledore turned to Russell. "How are your assignments going?"

"Miss Granger is progressing brilliantly," Russell replied. "She will have all the knowledge she needs to help Potter by the end of the term. It will need maybe a day or two of intense work after that to bring it all together in context. She has done most of the work with Miss Lovegood, and she'll need more tutoring, of course, but if anything happens to Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood will be there to take up the slack."

"I have to admit, I had some doubts about adding Miss Lovegood, but I am glad things are working out."

"You had some major doubts about my tutoring Miss Granger," Russell pointed out.

"True," Dumbledore admitted. "I still believe Harry will have all he needs to accomplish his quest by himself. Still, he needs his friends."

"And I think you place too much trust in luck, instinct, and Higher Magic," Russell retorted. "And 'needs his friends'? After you left him in that hellhole of a Muggle 'home', you're lucky he can work with anyone! Tell me, if he hadn't learned some form of affection with his friendships, what would have happened when he was possessed at the Ministry?"

"Voldemort might have seized control," Dumbledore had to admit. "I know I can make mistakes, John."

Russell ignored that. "Now, Miss Granger has enough to think about this term, and that is even more true of Miss Lovegood. I have created copies of the fourteen books I have that have information on Horcruxes. I intend to give them to the girls at the end of term, unless you have some decent objections."

"I suspect that I will have little influence at some point between now and the beginning of the next school year."

"Albus. . . ."

"Would you care to throw for me, and predict which is the most likely month?"

"Not really," Russell admitted.

Hermione looked at her mentor nervously.

"So, did Mister Potter tell you about the six Horcruxes?" Russell asked.

Hermione nodded. "You knew, of course?"

"I knew that was the Headmaster's theory, and I agreed that it was the most likely scenario. Now we know. You will find, Miss Granger, that there are often times when the best theory turns out totally wrong."

"True. And you've mentioned several times that you've met with people from outside Europe, from Tibet, India. . . ."

"Australia, the Americas, Africa, any place where they have knowledge of soul magic," Russell agreed. "You don't know nearly as much as I do about the subject, Hermione, but you probably know more than anyone else in Britain, other than myself, the Headmaster, and Voldemort. I have copies of fourteen books on Horcruxes and soul magic, and another twenty-odd books on related magic, which I'll give you after the term ends. You will be ready to help Mister Potter."

"You won't?"

"I will if I can," Russell said. "It's best to be prepared for all possibilities."

"Which is why you're having me train Luna, in case something happens to the Headmaster, you, and me."

"Exactly. I'll have at least two dozen of the works copied for her as well by then."

Hermione looked very sad. "War sucks," she said.

"It does," Russell agreed. "It sucks because of all the harm it does, and that includes all the compromises we have to make in order to fight it."

Hermione squared her shoulders and looked Russell in the eyes. "I understand, sir. What do we do

next?"

Chapter X

Wednesday, May 21, 1997

Professor Russell was just walking out of his office, on the way to a late dinner, thinking. Death Eater attacks had slowed almost to a stop. That was good, but someone had finally figured out how to send the dementors out randomly. That meant there were more soulless, more terror. It also likely meant that either the Death Eaters would start equally random attacks or else they were preparing for something big.

"Professor Russell!" Russell turned around, and saw Luna Lovegood frantically running down the corridor.

"What's wrong?"

Luna's words came quickly and breathlessly. "I heard screaming from a boys' toilet and then Professor Snape ran in and then there was more yelling and he brought Draco Malfoy out and he had lots of blood all over and he was still seeping blood and Professor Snape said that if anyone poked their nose into the bathroom they would be serving detentions from now until the end of the year." She took a huge breath and went on, a little slower. "Harry is in that toilet, Professor, and Professor Snape was swearing he'd have Harry expelled and imprisoned. Professor, you have to help him!"

Russell sorted through what she had said and then instantly said, "Come, Miss Lovegood."

Snape had apparently driven all the lingering, curious students away. Russell could hear the Defense Professor's raised voice coming from the boys' toilet. "Go," Russell commanded Luna. "I'll take care of things as best I can." Luna gave Russell a pleading look, and then fled.

Harry stormed out of the toilet a few moments latter. Even had Russell not been disillusioned, he rather doubted Potter would have seen him. He canceled the charm and marched into the lavatory.

"I've got the little bastard now!" he heard Snape chortle as he opened the door. Snape glared at him. "What do you wa. . . ." Russell had said nothing, he had simply kept marching, picking the lighter Snape up and ramming him into the far wall.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Russell roared at Snape as Snape hit the wall.

"I am disciplining a dangerous child!" Snape yelled back. "I have him this time, and he will be gone before midnight!"

"Are you crazy?"

"He attacked, he nearly killed, Draco Malfoy!"

"So what? Malfoy doesn't matter, you idiot!"

"Listen to yourself! I will not allow. . . ." Russell rammed Snape's head against the wall, which silenced him for a moment.

"YOU will not allow? This isn't about YOU either. It doesn't matter if Potter cursed Malfoy. . . ."

"It was a Dark, almost Unforgiveable curse. . . ."

"IT WOULDN'T MATTER IF POTTER HAD KICKED YOU IN THE BALLS, CRUCIOED YOU, AND PISSED IN YOUR MOUTH!" Russell tossed Snape to the ground. "Are you really this bloody stupid? Do you really think Dumbledore. . . ."

"I am a Head of House! I can appeal to the Board of Governors on this, and I will!" Snape claimed, sitting up. "Potter has learned what he needs to learn here. He doesn't need to be here, he doesn't need my book. . . ."

"Oh, so THAT'S where he learned a Dark Curse, is it? If Dumbledore or you didn't want him learning it, you could have easily obscured it. He likely would never have found it then."

"I had forgotten it was there," Snape admitted.

"Yell at the boy, give the idiot some detentions, he deserves them."

"But. . . ."

"But what?" Russell said with contempt. "Are you afraid that this will drive Malfoy into making a direct attempt on Dumbledore's life?"

Snape looked at Russell stupidly.

"So, you are an idiot. Just because I never came right out and said that I knew it was Malfoy behind those two pathetic attempts? I'm a poor Legilimens, but even I could read what Bell was to do with the necklace that night, and who used the Imperius on her. And I heard you memory charm her in the Infirmary, so you know it was Malfoy."

"Draco has been given two tasks by the Dark Lord," Snape hissed. "I am sworn to fulfill one of them, or die. I have been trying to get him to tell me the second one, so that I may help him with that. Otherwise, I will have to fulfill the task of killing Dumbledore or die, and you know I don't want to do either!"

"But if you can find out the other task. . . ."

"Then I can substitute that for the killing of the Headmaster. This does NOT help me do that!"

"Neither will trying to get Potter expelled when you know it will fail," Russell pointed out.

"At least I can get that book back from Potter," Snape said.

"He won't bring that book," Russell said. "He knows that book is worth keeping."

"If he doesn't I'll. . . ."

"You'll give him a hard time, and then let it go."

Snape stood up straight. "You are presuming a great deal, John. Don't try my temper."

Russell glared right back. "And don't you try mine, either. This has been a difficult year for both of us, and my temper is also frayed. I haven't lost my temper in a very long time. I would regret if you were the cause of my losing it again."

Snape sent a Legilimency prope into Russell. What he got back came as a shock. It wasn't a verbal answer, or even Russell's Occlumency defense, it was a vision of a raging monster, more horrible in some ways than the werewolf that had nearly infected him, as horrible as the worst he had seen as a Death Eater. It was frightening to know that this monster of anger and rage dwelt in the heart of his acquaintance, a man he had thought until the previous summer to be relatively mild-mannered.

"I am mild-mannered," Russell snarled, reading Snape in return. "You of all people should know we all have a beast inside them. Mine is merely more potent than most. Do not try my temper, Severus." He looked up. "Potter should be here in a few minutes. I'll be over in the corner, disillusioned."

Snape took the time to rearrange his robes.

"I trust that met with your approval?" Snape flooked. "Or do you think I was too hard on the poor boy by making him miss his Quidditch game?"

"That was fine," Russell said. "Why would I mind your improving the odds of Ravenclaw winning the Cup?"

Snape was left speechless for a moment. Russell carried on, "While you couldn't use Legilimency on Potter this time because he was avoiding your eyes, I could. Think about this -- Malfoy was about to use the Cruciatus on Potter. Potter defended himself with a poorly thought-out response, but under the circumstances, a perfectly legal one. While the staff will still support your punishment as a charade, you had best inform them of **why** Potter was hexing Malfoy. It will sound better coming from you."

"But. . ."

"But what? But you are determined to save Malfoy, even if, by all rights, HE should be the one expelled? You are such a hypocrite, Severus."

"I will not tolerate much more of your interference, John," Snape warned.

"Severus, we are about equal in raw power. I have about twenty-five years more experience than you do. I may not know all the Dark curses you do, but then, I doubt if you know all the ones I know, either. In a straight duel, Dumbledore and little old Flitwick could probably take either of us, but in a real, dirty fight, don't think your little Death Eater torture sessions or your attacks on helpless, untrained civilians and children would help you all that much. How many wizards have you killed when they weren't already helpless, Severus? One? Two? Any? No, I thought not. I have fourteen such kills now."

"Oh, you count the Flint boys?"

"I do," Russell said. "The older one was sitting in a trap he had built for me, and the younger was in combat."

"I don't know what to think about you sometimes," Snape said, turning to go to the Staff Room.

"Sometimes I wish you didn't exist, and other times I wish there were a lot more wizards like you."

Thursday, May 22, 1997

Russell looked up from the stack of papers on his classroom desk. His Fifth and Seventh year students were starting to get nervous, as their exams would start in two weeks. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"May I speak with you privately, Professor?"

"Of course, come in." When she had done so, Russell cast a quick privacy spell. "What may I do for you?"

"I just wanted to thank you," Hermione said simply.

"For what?"

"Luna told me she went for you last night. I'm sure that Professor Snape and Harry would have, well, let's just say that things could have gone much worse than they did," Hermione said frankly.

"In the end, the results would have ended up much the same had I not intervened," Russell replied.

"However, the process might have been much more unpleasant."

"Yes, sir. And thank you for watching out for Harry. I hope the Headmaster allows me to tell him how much help you have been this year."

"I believe it likely he will allow it during the summer vacation," Russell agreed. "Was there something else?"

"I did think someone should mention that Malfoy was about to use an Unforgivable on Harry," Hermione said firmly. "It wasn't all Harry's fault."

"No, it wasn't," Russell agreed. "However, there was no proof of Malfoy's intentions."

"Why does he seem to get away with almost everything?" Hermione complained.

"I wish I could reassure you, but to tell you the truth, I've often made the same complaint. Still, your friend used a very Dark spell. I hope that missing the Quidditch game drives that home a bit to him."

Hermione nodded her understanding.

"He made two other errors," Russell added. Hermione looked up at him. "He used a spell he didn't understand, and he used a spell with too many syllables. Generally, you should never use a spell in a fight that has more than three syllables or one you don't know the consequences of."

Hermione's jaw fell open, then she said, "That's so simple, but no one ever mentioned it before."

"You'll all learn, if not this summer, then next year. Now, go tutor some Fifth years or something. I have to get these marked for tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

Friday, June 13, 1997

The next three and a half weeks swept past, as academics again took the forefront in the minds of most of the population of Hogwarts. Russell had few chances to talk with Granger or Lovegood, to observe Potter or Malfoy, or to question Dumbledore or Snape. He only had to go on three missions for the Order, none of which had any results.

Almost all the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were over by the afternoon of June 13, only a few were left for the following Monday. Although he was not phobic about 'Friday the 13th', Russell woke up feeling apprehensive and the feeling grew all day. He even resorted to using the Tarot cards in the afternoon, but the results were unclear, except they all predicted trouble in some form. Feeling a bit foolish, Russell added some items to his pockets he usually only carried when out in the field.

After dinner, Russell made his way to the smoking room, but decided he was not in the mood for enjoying a nice pipe or savor a good cigar. He opened the humidor containing his miscellaneous cigars, and dug down to the bottom, pulling out two small Italian cigars. These were strong and almost nasty.

They matched his mood, as he smoked and paced, trying to work out what was bothering him. It was just a few minutes before 9:00 when he felt a message from Hermione Granger on the Message Stone he had given her the previous autumn.

The only other time she had sent for him, she had distraught about the antics of Ron Weasley. This time, however, she was terrified. Russell tossed down the second cigar butt and hurried to find Granger, passing a rather drunk Professor Trelawney on the steps of the tower.

He found Granger, along with the two Weasleys, Longbottom, and Lovegood. He listened to Granger's explanation of what Potter had told her, and their plan to watch the Room of Requirement. "Good," he said, "Go. I'll check in with Professor McGonagall. Whenever the Headmaster leaves, she brings in some Order members and notifies a staff member." He thought. "Tonight would be Professor Flitwick on the first watch. So, go on. I'll tell them I stationed you at

the Room of Requirement, and if anyone tries to move you, hex 'em unless they have a password." He turned to Hermione. "You choose the password."

"'Harry Triumphant'," Hermione said firmly.

"Good enough. Go, already!" The students went. Russell went to track down McGonagall.

He found her some twenty minutes later, taking a turn around the castle. "Ah, John. Good evening. The Headmaster had to take one his little trips. . . ."

"This wasn't a 'little trip', Minerva. He and Harry Potter are on their way to strike a major blow against Voldemort."

McGonagall looked shocked. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. In addition, Potter had information that Malfoy might try something tonight, which the Headmaster partially discounted, being anxious to get away on the mission. Potter believes Malfoy has been plotting something in the so-called Room of Requirement. I have set five of his friends to watch the room. They will not leave without the password."

"Which is?"

"'Harry Triumphant'."

"Understandable. Very well. I will continue to patrol inside. When I run into Filius, I will send him for Severus. Remus, Nymphadora, and Bill Weasley should be here shortly as well. I will send someone out to join you in an hour or so. They will use the same password."

"Fine," Russell said, turning.

"John, what's wrong?"

"I don't know," he replied. "For some reason, I've felt anxious all day."

"Let's hope nothing happens here."

"Let's hope," he agreed.

Some forty minutes later, Russell stopped in his tracks, afraid, really afraid for the first time in many many years.

The Dark Mark was just appearing over the Astronomy Tower.

The Battle of Hogwarts had started.

Chapter XI

For several long seconds, John Russell stared at the Dark Mark floating above the Astronomy Tower. Then he moved into action.

The first thing he did was disillusion himself and start moving back to the castle. There were several entrances which only current staff members could use, and he made his way to the closest.

He did not rush in, but took the time to search for ambushes both before and after he opened the portal. He did not suspect any of the staff to be in open collusion with Voldemort, but there were a few he worried might be susceptible to the Imperius, and of course Snape might be forced to cover himself by sacrificing others.

Once inside, Russell was uncertain where to head next. He decided that to make for the common corridors linking the Room of Requirement and the Astronomy tower would be his best bet. First, however, he approached a portrait, and gave it a password and a command.

"That was not necessary," the young girl in the painting replied. "Professor McGonagall already issued the alarms for the library as well as for the common rooms."

"Thank you," Russell answered. That meant that none could move out of the common rooms, and any students in the library had been advised to stay put unless a staff member told them to move. Madam Pince should be locking down the library and moving any students back into the deep stacks and sending them off to their common rooms under the supervision of upper-year students if she deemed it safe. No one could enter a common room, even with the password, unless the guardians recognized the student and were certain there were no unauthorized people or students trying to enter. It was far from an ideal system, but hopefully it would be good enough.

"There seems to be a young person in very unbecoming black robes three cross-corridors and to your left," the girl added.

Which was the very route Russell would need to take. "Thank you again," Russell said. He moved very quietly down the corridor and took the third left. Sure enough, a man in full Death Eater garb stood guard about fifteen feet further down the corridor, trying ineffectively to hide behind a suit of armor. 'Thank goodness most wizards aren't strong enough to cast a spell while disillusioned,' Russell thought.

He moved past the guard and searched the next two cross-corridors, but saw nothing. He detected no one else in the corridor. He was sure he could detect anyone disillusioned or even under an invisibility cloak, but anyone under a runic invisibility shield would be undetectable without his casting reveal spells. He decided he could not leave an active Death Eater behind him.

Coming back to the Death Eater, Russell took a closer look and realized that he knew the man. Jason Talbot was a werewolf, bitten the summer after he had taken his O.W.L.s, after which he had dropped out of Hogwarts and then from wizarding society. Russell wished he had brought one of his pistols, especially the one that had a silencer.

While all spells worked on werewolves, most disabling and knock-out spells did not work for long on them. Russell felt he had little choice. He raised his wand above his head, pointing it downwards and silently made the incantation for a slicing hex as he circled his wand.

Talbot's head fell to the ground, and Russell gave the body a slight pull so that it didn't crash into the armor, and which also propelled him out of the way should any hexes be directed towards their location.

None did. Except for some slight noises coming from the bleeding body, there was silence.

Russell moved off.

Three corridors down, Russell came across a group of six Death Eaters, playing games with three young students, third year Hufflepuffs he did not recognize. Five of them were pushing the three students around with various minor hexes, playing keep-away from the sixth Death Eater, whom Russell realized was another werewolf.

Russell carefully and quietly pulled on a glove made of a metal alloy mesh -- nickel, silver, and platinum, with silver studs on the knuckles. The nickel gave it strength, the small amount of platinum made it slightly impervious to magic, and the silver was of course poisonous to werewolves. Russell concentrated all his power, and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" All six wands flew his way. "Run, children!" he shouted as he started to move, still disillusioned.

It took Russell over three minutes to disable the six Death Eaters, but all of the six were finally lying on the ground, moaning in pain and unable to move. The students had run as they had been told to do. Russell's disillusionment was gone, and he had far too much blood on him to reestablish it. He didn't have time to kill or do a good job on the six, so he petrified them and moved on, breathing hard from the exertion of the firefight.

He knew, however, there was a fight ahead of him. He could hear it further up the corridor. He forced himself into one of the large stairwells.

There, he found Professors Sprout, Vector, and Sinistra and Madam Hooch trading hexes with seven Death Eaters, who were being urged on by two werewolves without wands and in plain dress. The four staff members were keeping the force from making their way towards the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Towers and the entrance of Hufflepuff. Russell threw himself into their right flank.

Faced with superior force, if lesser numbers, on two sides, the nine attackers broke off after a few minutes, all injured except for one of the werewolves, who was killed when he was hit by hexes thrown by both Russell and Hooch. Russell was not happy to see the three of the attackers had fled back the way he had come. Those six he had petrified would be freed, although at least he had destroyed their wands.

"What do we do now?" Vector said.

"You seem to be in command to some degree, John," Sprout said.

"Or you are if most of that blood is someone else's," Hooch put in.

"I'm fine, other than being a bit winded," Russell said. He looked at Sinistra. "Do you think you could get to Slytherin from here safely? The students have to be a major concern."

"I can get there," Sinistra assured the group.

"Then I'm back to Hufflepuff," Sprout said.

"Ravenclaw," Vector agreed.

"All the way up to Gryffindor," Hooch said with a huff. "I should have brought my broom."

"And I'm off to find the main body of these bastards," Russell stated.

"Be careful," Vector said.

Russell shook his head. "It's too late for that. I just need to take out a lot more of them. Let's go." Russell was past running now. If he ran, he would be too winded to fight. Still, he did not walk slowly. Once he was near the base of the Astronomy Tower, Russell again heard the sound of a major fight. He hurried to the fight.

Russell got there and saw there was a mixture of staff, Order members, and students fighting a slightly larger group of Death Eaters. These seemed to be more skilled than the others he had run into so far. Russell drove a huge blond wizard away from the prone Neville Longbottom, and defended his ground. "Longbottom!" he called between his castings, "are there more up the Tower?"

"Yes, sir," Neville said a bit distractedly. The teen had obviously been well-hexed. "The entrance is hexed, sir. Only Death Eaters and Professor Snape have made it up the Tower."

At that moment, Russell was knocked aside as about five people stormed out of the Tower and into the battle. Russell threw another cutting hex at the last of the five, which caught the wizard right on the jugular. He was down and bleeding to death in seconds. No one stopped to help.

Suddenly, over the sounds of the fight, Russell heard Snape shout, "It's over, time to go!" and he saw Snape was then running after Draco Malfoy.

Russell could not give chase. Greyback was leaping towards Potter, and a second werewolf was following his leader. Potter took down Greyback for a second and Russell, his cutting hex powered by his now raging anger, sliced the second werewolf in half.

That shocked Russell for a split second. In that time, Greyback was back on his feet and coming close. "Pay back time, old man!" Greyback roared, trying to claw Russell.

Russell ducked the swing, and he managed to rake Greyback's shoulder with the sharp studs on his silver glove. Greyback howled, and took off on a run. The other Death Eaters were trying to disengage, and Russell and the others managed to stun three more before they took off.

"John. . . ." McGonagall started.

"No time," Russell said. "Lupin, Potter took off after Malfoy, and this bunch left after him. I can't catch up to help. Maybe you can."

"Right," Remus said, taking off on a run.

"Tonks!" Russell called out, "we need to secure these people!" He turned to McGonagall. "If Potter is back, where's the Headmaster?"

"I don't know," she acknowledged. "You and Tonks get things taken care of here. I don't know where the other staff members are."

"Sprout, Hooch, Vector, and Sinistra were holding a group off from the central staircase. After we drove them off, they each went towards one of the Houses."

"Right. Miss Weasley, Mister Longbottom. . . . Mister Longbottom, have you recovered enough to fight if necessary?"

"Yes, Professor," Neville said.

"Then you two go off to Professor Snape's office and see what happened to Professor Flitwick. Send anyone not involved in the fighting back to their House. Send or bring anyone else to the Infirmary. John, when you two have everyone secured, take any of our injured you find to the Infirmary."

"Right," Russell acknowledged.

"Bill. . . ." Ginny started. She took a hard, dry swallow and said, "That's Bill over there, bleeding."

"I'll see to him, Miss Weasley. I promise."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I'll track down Slughorn, and get him to contact his friends in the Ministry," McGonagall said.

"I'll also get as many Order members here as I can to help out."

"How is he?" Tonks asked nearly ten minutes later.

"I don't know," Russell said. "These look like human bites. . . ."

"That extensive?"

"Exactly. I suspect it was Greyback. He had a run in with a team of mine last autumn, and Bill out-dueled him easily. I suspect Greyback savaged him deliberately for revenge."

"I never heard that the bite of a werewolf was dangerous, other than when he was transformed," Tonks said, horrified.

"I hadn't either," Russell admitted, "but I can't heal these. I wouldn't put it past him to have bitten his cheek first, to mix his blood with the saliva."

"What do we do with their wounded?" Tonks asked.

"Keep 'em knocked out," Russell said with a shrug. "If you try to help any one of them, another might get the drop on you. I can't stay and help you."

"Right," Tonks said. "I'll be up in the Infirmary as soon as I'm relieved."

After leaving Bill Weasley in the Infirmary, Russell moved off to secure the castle as best he could. He would be up all night, but as more Order people and aurors showed up, the task would be made easier.

Saturday, June 14, 1997
4:27 a.m.

"John?"

Russell looked up and nodded, "Alastor. Is it true?"

There was no need to ask for the question to be clarified. "It is. Potter saw Snape kill Albus."

"I never would have thought it possible," Russell admitted. "So what happens now?"

"The rest of the school year is over. Any student whose parents want to can pick them up any time after Ten this morning. Albus' funeral was going to be Tuesday, but the Ministry is putting it off until Thursday, so they can put on a better show, the. . . ."

"Bastards!" Russell and Moody said together.

"Anyway, you may consider yourself relieved," Moody said. "Get some sleep."

"I am exhausted, but I don't think I'll sleep well at all," Russell admitted.

"How many did you kill?" Moody asked.

"I know I killed three, two directly and one I left injured died as well. I also think one that Hooch and I double-hexed died, too."

"I wish they felt half the regret we do when we kill," Moody growled.

"If they did, they wouldn't be following that lunatic."

"Good point," Moody agreed. "I'll have copies of all the reports on your desk as they are finished."

"Thank you, Alastor," Russell said, and he made his way to his rooms for a long shower and some sleep.

"Come in!" Russell called that evening right before dinner. He was not surprised to see Hermione Granger come in.

"Are you terribly busy, sir?" she asked.

"Busy, but not terribly busy," Russell told her.

"It's time I told you everything I know," she said.

"And I imagine I'll be speaking with your friend after the funeral," Russell said to her in return.

Wednesday, June 18, 1997

The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a very large place. There are towers and turrets, corridors and secret passageways. There are rooms which are hidden, and rooms which have just plain been forgotten, some in obvious places and some off corridors which are so far off the beaten path that they have barely been set foot in since a group calling themselves the Marauders had mapped most of the castle in the 1970s.

This was one such room, mid-way up what most students now called the 'divination tower,' unoccupied except by paintings and one fairly eccentric divination teacher. This room had a lovely view out of two windows looking towards the northwest, overlooking the Forbidden Forest. There were two stuffed chairs (one a rocker) and a small set of shelves. Every evening at 8:00, one staff member climbed the stairs to indulge in his two vices.

Never again would the Headmaster join him. Never again would the last year's Defense professor, once the Potions professor, join him. John Russell, the Runes professor, looking at least five years older than he had the previous June, sat and smoked his favorite pipe.

Tomorrow would be a difficult day, and a difficult war lay ahead.