

The Legends & the Stooges of Fate

By

DrT

Friday, May 22, 1998

Severus Snape was frightened.

Snape had long played a dangerous game, albeit one he often enjoyed. Other than himself, only one person had known what game was even being played, and even Dumbledore had confessed he had not always been certain.

Snape was something of a sadist, although he did not care for causing physical pain. He did enjoy belittling those weaker than himself, and until this moment, he had met only two whom he had considered truly stronger than himself, the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore.

He had joined the Dark Lord the summer before his Seventh year, driven in part because he had wanted to fit into the Pure-Blood ideals of Slytherin and in part out the rage he had felt when Sirius Black had not been punished for nearly getting him killed or bitten by a werewolf. The Dark Lord had seemed to appreciate a Half-blood as talented and as devoted to the Old Ideals as Severus Snape. The wooing of Snape had been seductive in every manner other than the sexual, and had that been needed, the Dark Lord would have no doubt supplied whatever follower, or a Muggle or magical enemy, who had come close to Snape's desires.

Once Snape had taken the Mark, however, all that had ended. The slightest deviation from the party line, the slightest hesitation, brought torture. That had disillusioned Snape quickly with the ideals of his Master and the Death Eaters.

That disillusionment had set Snape to thinking, and to studying the magical world outside of Britain and the Muggle world in general. Snape had quickly come to a dismaying realization:

Pure-Bloods could not win, at least not by force.

There were only 30,000 magical people in Britain and Ireland -- and 62,000,000 Muggles. There were something like 6,600,000,000 Muggles in the world at the time by most counts, and less than 4,500,000 magical people, a fifth of them in North America, which was making noises about coming into the fight against his Master. There were magical cultures with access to magic Snape didn't even have names for, and the Muggles of the late 1970s seemed poised ready to destroy whole cities with technologies Snape could not pretend to understand.

Therefore, Snape had finally gone to meet the one person who might save him. Albus Dumbledore. He had played a dangerous game for almost two years, when the Dark Lord had somehow been defeated by a toddler.

Dumbledore had kept his promises, and not only kept Snape out of Azkaban but even managed to get him a job at Hogwarts, when few well-paying positions were open to him.

Snape had been appalled when he learned the outlines of the Prophecy but had stayed at Hogwarts despite loathing the interactions with the students. He had never met any student under a Sixth year who he wouldn't have preferred cursing to teaching. A few of the Sixth and Seventh years had at least been almost tolerable.

The coming of the Boy to Hogwarts had made things even worse. True, he owed a Life Debt to James Potter and had detested Black far more than Potter or even Lupin. True, Lily Evans had been the only student outside a few Slytherins he had not abhorred in his years as a student -- she may have been a Mudblood, but she had striven to understand the Magical world, especially Potions, as

opposed to those like Granger and most Ravenclaws who, Snape believed, merely parroted back what they had read. Still, there was something about the Boy that made Severus Snape react almost mindlessly -- a fact that made Snape hate the Boy all the more.

Even learning that the Boy had been tortured and not spoiled while growing up did not change how Snape reacted, much to his own puzzlement the few times he had considered his own reactions. Normally, Snape had a modicum of respect for those who had fought back from their oppressive families and become independent, as he had himself.

In the Boy, it merely fed Snape's hate to know that the Boy had succeeded in dealing with the abuse far better than Snape had.

Snape had been startled towards the end of the Triwizard Tournament when the Headmaster had outlined a series of possible paths. Each was audacious, but Snape had been impressed. Despite the high risks to Dumbledore and especially to Snape, there was a higher probability that not only would the Dark Lord end up dead but that the Boy would end up dying with him. In fact, there was no way that the Boy could survive Voldemort. Should the Dark Lord survive, he should be so weakened that a Muggle could kill him by hand, if unprotected by any Death Eaters.

Snape liked those alternatives.

The next two years played themselves out, and even if there were a few more casualties than expected, that did not bother Snape, as he had not been one of them. He had had to pretend to kill Dumbledore, but he had pulled that off with greater ease than he had fooled Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange with a faux oath.

Since then, Snape had managed to steer Voldemort into attacking magical targets rather than Muggle -- neither he nor Dumbledore wanted the Muggles to start launching missiles at magical targets. Snape had been shocked to learn that Muggles had learned the basics of tracking magic with their electronics. Should they refine it, the magical world would be destroyed.

The targets had also been confined to Britain, with a few in Ireland. The North Americans had rallied the rest of the world, and the first attack outside of the British Isles would bring a full-fledged attack from the rest of the magical world.

Even Snape had been slightly surprised when the British Ministry, wounded and incompetent, had refused the help offered to them by the rest of the world. The British magical community had always considered itself apart and superior from the rest of the world, while the world thought the British arrogant and basically backwards. The Ministry had proved the outside world right.

Perhaps it had helped that most of the targets between July and October 1997 had been against the Order of the Phoenix rather than the Ministry or the general population. The Weasley- Delacour wedding in July had been a massacre, and the destruction of Grimmauld Place in August had gutted much of what had been left of the organization. A large number of the Order members had been picked off by Halloween.

Yet somehow, the Boy had survived it all. He had somehow disappeared from the Weasley Massacre, as had the tortured and maimed Granger (most of the torture done by Snape himself and Draco Malfoy), and only one crippled twin remained of the once- large Weasley family. Despite his doubts, even Snape was wondering if maybe there was something to that stupid Prophecy, as Potter had still not been caught by Halloween.

Then, on Saturday, November 1, the Dark Lord had launched a major attack on Hogsmeade. The Dark Lord had led in thirty Death Eaters, his few giants, and over a hundred dementors. They had killed a number of villagers and students on their Hogsmeade weekend.

And then something had destroyed all of the Dark Lord's forces in on the attack. None of the student or village survivors knew what had happened. They had some vague memories of powerful white spells, and that was it. Only the Dark Lord had come back from his side, and had said nothing about what had happened.

It had taken him three months to recover from his injuries.

From mid-November through this night, there had been low-level ambushes from both sides, or perhaps from all three sides, as it was clear that a new player had entered the game. This new player had taken out the remaining dementors and any Death Eaters associated with them, most of the Dark Lord's spies within the Ministry, and even a few members of the Ministry who were dark although not on the Dark Lord's side.

The bled-out body of Delores Umbridge, who had had the words 'LAIR' and 'TRAITOR' cut deep into her body over a thousand times, had been the most infamous to the general population. For the Death Eaters, it had been the remains of Draco and Lucius Malfoy and then a few days later the three Lestranges, all five reduced to their heads and gutted torsos, but somehow still alive if unable to speak -- for a few hours.

Whatever the new force was, it was led by someone as ruthless as he was powerful.

The Dark Lord had been planning a new assault on the Ministry itself these past three months. Snape was part of the second team, which would follow the main assault team and try to liberate items from the Department of Mysteries. The team had been meeting as a whole for the first time, twenty-four Death Eaters, when the assault had come just three minutes before.

It had been fast, furious, and over-whelming. The floo had been cut off, and there was not only an anti-apparation ward in place but also an anti-portkey ward, which was thought to be impossible to produce in under a week of very noticeable hard work.

In less than three minutes, twenty-three of the Death Eaters were dead or incapacitated. Only Snape had been left standing, looking at who had attacked such a large number. He was actually quaking in fear.

It was the Boy.

The Boy was still on the short side, perhaps five foot eight, and very slender. His face was no longer that of a teen, but of a worn, weary-although-not-tired, man. His eyes blazed with power.

Although there was a wand in the wand holster on his belt, Potter also had a sword sheathed on his back and carried, of all things, a staff. It was over five feet long and had a worn and tarnished silver ferule on the narrow bottom and a large emerald at the top, which pulsed between its native dark color and the same bright green of the Boy's eyes.

Potter looked at Snape, and the jaded spy shivered again in fear. "Hello, Snivellus," Potter said. "I've been looking for you."

Snape managed to recover enough to say, "You don't know what's going on, Potter." He had meant it to be a powerful statement, but it came out like a bleat for mercy.

"I know you faked the Headmaster's death. I know you and he have been looking for three of the four Horcruxes, and have found and destroyed Hufflepuff's cup and Ravenclaw's spellbook. I know he thinks Voldemort accidentally turned me into the sixth Horcrux, and therefore when Voldemort kills me he will be actually leading himself towards his own downfall." Snape's eyes went wide. "I also know Dumbledore was wrong about that. I know you have two portkeys in your respective front pockets, one to Dumbledore and one to Voldemort, right and left pocket respectively. I also know that when I'm done here, we're going visiting. Oh, and I should also say that you can go ahead and pick up your wand or take out either of the two spares you have concealed on you. I've already burnt out their cores. They are now very nice sticks."

Snape shook his spare wand from its holster on his forearm and sent off a stunner, all in one clean motion.

Nothing happened.

"I told you," Harry said as he sorted the bodies into two piles (the dead and the dying) while piling their wands up into a third pile. "And don't be tedious, demanding explanations. I'll explain to Dumbledork and you may listen in."

Snape watched stunned as the Boy -- no, as Potter -- wandlessly extracted a wand from the pile and moved it to his hand, his fingers around it, but not actually touching it. Potter pointed the wand at the dying Death Eaters. "Avada Kedavra," he whispered regretfully. And with that, they expired.

With a snap of his fingers, Potter made the other wands disappear and he put the wand he had used away in a pocket. With a sweep of his left hand, the two piles of bodies moved together. He snapped his fingers again, then pointed at the bodies and said the triggering phrase for the portkey to Voldemort, which the other team leader had as well as Snape, and the pile disappeared.

"That should put Tommy into a bad mood," Potter said. He walked over to the Snape, grabbed his arm and triggered the portkey to Dumbledore before Snape realized that he should have done so before Potter and reached him, as the portkey ward was obviously down.

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore said, standing and turning from the over-loaded desk in his hide-away towards the sound. "What might be. . . . Harry?"

With a wave, Snape was thrown over to Dumbledore's feet. "Surprise," Harry said. He waved his staff, burning out Dumbledore's wand, although the elderly wizard did not know that. "I thought it was finally time to stop by and say hello and have a little talk with the pair of you."

"How wonderful," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling.

"Oh, and that little trick where you exude an aura of -- how was it Hermione described it? Oh, right -- an aura of good fellowship hidden under a compulsion charm. Anyway, it doesn't work on me. You might also want to know that I've burned out your wand and am well able to defend myself against your wandless magic."

Dumbledore looked as stunned as Snape had felt. He quickly recovered and said, "I am pleased to know you, and I presume Miss Granger, are well."

"I am physically very well," Harry said. "Hermione was severely crippled in the attack on the Burrow you had Snape here encourage old Moldishorts to launch. Her left arm will never be whole and she only has about eighty percent use of her left hand, and will walk with a major limp the rest of her life, but she has recovered from all the cuts Malfoy and Snake here inflicted on her. To answer your unasked questions about that, I was knocked out early on in the attack. Neville's grandmother was worried, and had sent him with an illegal portkey. He saved myself, Hermione, and Luna. As Snivellus here murdered Hermione's parents that very evening, no one had yet had time to notify them where she was."

"Ah. . . ."

"Do you remember the Prophecy? Oh, of course you do," Harry said, pressing on. "The thing said 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches'. Not 'the one who will have the power'." Dumbledore and Snape looked at Harry, puzzled. "Well, even Hermione didn't get it until late August. I was born with the power to 'vanquish' Voldemort. Not born with the potential to destroy him, but born with the power to vanquish him. And I did. Vanquish him, I mean. It had nothing to do with my mother's sacrifice, although that did help me destroy his host during my First year."

The pair still looked puzzled. "Don't you see the two major things that meant? No? How much potential must I have if I was born with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord, as opposed to with the potential?" Now the two wizards looked worried. "Now you're on you're the way. He Marked me as his equal, which gained me Parseltongue but actually bound my power to be merely equal his at that point. That's why my magic was so erratic. It didn't develop naturally. It was always easier to something spectacular, like a Patronus that drove away over a hundred dementors in my Third year, than summons a broom or levitate a needle. I was basically learning how to sew silk with a knife."

Harry started pacing, but his attention didn't stray from the two wizards. "I was so angry after I woke up at Longbottom Manor," Harry said. "The magic was pouring off me at one point just before I woke up. Madam Longbottom called in a specialist from the Alps, someone from an old coven. With her help, I learned to take the blocks off my magic. And if you make another move towards that revolver in your top drawer, Dumbledick, I'll kill you both now."

Dumbledore moved a few inches further from the hidden weapon.

"Hermione, Neville, Luna, and I sat down and thought things through. In one chain of thought, we knew that there were six Horcruxes. Two, the diary and ring, were destroyed. That bloody locket was in a drawer at Grimmauld Place. Ginny figured that out the night before she died. If you had shown up to the wedding, we would have told you. I snuck in and took it two days before you got Voodlemart to destroy Grimmauld Place. Three down. I had a strong feeling that I should go to Godric's Hollow, and found that the night Voldemort was disembodied, he accidentally created the Horcrux he was trying to make in any case -- a knife belonging to Gryffindor." Here Dumbledore looked shocked.

"That's right, it wasn't me, it was a knife not me, you dumb fuck," Harry spat. "The soul fragment went through me, creating this scar, but the soul fragment was inside the knife. Even before we realized that, Hermione wondered why you would think Riddle would be stupid enough to put part of his soul into any living being. When the snake died, even if it lived twice as long as the basilisk, that piece would still be gone and even a few thousand years is far short of immortality."

"You don't believe that the soul fragment would keep the snake alive?" Dumbledore asked.

"Who could be that stupid?" Harry demanded, making Dumbledore wince. "A soul might be immortal, but in a body it is subject to that body." Seeing Dumbledore wasn't going to say anything at that point, Harry went on, "You, we found out, discovered and destroyed another Horcrux and thought that I was the sixth."

"How. . . ."

"I am hardly going to tell you how we've been spying on you, and the grease ball here can tell you, since he's been trying, that Legilimency won't work." Harry informed Dumbledore. He smiled nastily. "Amazing, with proper instruction, it took me three days to learn Occlumency."

"That's when everything fell into place," he said. "When I found out you thought I was a Horcrux, I mean. You wanted me to vanquish Voldemort, which I did at fifteen months. Then you wanted me to die, preferably at Voldemort's hands, thinking that would get rid of the Horcrux you thought was inside me and finish fulfilling the stupid Prophecy. That's why I was sent to live with the Dursleys and then you just left me there to just suffer the abuse. Why you allowed this prick to abuse and even mentally rape me. Why you set things up for me to confront Voldemort over the Sorcerer's Stone, why you allowed the basilisk to roam the halls, why you allowed Barty Crouch to plant my name into the Goblet of Fire. You wanted me to die."

Dumbledore had been inching back towards the gun. Harry summoned it and then vanished it.

"Naughty, naughty," Harry said. "To get back to my story, you might be wondering why we knew you were alive." Harry held his left arm up, and Fawkes blazed into being. The bird glared at Dumbledore and squawked angrily.

"I don't understand," Dumbledore protested. "Phoenixes rarely bond, and when they do, they only bond once!"

"Fawkes wasn't mourning for your life at your fake funeral," Harry said relentlessly, "he was mourning for your soul. He knew you had gone Dark, which broke the bond, leaving him free to come bond with someone else. He healed me and saved Hermione's life."

"Why would he bond with you, considering I just saw you murder twenty-three people?" Snape managed to say.

"I fought and executed twenty-three people," Harry corrected. "And Fawkes here has bonded with Luna, not me. Back to the main story, it took us all of two weeks to locate you after that, and it was easy to spy on you." They had used Harry's money to rent and buy Muggle eavesdropping equipment, which by-passed the magical wards. "While Neville and Luna kept an eye on you, I trained and Hermione thought. I also retrieved the locket and the knife, destroying them. When we learned Snape told you about the planned Hogsmeade attack, I showed up. I wish I could have done more, faster, but all-in-all I did a decent job. Since you were still copying Ravenclaw's spell book, I couldn't kill the Dork Lord, so I simply wounded him and sent him away."

Snape still could not believe it. "You mean that you. . . !"

"Yes, I, myself, am the so-called 'third force', at least when it comes to actual fighting," Harry said. "I've taken out most of the known corrupt officials in what's left of the Ministry and cut down on the Dank Lord's forces as much as I could. Oh, Strike Force Delta and Alpha? The ones he has said

are awaiting to attack in Ireland? Those Death Eaters have actually all been dead for weeks, as are those on 'Intelligence Missions'. I took out Beta last night and the Ministry Strike Force Gamma tonight, just before I took your team out. In fact, after tonight, I believe he just has his snake and three Death Eaters: you, Pettigrew, and that idiot Zach Smith at Hogwarts."

At this point, Fawkes squawked and flew off in a burst of flame.

"And what now?" Dumbledore asked.

"And now it's time to end this farce," Harry said.

"Are you certain there is not even the trace of Voldemort's actual soul inside of you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"I am, and so are the others we've consulted with," Harry answered. "You know, people who actually know something about soul magic. Something I bet you never bothered doing."

Dumbledore could say nothing to that, for it was true.

"Now what?" Snape asked.

"Avada Kedavra," Harry whispered. It was only as Dumbledore fell to the floor that Snape noticed that Potter was again in control, although not actually touching, a wand with his left hand. He tossed the wand on the floor and with a snap of his fingers it was burned to ashes.

"You . . . you killed him!" Snape exclaimed.

"According to all the future history books, YOU killed him last June," Harry said. The emerald on the tip of the Harry's staff glowed brightly, and the body turned to ashes and then disappeared.

"Where. . . ?"

"Why to the tomb at Hogwarts," Harry said. "Where else?"

"What now?" Snape demanded.

Harry smiled and triggered Snape's other portkey, delivering him to Voldemort. Harry waited spent two minutes destroying Dumbledore's hide-away, then he hooked his staff over his shoulder, unsheathed the Sword of Gryffindor, and followed the magical trail.

Snape was writhing on the floor of a dank and moldy dungeon, as Voldemort applied the Cruciatius. Voldemort did not notice Harry appearing behind him, and Harry did not bother challenging, taunting, or otherwise making his presence known. Instead, he cut Voldemort's head off with one chop, and then swirled and did the same to Nagini.

Harry then froze Snape and Pettigrew. He tidied up the dungeon a bit, making certain the bodies were in a neat pile, and then he cast the Dark Mark on Snape's. Harry had no idea how to fine tune the casting to one particular Death Eater, and wouldn't have even if he knew how. He knew that Smith was still at Hogwarts, but also knew he and his friends might have missed others. All surviving Death Eaters should answer the call he put out.

"No use having you two around," Harry said. "I should make this slow and painful, but I'm not into torture, so I'll just make things slow." With that, he removed Wormtail's silver hand and Snape's left hand, and let them bleed silently to death.

Harry dusted Voldemort's throne and sat down to wait.

Zach Smith arrived thirty-five minutes later. Three others had proceeded him and two others came in with him. Harry petrified the new arrivals as soon as each had shown up. After a further hour, he decided there were no others, at least none likely to show.

"As you can see," Harry said, "your Master is dead. You six seem to be all that are left. You three, I don't know. You three, I know. Zach Smith, Millicent Bulstrode, and, I must say it's damn difficult to believe, Hannah Abbott. Any excuses, Hannah?" Harry took her wand and unfroze her.

"No excuses," Hannah said, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I was there when they raped and then tortured Susan almost to death. They raped me, Smith here and Malfoy taking the lead. They gave me the choice, kill Susan and join them, or let them finish her torture and then start off on me. I gave in, Harry. I was weak, and I gave in, and I've been as bad as they are since."

Harry re-petrified Hannah and gave each of the other five a chance to excuse themselves. They all begged for mercy, they all claimed they had been forced to join in, but only Hannah had despised her own weakness, only Hannah, Harry could sense, truly felt guilt and remorse for their actions, as opposed to feeling bad about being caught.

Therefore, Harry gave judgement. "You five are weak, nasty, bigoted, and dark. Avada Kedavra." The five collapsed. Harry then unpetrified Hannah and handed her back her wand. "You've killed before," Harry said.

Still crying, Hannah nodded.

"Does anyone alive, other than me, know you were a Death Eater?"

"Don't think so," Hannah managed to say.

After a long pause, "Then maybe you should kill me," Harry said softly.

"What?" That made Hannah stop crying

"Maybe you should kill me," Harry repeated. "I'm too powerful to live. I'm not evil, but I've killed dozens of people. Hell, I've killed over sixty people in the last twenty-four hours. I don't tolerate fools any more. I'm dangerous. You could simply kill me, and then try to live with what you did since you ended Susan's suffering."

Hannah looked at Harry oddly. "I could see Susan's condition in your mind," Harry said. "Killing her was a mercy. She wouldn't have lived long, even with medical treatment, and each breath would have been torture. You killed her quickly. Then you should have turned your wand on yourself or killed one of the Death Eaters and made them kill you."

"You're right about me," Hannah managed to agree as she stopped herself from crying again, "and

since you're apparently in charge of the so-called 'third force'. . . ."

"Except for some intelligence gathering, I am the entire third force," Harry said.

"Then you are powerful," Hannah agreed. "I'm sure what's left of the Ministry would happily pin a medal on you and then poison you. Still, if I killed you, they'd tear me apart. And don't say they wouldn't find out. They'll track down. . . ."

"You seem to be the last Death Eater," Harry said. "At least no more answered the final summons. And I admit, I could only check about a fifth of those I killed, but you were the only one who showed anything like true guilt and remorse over your actions as a Death Eater, as opposed to just feeling guilty about being caught." That had been true even of Dumbledore, the only non-Death Eater Harry had directly killed.

"That doesn't mean I should be forgiven," Hannah argued.

"True, but it does mean you're the only one who might deserve it," Harry argued.

"Well, killing you won't bring me closer to any possible redemption," Hannah argued back, "nor would your using me for your suicide help yours."

That rocked Harry, and made him think. "You're right," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Now, since I don't think you're going to kill me, and you have no right to arrest me, what next?" Harry looked confused. "Well, should I go tell the Ministry what happened and then grovel for my life?"

"Give me your arm," Harry said.

Hannah knew which one he meant. As soon as he touched the Dark Mark, it sizzled and disappeared. Hannah just managed not to scream.

"It's still there," Harry said. "It will always be there. But I doubt if anyone will know how to raise it, other than me, and if I do, please, kill me."

"Alright," Hannah agreed in a very shaky voice.

"You're acting as a prefect?" Harry asked, pointing at her badge. Hannah nodded. "Then come along. I'll take you back to Hogwarts, where I'll tell the Headmistress that as best I can determine, all the Death Eaters are dead and that I saved you after you'd been kidnapped by Smith. You don't owe me anything, Hannah, but you owe all those dead and tortured since Susan something. You had better at least live a good life from here on out."

Hannah squeaked as Harry grabbed her and she found they were just outside the wards of Hogwarts. "Come on," Harry said.

"And you," Hannah asked, "what do you do?"

"Luna and I are going away, leaving this life," Harry said. "Asking you to kill me was just a moment of weakness. Neville and Hermione are trying to decide if they want to come with us or stay. My guess is they'll come with us. With luck, the regular magical world will never hear from us again." He glared at Hannah. "Let's hope not, anyway. And I hope you don't, either."

Hannah nodded her understanding.

Saturday, May 23, 2048
Hogwarts

Four figures approached the gates of Hogwarts, one subtly supported by the two taller figures. "It's been so long," the supported figure said wistfully.

"It has," the leader of the group said.

They slowly approached the great doors. "I don't see many students," the other male said. "Must be a Hogsmeade weekend."

"Either that or they're chasing fwoopers," the fourth member said. The other three looked at her affectionately. "If the nargle infestation grew, they might have come here to feed!" she protested.

"Yes, dear," the leader said, giving her a quick hug. Luna's whimsy had been very hit-and-miss over the years. Somehow, it seemed nice to hear it again in this setting.

As they approached the great doors to the entrance hall, they swung open and a slightly stout woman stood in their way.

"Professor Sprout?" the heftier man asked.

"I am Headmistress Sprout," she acknowledged. "Old students, I presume?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the leader said. "We've been out of the country for decades. We apologize if visitors are no longer allowed on weekends."

"It is more usual to make an appointment," the Headmistress stated.

"I take Professor McGonagall retired some time ago?"

"She retired from being Headmistress almost forty years ago," Sprout acknowledged. "She is still teaching Transfiguration."

"Anyone else we might know from our time here in the Nineties?"

Sprout narrowed her eyes, realizing these four were under glamours. She wasn't worried, as they could not enter without her permission. "Professors McGonagall, Vector, Sinistra, Hagrid, and of course Binns are still with us as is Madam Pomfrey. Professor Justin Finch-Fletchley teaches Muggle Studies and Hannah Finch-Fletchley teaches Charms. Professor Weasley teaches Potions."

"George teaches Potions?"

"Actually, he's never said which twin survived," Sprout admitted.

The leader canceled the glamours and Sprout gasped. Harry restored them and said, "Perhaps we can meet with any of those folks not in Hogsmeade?"

Sprout thought a moment, then said, "Only Justin is in Hogsmeade from the group that you would know. Shall we go to my office?"

Harry shook his head. "No place with portraits. How about the Room of Requirement?"

"We have not been able to access that since you dropped Hannah off," Sprout said in a reproving voice.

"All you had to do was ask a house elf to show you, personally, the entrance," Harry said. "Granted, they wouldn't volunteer the information unless they heard you ask about it."

Sprout rolled her eyes. "Of course. We should have suspected it would be something as obvious as that. Well," she stated, "come in. You four should remember the way. I'll gather up the troops and you may surprise them."

The quartet was sitting in a room not totally unlike the Gryffindor common room as they remembered it, although the seating was arranged so that the quartet sat on two loveseats so they could face the various staff members. They heard George say as the door opened, "You mean you finally figured out how to get in here?"

"It turns out, all we needed to do was ask any house elf," Sprout said as she walked in. "Our visitors told me."

"Visitors?" McGonagall demanded. The group glared at the seated quartet. Harry snapped his fingers, and their glamours disappeared.

The staff members stared in shock.

"Did we surprise you, George?" Hermione asked.

Leaning ponderously on a walking stick, George sat heavily in a chair. "I must say, you have."

"So, you are George," McGonagall growled.

George retorted. "Physically, yes. In other ways, I am both Fred and George, and I will always answer to both." Most of the people shook their heads at that, partially understanding.

"I suppose you expect some sort of heroes' welcome," Sinistra stated.

"If we wanted to be thought of as heroes," Neville said simply, "we would have stayed."

Sinistra looked abashed. "True. I apologize." She glared at the quartet. "I don't know if anyone else would tell you this, so I will. You may have had excellent reasons for leaving when and as you did, but you left quite a mess."

"Did we?" Hermione asked. "I wouldn't dispute there was a mess, but why think WE were responsible? Did we corrupt the Ministry? Did we undermine just about every institution in Britain, other than Gringotts? No, there was a mess, which we did not help clean up. We helped Harry do what he was forced to do -- he dealt with Voldemort and his Death Eaters and some of Voldemort's major unmarked followers, most of them in the Ministry and media."

"Dumbledore tried to help after he defeated Grindelwald," Harry said quietly. "He was mostly ignored. He ended up trying to influence the wizarding world so indirectly he that became ineffectual, and unable and unwilling to intervene directly. I know if I tried to do the same, I would have been worse at it than he was. I'm not about to try to make myself all-powerful, or even all-influential. I'd be rightly overthrown, if most likely for all the wrong reasons. That left leaving, so that everyone would know from the beginning that you needed to do it right and that it was all your responsibility. I couldn't be your crutch."

"You might be right," Sinistra said, "but people won't like believing it."

Harry shrugged. "Popular opinion has always proven itself fickle, and besides, we'll be gone in a few hours."

"You will?" George asked sadly.

"Afraid so," Neville said.

"I made them come," Hermione said. "I'm dying, and I wanted to see Hogwarts one last time."

"So young!" several exclaimed.

"May I ask why?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"I should have died at the wedding," Hermione said. "I pulled through because of Fawkes' tears and Harry raw power. I've been living on borrowed time, on borrowed magic, ever since. My active magic has just about disappeared. My liver and spleen are losing function, and I am slightly anemic at the moment, despite being on the full medical treatments."

"I suppose you can't tell us much about where you have been," McGonagall said, conjuring a large handkerchief for Hagrid, who was quietly crying. The half-giant was not the only one with tears.

"Not really, no," Harry agreed. "We look different than ourselves, and from the glamours you saw. We're happy, or we were until Hermione's health started to fail. And we're asking you all to keep that quiet."

"We will," Sinistra said, knowing that she would be considered the weak link amongst the group.

"I take it you've been to both first-rate healers and even Muggle specialists," Pomfrey inquired.

Hermione nodded. "I might be able to live a bit longer if I could have a Muggle liver transplant, but any magical treatment to replace the liver would also be just as affected by the hexes on my system. They are ingrained in my body."

"Her body was in a sort of balance," Harry started to explain.

"You must have been caught in the back-wash of at least one killing curse," Pomfrey said.

"Besides all the other injuries and hexes, yes, I was caught in the back-wash of at least six killing curses," Hermione said. "My body absorbed part of the curses, and not even Harry's power could completely flush them out."

"It's a tribute that you even lived a month, let alone more than fifty years," Pomfrey agreed.

It was clear the group, even Pomfrey, thought Hermione's death was close, rather than being at least two years in the future. None of the quartet bothered correcting her, as that would help keep their cover-lives secret when they returned to British Columbia.

Hermione turned to McGonagall. "I remembered your saying that this would be the year you planned on retiring," she said. "I did want to say goodbye to you, and we thought this would be the best time to drop in."

"We can't tell you much about us, other than we're happy," Neville said.

"But it would be nice to hear about all of you," Luna added before Neville could continue his statement. They ended up staying the afternoon and into the evening. The students were shocked to see that Harry Potter was a real person, and that kept any of them from realizing that Hermione was ailing.

Hannah took Harry aside just before dinner that evening. "Yes?" Harry asked.

"Is there anything you want to ask me, Harry?" Hannah asked.

"I know you've done good work here, Hannah," Harry said.

"I still feel dirty," Hannah replied. "I can never fully redeem myself, can I?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't see why not," he answered. "But no, you'll never really feel clean. I'll never feel clean. We did awful things, Hannah."

"I think I was worse," she retorted.

"Probably so," Harry agreed. "All we can do is the best we can."

"Harry, I've written a tell-all book," she said.

"And?"

"It won't come out until at least ten years after I die. I still feel dirty, but at least I washed some of the dirt off."

"Why ten years?" Harry asked.

"It would hurt Justin, and Hogwarts, more if it comes out while I'm still alive. Actually, it can come out after you die, too, if you survive me."

"No," Harry said. "You see to your soul, I'll see to mine. I will tell the others, so if you die before us they can be prepared."

"You never told them?"

Harry shook his head. "It wasn't mine to share."

"Thank you for giving me my life back, Harry," Hannah said. "I didn't deserve it, but I hope I

haven't disappointed you since you spared me."

"In a sense, you rather proved both Dumbledore and myself right," Harry said. "He always hoped that evil could be redeemed, he just never understood that evil couldn't just renounce evil, like a bad habit or even a drug. Evil has to first truly understand that it is evil, and be sickened by it. You were sick of it from the start, just too scared to end it. And then you have to understand that the evil is part of you. You were the only Death Eater who knew that you had chosen wrong, and who just needed a chance."

"And if I had failed with my chance?" Hannah asked.

"I didn't feel you were going to go around killing people, Hannah," Harry answered. "We both have to live with what we did in those months."

"The difference is, I never killed anyone who wasn't an innocent," Hannah said. "Did you ever torture anyone?"

"I did let Snape and Pettigrew slowly bleed to death," Harry answered. "There are many worse ways to die, but that doesn't make it a good one."

"Trust me," Hannah said, "that doesn't come close. Do you think my victims can forgive me?"

"I think so," Harry answered. "If you need to hear it, I forgive you, for what little that means."

The four visitors left late that night, one already asleep. So far as anyone could tell, they were never seen in Britain again.