

Triwizard Redoux

by

DrT

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Chapter I

Hermione Granger was a very worried young woman. In just a few hours, her best friend, in some ways her only friend, was going to be competing in the First Task of the first Triwizard Tournament to be held in many decades. She had no idea what he might be facing, and she had had little contact with Harry for over the last week. Today was a Tuesday, and she had last really spoken to him a week before the previous Friday.

Harry had seemed fevered and weak that morning, and had told her he needed to talk with Dumbledore. She had been startled when Harry had accepted her help in getting to Dumbledore's office, although she had had to stay down in the corridor during the half hour or so Harry had stayed with the Headmaster. Supporting Harry's weight, an arm around his waist and his around hers, had made Hermione realize just how small a person Harry was physically. Although generally fairly quiet, his strength of character was so great that he always seemed a bit larger than life.

Dumbledore had been very solemn when he had helped Harry down to her. "Mister Potter has come to me with a reasonable request, although one which might stir up some confusion. I am releasing him from classes from now until the day after the First Task. I know you will allow him access to your class notes?"

Hermione had blinked, then said, "Of course, Headmaster."

"I know you do not share Divination with him, but I believe Mister Potter will be able to make up that work fairly easily. Now, you are not to tell anyone how to contact your friend here. Only you will have any access to him, and that will be very limited. You are not to meet with him, but send messages through the house elf, Dobby. He has been working at Hogwarts for a few weeks, and will be cleaning your room every night. Leave any class notes and other correspondence on your desk, and Dobby will take care of things from there. Understand?"

"Not entirely, sir, but I'll do it," she had said.

She had not seen Harry since.

The other champions had been informed and allowed the same privilege, and it seemed like they had all taken up the idea by the following Tuesday afternoon. Ron had been irate, as not being able to give Harry the cold shoulder had made Ron's temper even worse. Hermione had been entertaining thoughts of both Ron and Harry in her fantasies since she had started having such fantasies. Ron's temper, now directed fully against her for the second year in a row, this time as a substitute for Harry, had driven those thoughts of him away.

Her notes to Harry had been just copies of the class notes at first. By Monday morning's note, however, he was writing back and not only asking her some very probing questions about the class material, but adding how much he was missing her.

Not anyone else, not anything about the school. Just her. That horrid reporter from The Daily Prophet had picked up some rumors from the other students, and she had been embarrassed by those, but by now, she was wondering if, perhaps, Harry might actually be finally thinking about her as more than a friend. Remembering their arms around each other as she helped Harry to the office, and the squeeze of thanks Harry had given her before releasing her, Hermione believed that he might be.

Still, her mother had always claimed that all males were dense, and that teen-aged boys were the densest. Hermione was hoping that Harry was not that dense.

All her life, Hermione had lacked for only two things -- acceptance by her peers, and a close relationship with anyone. Harry came closest to accepting her and appreciating her for who she was

(as opposed to Ron, whom she had decided after their last big fight on Wednesday just wanted to use her when convenient and insult her the rest of the time). And she was closer to Harry than to anyone.

Hermione was fifteen now, and was hoping for more than close friendship.

As for her teachers this past week, Snape had even been more horrid to her than Ron had been. He still hadn't apologized for his remarks to her after she had been hit by Malfoy's hex earlier that month. Somehow, she didn't think he ever would. Professor Moody had also been strangely insistent that she tell him what she knew, although she had managed to avoid being alone with him.

Harry had only asked her for one favor, a few days before. He had asked her to privately give a sealed note to Cedric Diggory, which she had. Dobby had delivered a note to her that morning, telling her to come to the seventh floor and find the tapestry of a silly wizard trying to teach trolls to dance.

Well, here she was.

A door suddenly appeared in the blank wall nearby. It swung open, and Harry's voice called out, "Hermione! Come in."

"Harry?" Hermione went on in and saw she was in a large study, with an extra table set for lunch for two. Harry was bent over fiddling with mixing a salad dressing of all things. "What is this place?"

"It's called either 'the Room of Requirement' or the 'Come and Go Room'," Harry said. "It turns into just about whatever is needed. I have this study, a bedroom, a potions lab, a gym, and a bath to rival the prefects' bath."

Hermione walked over. "And why am I here?"

"Because I've been forced to ignore you, and I regret that a great deal." Hermione blinked rapidly, not only at the sentiment, but at the feeling underlying it. Even more so, she was surprised when Harry had straightened up.

Hermione was not overly-tall, especially for her age. She was a shade under five-foot two. Harry had been about half an inch shorter than her the last time she had seen him, and now he was a bit more than an inch taller than her. Harry smiled as he saw her eyes flick down at his shoes.

"No, I'm not wearing heels," Harry teased. "I fixed my lack of height the same way you fixed your teeth."

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth, covering it. "You noticed?"

"Of course I noticed," Harry said. "Do you think I wouldn't notice that the most important and beautiful person in my life suddenly got even more startlingly beautiful?"

Hermione was shocked, to say the least. It was also clear that Harry hadn't meant to blurt that out.

Harry visibly steeled himself and moved over and took Hermione's hand. "Hermione, my life has changed drastically, and it will change even more drastically over the next year." Harry seemed to try and stop himself for a moment, but then his feelings poured out. "I know it isn't the best time to ask you, what with those stupid articles by Skeeter and the Tournament and so many other things far worse, and I know Ron will be angry, and so will Ginny for the matter. But I don't care about them . . . I just care about you. Hermione, will you be with me, my companion, my partner? Or at least consider being my girlfriend until we can see where we might want to go?"

Hermione's eyes teared, and wrapped herself around Harry. "I love you, Harry Potter." Harry hugged her back. Then, after Hermione brushed her lips against Harry's, she leaned back from the hug and asked, "How did you get taller? Other than 'by magic', I mean."

"The same way I put on a stone of muscle," Harry answered. "Magic. In this case, a growth potion

and several nutritional potions, which have helped make up for the fact that I was under-nourished for ten years and then three summers."

Hermione looked Harry in the eyes, and her own eyes went wide. Harry nodded. "Yes, and a potion to fix my eyes. The glasses are plain glass." Hermione had just noticed that.

"I've never heard of these potions, Harry," Hermione said. "Believe me, I've looked for a magical treatment for your eyes."

"No, you wouldn't have heard of these," Harry agreed. "They haven't been invented yet."

"What!"

"Come here and sit down. I was going to wait until after we ate, but I guess you're just too smart." The pair sat on the sofa. "First, this stays between you and me. No one else knows, not even the Headmaster, although I'm sure he'll figure some of this out over the next few days, or more likely, he'll force me into a position where I'll tell him."

"Alright," Hermione said, her suspicions roused.

"I swear I am Harry James Potter," Harry said, holding out his wand. A flash of light proclaimed this a true oath. Hermione relaxed a bit, but just a bit. "Yes, I am in part from the future. 2013 to be exact. Short version, Voldemort returned at the end of this school year, but Fudge denied it for a year and used that year to make my life, and the Headmaster's, hell. Malfoy let in Death Eaters at the end of our Sixth year, and during the fight, Snape murdered Dumbledore." Hermione gasped. "Due to your brains and my power and luck, Voldemort was killed at the end of what would have been our Seventh year, if Hogwarts hadn't been partially closed down -- only First through Fifth years were attending. Lots of people dear to me died over that year: Ginny; Remus; Ron . . . you." Hermione winced. "Sirius had already been killed. After the war, magical Britain was shot to hell. Because Tom Riddle was a Half-Blood, the Pure-Bloods running everything made that out to be the cause of all the evil -- the half-bloods, ignoring that all Voldemort was in some ways was an excuse for the most racist Pure-Bloods to attack Muggle-borns and those who don't loath Muggles. They made things even more restrictive by enacting lots of restrictions on everyone not totally magical for three previous generations and considered human for at least six previous generations. I was in a deep depression, and I was rescued by a friend who was dying from a cursed poison -- she drank it when it was made specifically by Snape to kill me, so it took her months to die. She took me to the Yukon, where she died a few weeks later."

"Six years later, the majority of the magical population rose up against the Ministry, and Ireland finally broke away, just like Muggle Ireland did back in the early 1920s. I came back to help, and was seriously injured, but survived. I spent years planning this. I grant you, I could have ended up back in my body at any point between last August and December, 1996. A week ago Friday was just about perfect."

"Well," Hermione acknowledged, "that is the short version, but you did manage to pack a number of facts into that." She looked at him. "And what about us in the other time-stream?"

"There's going to be a Yule Ball this year," Harry said. "I was obsessed by Cho, but was also considering you and Ginny. Ron was obsessed by Fleur." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Viktor Krum actually asked you before anyone else did, and you said yes." Hermione's jaw dropped at that. "He really liked you, but you only seemed to like him as a friend, or so you always said. Ron threw all sorts of jealous fits when he found out you weren't available as a passive backup for his needs. He and I went with the Patil sisters, and they had a really miserable time. Ron spent the next year and a half semi-flirting with you but never carrying through, and then he and Lavender made spectacles of themselves during most of the autumn and early winter of our Sixth year, which hurt you quite a bit. Then Ron got scared because she was a bit too obsessive for him. That's when you finally dated him for a bit."

"Because I was safe?"

"I think so," Harry said. "You always liked Ron more than he liked you. I always thought he used you as a safety girl friend, but was always looking for someone else, but maybe I was wrong. As for me, Cho and I dated a bit in Fifth year, which was a disaster. Ginny and I dating in Sixth year was a lot better, but when I broke things off, it turned out she had been leading me on with a mild enticement potion. Ron caught her and Mrs. Weasley about to dose me with a strong love potion in late July of 1997 and blew the whistle, mostly because he had suffered through getting a love potion another student had designed for me, and this was his way of paying me back for helping there and when he nearly died of poison at about the same time. You and I became lovers after Ron was killed, just after Christmas in 1997. We were each other's first actual lover."

"That's a lot to absorb," Hermione said.

"It is," Harry agreed, standing. "We need to absorb some food, and I need to take ten minutes to set up some Occlumency shields inside your head for you."

"Occlumency?"

"Both Snape and Dumbledore are constantly reading surface thoughts. It's a magic called 'Legilimency'. Clouding your mind is 'Occlumency'. You had a very organized mind at eighteen, and I would imagine you're pretty close to the same now. You ended up mostly teaching me how to do this. It will likely take me ten minutes to teach you how to recognize if someone is scanning your mind, and to deflect them from a surface scan. Blocking an attack they don't bother disguising took you weeks of meditation and hard mental work. It will also make you less likely to be taken over by the Imperius."

"Alright." As Hermione sat at the table, she asked, "You do have a plan for tonight, right?"

"I do," Harry agreed.

"So you know, well, of course you know what the task is."

"Dragons," Harry answered.

That made Hermione's heart skip a beat, but she continued, "And the note to Cedric?"

Harry shrugged. "The last time, Karkaroff and Maxime found out and clued in Viktor and Fleur, while Hagrid told me. I didn't think it was fair for Cedric not to know."

Hermione smiled and started in on her salad. "That's my Harry."

Harry pulled out a small box from his pocket and handed it to her. "I am yours, if you want me to be."

"Harry," Hermione asked, slightly breathless and wide-eyed, "what is this?"

"It's not an engagement ring, if that's what you're worried about," Harry answered. "I was going to wait to tell you how I felt about you until after the First Task, so we could talk some more, but I couldn't help but tell you as soon as I saw you. I love you and I've missed you so much that it still hurts. In this time stream, we've been friends for over three full years, and really close friends for most of that time. Next weekend, if not sooner, we'll come here and I'll tell you about the alternate future; about things they have never told us about the wizarding world, especially wizarding Britain; about how abusive my life at the Dursleys really was; about almost anything you want me to tell you. If you want to wait until then to decide about that ring, or if you want to say 'no' now, you will still be my best friend, and my closest advisor . . . the one person I know I need to listen to, even if I don't always do what you think I should do."

Hermione swallowed nervously and opened the box. In the magical world, promise rings were still common, showing that the couple was serious. They were either silver or at least silver in color, and always had a knot motif in some fashion. Hermione took the ring from the box, noted the Celtic knot design, and then looked surprised. "This seems too heavy to be silver," she said.

Harry nodded. "It's platinum. It can never be hexed." Platinum was something of an anti-magical metal -- it could not even be shaped directly by magic.

Hermione looked a bit undecided about which hand to wear it on. The right hand signified a serious couple. On the left, it was the equivalent of a Muggle pre-engagement ring. "Harry . . . I'm not ready to start where we apparently left off."

"I know," Harry answered. "You set the pace. As long as there are lots of hugs, kisses, and hand-holding, I won't complain."

"I promise you, you will never lack for any of those," Hermione stated firmly as she slipped the ring onto her left hand's ring finger.

When they had finished their lunch, Harry said, "I was wondering if you'd like to carry something into the stands." He went into another room and carried out a seven foot pole, with a banner or flag rolled up on it.

"What is it?"

"The Potters were a cadet branch of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Gryffindor," Harry said. "The more senior lines have died off, so I am now head of the House of Gryffindor as well as of the Potter family. Well, I'm actually the entire Potter family at the moment. Godric Gryffindor was the last acknowledged magical heir of Merlin, who had no blood heirs." Harry pulled out another wand, this one made of thick oak and with an emerald on the end. "This is Merlin's wand, and I am his magical heir. I can't tell you yet how I got it, but I will. The banner quarters Gryffindor's arms, Merlin's, the Potter family, and my own. It's my battle banner."

Hermione blinked. "You'll also explain how you're the heir of Merlin later. What are your arms?"

"A Kodiak bear and an ermine, on a checkered field of green and brown, I forget the correct heraldic terms."

Hermione frowned. "Why a bear and an ermine? I'd have thought a stag."

"This is my banner, not my father's," Harry said, and turned into a bear for a moment.

"You mean . . . you mean you managed to send back all your magic as well as your memories?" Hermione demanded.

"Exactly," Harry acknowledged. "And older Harry's magic combined with younger Harry's. Just as I am a combination of their memories and personalities, I am also a combination of their magics, albeit with older Harry's skills. I'd say I'm at least half again as powerful as older Harry was. I was Voldemort's equal the last time. I'm more than that now."

Hermione pushed back the obvious questions. "And the ermine?"

"That was your animagus form, of course."

Hermione found herself escorted to a front-row seat by Professor McGonagall, who helped her create a setting for the standard. "Miss Granger, do you know the meanings of three of these four sets of arms?" she asked, taking a seat by one of her favorite students when the banner was revealed.

"Harry is the Head of the Noble House of Gryffindor and of the Potter family," she replied. "Gryffindor was considered the magical heir of Merlin."

"And the meaning of a lady flying a contestant's banner?"

Hermione merely held up her left hand. "Is it any different than this?"

"No," McGonagall acknowledged, admiring the ring, "it is not. Congratulations." She smiled warmly, for she thought her two favorites amongst the current students would make a fine couple, each complementing each other.

Hermione had been appalled at exactly how powerful and dangerous the first three dragons were. Baby Norbert had not prepared her for seeing a full-grown dragon. Even McGonagall was looking worried. Hermione was glad she knew that Harry was now more capable than he had been, and was likely more powerful than any student in the history of Hogwarts. "And last," the announcement came, "Harry Potter!" The sheer magnitude of the task prevented much booing or jeering, except for the small group around Draco Malfoy. Instead there was some polite applause as Harry strode onto the field.

The dragon, the largest and meanest of the group, roared with anger at her confinement. She had been moved twice, and worse, her eggs had been moved twice. She was partially restrained by wards. She was, in short, one angry dragon.

"What is Potter doing!" McGonagall exclaimed, and she was not the only one. Harry was just calmly walking towards the dragon. Half way there, he magnified his voice, and made a series of noises that sounded like a cross between roars and hisses.

The dragon stopped her own roaring and looked at Harry.

Harry barked a command, and the dragon sat like an eager puppy. Harry walked closer, and the dragon lowered her head threateningly, breathing fire and small flickers of flame. Harry spoke sternly but not harshly, and the dragon looked at her eggs. She raised her head, and seemed to regard Harry with a judgmental look.

Harry walked forward, still speaking, although now more gently. He picked up the golden egg and showed it to the dragon, which seemed satisfied.

Harry spoke again, and the dragon leaned towards him, coming very close and making some draw in their breath in fear.

Harry scratched the dragon under her chin, spoke politely, bowed, and walked away.

It took the crowd several seconds to realize that it was over, and then they applauded, mostly in confusion.

Needless to say, Harry was awarded 10 points by all the judges except Karkaroff, and even he had to give Harry a 9.

Chapter II

Albus Dumbledore, a very confused wizard, slowly made his way through the crowd, trying to get to Harry. The crowd, also rather puzzled in general because of Harry's handling of the dragon, parted for him with only slight resistance. Dumbledore soon managed to step in front of Harry, the Golden Egg in the crook of his right arm and his left firmly around a shy Hermione Granger's waist. Dumbledore blinked at that -- this was not the confused young boy who had pled to be allowed some time to deal with the First Task. Behind them was a milling group of lively Gryffindors, with Neville Longbottom carrying that very surprising standard and the Weasley twins and their sister leading perhaps a dozen others in shooting multi-colored sparks into the air.

Harry looked into the Headmaster's twinkling eyes and smiled grimly. Sure enough, he felt the touch of Occlumency, and saw the surprised look on the old man's face when he realized he no longer had free access to Harry's surface thoughts. "Is there a problem, Headmaster?" Harry asked innocently.

"Ah . . . no . . . no, congratulations, Harry. Please come and speak with me sometime tomorrow."

"Of course, Headmaster," Harry said. "Good evening."

When Harry turned, he saw someone he really needed to see several yards away. "Excuse me?" he called. "Aren't you Luna Lovegood?"

Luna blinked, and nodded, surprised to be noticed by the Champion. Still, she approached when Harry beckoned. "Yes?" Dumbledore watched the unfolding scene with curiosity.

"Having seen how the reporter from The Prophet reports, I've decided I'm much better off with giving an exclusive to The Quibbler." Harry had come out of seclusion only for 'the weighing of the wands' and had barely avoided being interviewed by Skeeter. Her poisonous 'quack-quack' quill had still been nasty, despite having even less material to work with than in the original time line. "So, if you can grab a dicta-quill by next weekend, I'll give you a story which will surprise everyone. If you think your father would be interested, that is."

Luna blinked again, twice, rare for her. "You . . . you're . . ."

"Yes," Harry assured her, "I'm serious, Luna. I'm not teasing. I'm not like those nasty witches in Ravenclaw who harass you just because you look at things differently than they do."

"Thank you," Luna said, her wide eyes even wider.

Harry saw some of those Ravenclaw witches scowling at her. "You can call me Harry, Luna, if you want. If it won't get you into even more trouble with the Ravenclaws, that is. I had never noticed some of them were so biased and unthinking before this term."

"I don't think they could cause me much more trouble," Luna admitted. Her defense of Harry as a champion had been the last straw for many of them.

Harry saw the rather disgruntled Ravenclaw Quidditch captain lurking nearby. "Hey, Davies!"

"Yes, Potter?"

"We've played against each other, and I know you're a fair guy. Did you think the same of me?"

"I did," Roger said, considering the tense.

"If I swear an oath to you that I didn't enter this contest, and that I would have done just about anything to have prevented it if I could have, would you believe me?"

"I don't need your oath, Potter," Roger said. "I believe you."

"In fact, if Malfoy hadn't added the 'Potter Stinks', I would have worn a Cedric badge," Harry went on.

"I believe you, Harry," Cho said, coming up along side Roger.

"Luna, have we spoken before this?"

"No, Harry."

Harry turned back to Roger and Cho. "When finding out about my new friend here, I also found out that she is putting up with a lot of bullying, just because she's considered a bit different. I was wondering if either of you could help her."

Roger looked confused, but Cho said, "It has gotten out of hand. I'll stop it, if Roger will back me up."

"Of course," Davies said. "Now, will you tell us how you spoke to a dragon?"

"Yes," Hermione added, "tell us."

Harry turned to Luna. "Care to tell them?"

Luna frowned in thought, and then said, "We learned two years ago that you're a Parselmouth. Is this somehow related?"

"Very good," Harry said. "There isn't a charm to allow people to speak to dragons, but there is one that allows a Parselmouth to do it. I did some research, to see if this gift did anything useful other than talking to snakes and scaring people." That made sense to the Ravenclaws, who researched nearly anything for fun.

Harry and Hermione, with many of the Gryffindors still following, took their leave. "Is that really how you did it?" Hermione whispered in Harry's ear. He nodded. "Can you do anything else with the gift?"

"Some spells, especially wards oddly enough, are more effective cast in Parseltongue. More interestingly, speaking Parseltongue enchants the voice, including the lips and tongue," Harry said. "Using it on a woman is supposed to drive her to the heights of ecstasy . . . or at least it does you."

Hermione blushed.

Meanwhile, Roger had turned to Cho and the suddenly-shy Luna. He saw the looks on several of the witches in Luna's year and above. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. If someone as generally clueless about other Houses as Potter has noticed something is wrong, then something is wrong." The general look of worry, and even a little guilt on a few, confirmed that Luna had indeed been bullied. "Well?" Roger thundered. "Get a move on, or should I ask Professor Flitwick to hold a more formal meeting?"

The worried Ravenclaws fled.

The Weasley twins had gone on ahead to get supplies for the party. When Harry and Hermione got to the common room, he gave her a brief kiss and went up to his room to change into some fresh clothes, as the others were still somewhat grungy. He was not surprised to see a very disgruntled Ron waiting for him. "What's wrong?" Harry asked a bit sharply. "Are you upset that the dragon didn't get me? Or that I'm dating Hermione? Or both?"

"If you want to date that know-it-all, go right ahead," Ron retorted, fantasies of Fleur and some of the other Beauxbatons girls dancing (literally) in the back of his mind. "Why did you offer to swear an oath to Davies?"

"Because he doesn't know me that well. You do, or you should by now. Even if you think I would go off and do something without telling you, you should know I wouldn't lie to you about it if you asked," Harry answered. "I've done daft things before, and I'll certainly do more. I would hope I

wouldn't lie, especially not just to protect myself, especially not to you or Hermione."

Ron looked ashamed. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're right."

"Ron, I didn't pick you as my friend over Malfoy just because he's a slimy, worthless piece of blond dragon dung," Harry said. Ron almost smiled at that. "I picked you because you are a great guy, at least most of the time. I understand you see part of my life and feel jealous, but you, unlike nearly everyone except Hermione, knows the bad side, too. The good doesn't make up for the bad."

"Well, that's your fault," Ron grouched. "You're too bloody normal. Anyone else who had to suffer all that would be a twister, to say the least."

"You know," Harry admitted, "I've sometimes wondered about Dumbledore, if he knew how horrible my life was before I came to Hogwarts, if he didn't set it up for me to be abused, just to see if I turned out as dark and evil as Riddle."

"Riddle? Oh, that's right, you mean, well, Riddle," Ron said. "Are you serious?"

"Not really," Harry said, getting changed, "but I do wonder. Riddle's life and mine before Hogwarts are very similar. Is that merely a coincidence? Or did someone meddle? If anyone meddled, it would have had to have been Dumbledore."

Ron thought about that. He couldn't refute what Harry had said, and that bothered him on many levels.

Five minutes later, Harry was ready to leave. "Don't forget that," Ron said, gesturing at the egg.

Since Ron was closer, Harry said, "Toss it here."

Ron blinked. "What?"

"Toss it here. It's not that much smaller than a Quaffle, and you can handle that."

"I can . . . touch it?"

"I would think so," Harry said. "Just don't open it. I might only get one chance at what's inside."

Ron picked up the egg and said, "Go ahead, I'll be right behind you."

"Okay." And so Harry made something of an entrance, looking something like a very small boxing champion, followed by Ron carrying the egg over his head like a championship belt. Half the house was already there, the rest had gone to dinner. They all applauded.

Harry thanked everyone, and, when asked, opened the egg a few minutes later. He shut it quickly. "What was that?" Hermione hissed in Harry's ear.

"It's designed to be heard underwater," Harry whispered back. He sat down in a very comfy chair near the fire, one usually reserved for Sixth and Seventh years, set the egg beside him, and pulled Hermione on his lap. She flushed from embarrassment, but made herself comfortable.

"Oooo, who's the champion? Ickle Harry's growing up," Fred teased.

"Fred?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you're more frightening or dangerous than a dragon?"

Harry had said that looking directly into Fred's eyes. Fred's breath caught. This was not the sweet young boy whom all the Weasleys (well, except for Percy) doted on. Fred had seen something, something he had seen a fraction of inside of Dumbledore. Once.

Something profoundly powerful and potentially very dangerous.

"Sorry Harry, Hermione," Fred said.

"That's alright." Harry reached into a pocket and handed Fred a boiled sweet. "Here, if you like cinnamon."

"Thanks, Harry." Fred popped it into his mouth just as Neville became the first person ever caught by a Canary Cream. The laughter at Neville was quickly directed at Fred as his skin matched his hair, with steam coming out his ears.

Harry handed a piece of parchment to the howling George, who stopped laughing long enough to take it. "Devil's Sweet," Harry said. "A gift from Prongs and his spouse," he added. George nodded happily.

The steam had stopped coming from Fred, who asked, "How long until I change back?"

"Half an hour, unless you crunched and swallowed it all at once," Harry said. "Then about three hours. You'll blow off steam again when you do."

"Damn," Fred said, who had, in fact, crushed the sweet in his mouth.

The party picked up as more students came in from dinner.

The next morning, Harry handed the Headmaster a note, saying that, if the time was good, he would be at Dumbledore's office at 2:00. The Headmaster merely nodded.

Going back to his place next to Hermione, Luna caught Harry's eye, and mouthed a quiet 'thank you' to him. Harry would hear some of the details later (Padma would tell Parvati, who told Hermione who told Harry), but the Ravenclaw meeting the night before had revealed that while Luna was the most harassed, there were several other students being bullied. Roger and a few of the other leaders made their decision clear, that such bullying would not be tolerated.

It wouldn't end easily or quickly, of course, and much of the rest of the term would very tense in Ravenclaw. Still, life suddenly got much easier for Luna.

"Come in," Dumbledore said, responding to the knock on his door. To his surprise, it wasn't just Harry who came in, but Hermione and even more surprising Remus Lupin as well.

"May I ask what is going on?" Dumbledore asked.

"I have many things to say," Harry said, "and they need to hear it. If there are things you need to ask or say privately afterwards, I will stay of course."

Dumbledore looked confused, as this was not behavior he was used to from Harry. Finally, he said, "Very well. Come on in, the three of you." Dumbledore sat and said, "I believe this is your show for the moment, Harry."

Harry nodded, and actually stood up. "I have learned many things, things which some," he glared at Dumbledore, "would prefer I not know, although I have no good idea why. The most obvious explanations, I hope, are not true." Harry began to pace. "Seventy years ago, there were three arrogant, poor, and slightly mad Pure-Bloods, by the name of Gaunt. . . ."

"Where did you hear that name!" Dumbledore almost hissed, shocked.

"I won't leave without telling you, but I need to tell a brief version of the entire story," Harry answered. "If you don't force me to stop, that is." Harry's aura flicked visibly for a moment, "And I do mean 'force'."

"Very well," Dumbledore said, giving in for the moment.

"The father of the other two was Marvolo Gaunt." Hermione's eyes went wide. "They were the last

three direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin, and that's about all they had. The daughter, Merope, was the least-crazed, but both she and her brother looked like what you would expect as products of generations of in-breeding." The other three winced at that. "She was in lust with the local squire's son, Tom Riddle." Now it was Remus who fully caught on. "She seduced him using a very powerful love potion. She got pregnant, and when she let the potion lapse, he dumped her." Harry frowned. "Voldemort told me that his father rejected his mother because she was a witch, but I don't know if he ever even knew." Harry shrugged. "For that matter, I don't know if they were even married, although Voldemort seems to hope they were." Harry smirked. "As far as I'm concerned, he's a right bastard in both senses of the term."

"Harry," Hermione gently scolded.

"Sorry," Harry said. "Riddle was sent to a Muggle orphanage." Harry glared at Dumbledore and said, "Back then, whose job was it to evaluate magical children in the Muggle world?"

Dumbledore said nothing. Finally, a puzzled Hermione said, "According to Hogwarts: A History, between 1786 and 1947, that was part of the duties of the Deputy Headmistress or Deputy Headmaster. . . ." She trailed off and looked at Dumbledore, who had his eyes shut in pain.

"How many times did you look in on Riddle, sir?" Harry asked. "Or asked others to?"

"Personally, I went once, to tell him about Hogwarts the summer before he came," Dumbledore said. "The Ministry had checked three times before that, because of incidents of wild magic. It was because of the strength of those discharges that it was decided that funding was needed to be found to train him." Dumbledore's shoulders slumped. "The system failed Tom Riddle, and I was a very large cog in the system's machinery."

Harry nodded. "On the other hand, leaving aside the nature versus nurture argument, I rather think that Riddle would have been a sneaky, cold-hearted, sadist to some degree no matter how he was raised."

"That gives me but little comfort, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"We know that when he was a Fifth year Slytherin prefect, he let loose Slytherin's basilisk," Harry went on. "It killed Myrtle, and Riddle later framed Hagrid." Harry again looked at Dumbledore. "What was the diary?"

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore asked.

"It was more than memories, wasn't it?" Harry asked. "It contained part of Riddle, didn't it?"

Dumbledore shivered. Remus demanded, "Do you know what you're saying?"

Harry nodded. "Tell me, when someone splits off part of his soul and places it into an enchanted dark object, what do we have?"

"A Horcrux," Remus said, horrified. "That's why Voldemort didn't die from the rebounding Killing Curse, isn't it?"

"I believe so," Dumbledore said.

"So, he's mortal now?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Why not?" Hermione asked.

"Think basic arithmancy," Harry answered.

Hermione frowned, then said, "So he created more than one? But how many? It couldn't have been as many as thirteen, could it?"

"No," Harry said.

"Then three, five, or seven," Hermione answered. "I could make an argument for any of them."

Harry picked up his bookbag. "Number one, the diary. Number two, Slytherin's ring." Harry pulled the broken ring from his bag. "Number three, Slytherin's locket. Number four, Hufflepuff's cup." He pulled them out as well. "Number five is Ravenclaw's emerald, and that is currently inside Voldemort's mutated snake, Nagini. Number six, Gryffindor's dagger, which he created the night he came to kill me and when he murdered my parents instead. He doesn't know that it was created, and he wants a sixth very badly, and he wants to use my murder to do it." Harry laid the broken dagger on the table.

"Six?" Hermione said. "that's not a good number."

"Six Horcruxes, but seven pieces of his soul," Remus pointed out.

"Ah . . . right, never mind that then." She turned to Harry and asked, "But why does he want to kill you?"

"Care to tell her, Headmaster?"

"You would seem to have all the answers, whoever you are," Dumbledore said. "I would also like to know what you've done to Harry and how you've come and gone so easily, since you collected those somehow."

"I swear on my magic that I am Harry James Potter."

The Headmaster was stunned, and Remus wasn't much better off. "I saw the flare, but . . . but how?" Dumbledore finally said. "How could you know these things; how could you have gathered these objects, let alone destroyed them?"

"Soon, Headmaster," Harry said. "But first, let's talk about Harry James Potter." Harry turned to Remus. "Did you ever hear or read my parents' will, Remus?"

Remus blinked at not being called 'Professor,' but merely said, "I was told that they never wrote one after you were born, and those the earlier ones were invalid."

Harry shook his head. "They wrote at least one, and signed it just before they went into hiding. Professor Dumbledore was one of the witnesses. In it, they named numerous people I could be placed with if I survived and they didn't. The Dursleys were excluded by name." Harry turned on Professor Dumbledore. "What gave you the right to go against my parents' wishes? What gave you the right to condemn me to ten years of abuse and malnutrition? Would having been brought up by Professor McGonagall, for example, made me a spoiled child? Or raised by Madam Bones?"

"No, but I would have been more likely to have placed you with the Longbottoms, and you would not have survived the attack on them," Dumbledore retorted. "I committed a grave sin of omission with you, Harry. I cannot deny that. I should have checked up on you."

"Or believed Mrs. Figg's reports?"

"Or taken those reports more seriously," Dumbledore acknowledged.

"So, you were trying to redo the experiment? Have me as abused as Riddle and see if I turn out Dark? Or leave me so ignorant that I would be totally dependent on you?"

"Do you really think those possible? That I am that dark?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I think I'd rather have you actively evil than so uncaring that you just ignored my welfare."

Dumbledore said nothing.

Harry looked at Hermione. "I care a lot for you, but you should know why Voldemort is after me. There's a prophecy. Either Neville or I was predicted to be the only one who could stop Voldemort, and Voldemort would Mark the Chosen One. He chose me. I kill him, or he kills me. I'm making

certain I kill him."

He looked at Dumbledore. "The question I have is, do I kill him now, when he's an homoculus, or do I wait and kill him when he's restored to his body?"

Chapter III

In the silence that followed Harry question, Harry merely stared at the Headmaster. Finally, Harry said, "Well? Voldemort is vulnerable. Do we go and kill his snake? Then I can break the last Horcrux and I can destroy the little piece that is Voldemort. Or do we continue the farce of a tournament, let him kidnap me, restore his body, and then I do it?"

"Harry. . . ." Remus almost sobbed. Harry saw that Hermione was actually crying.

"I have to do it, Remus," Harry said, moving to stand beside Hermione and letting her hold him close as she cried against his side. "I don't like it, but I must. So tell me, Headmaster, if I kill Voldemort in the form he's in now, would I destroy him? Or do I have to wait until he's in a slightly more real body?"

The Headmaster shook himself and looked at Harry. "What are the forms made of? Do you know?" Dumbledore finally asked.

"His current form was made mostly by dark magic, blood from innocents (whatever that means), and mostly from Nagini's mutated venom. His restored body would be made from his current form combined with the bone of his father, the flesh of his servant -- meaning Pettigrew -- and my blood."

"The latter would certainly be mortal once the last Horcrux is destroyed. His current form likely would merely free his essence again, much as Professor Quirrell's death did."

"I was afraid of that, but I wasn't sure," Harry said. He looked at Hermione. "Hermione. . . ." he started.

"Don't you dare," Hermione said through her tears, looking up at him and holding him tightly, the side of her face still against his stomach. The look on her face nearly broke Harry's heart. "Don't you dare offer to release me from your promise, Harry James Potter." It was only then that Remus noticed the shape of the ring on her left hand. "I've been torn this last year between you and Ron, and even if everyone will think I'm too young, I won't change my mind. I knew, even in our First year, how special you are, and everything I've learned just makes you more special to me."

Harry conjured a silk handkerchief from nothing -- N.E.W.T. quality work -- and handed it to Hermione. "I won't lose you this time," he said.

"This time?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Exactly," Harry said. "I won the war, despite every obstacle you managed to put in my way, despite your being murdered by your pet project at the end of my Sixth year. I won because Hermione is actually the most brilliant witch this century and because when it came to fighting Voldemort I was as lucky as I was powerful and I was slightly more powerful than him, just as he's slightly more powerful than you. I won, but the wizarding world lost. The Pure-Blood fence sitters, the Percy Weasleys, took over and implemented most of the Pure-Blood agenda, claiming that it was Riddle's half-blood status and having been brought up in the Muggle world that contaminated him and caused all the problems. That caused a civil war. Again, I won. But almost every single person I cared for was dead, and the few survivors, like George Weasley, were in bad shape and I wasn't much better off for a few years. I managed to send my memories and my magic back nearly twenty years into the past, where I combined with the me of a week ago last Friday, a little after midnight. I am both, with nearly the power of both and the control of the older Harry." Harry conjured Hermione another handkerchief, so she could finish cleaning herself up.

"Which explains how you won the first task to handily," Dumbledore said.

Harry shrugged. "I won the Tournament last time, too. This time, I'll just make certain Cedric survives it." Dumbledore winced at that. "Now, does this basically answer the basic questions you called me here to answer?"

"It does," Dumbledore had to admit.

"Hermione, Remus, and Sirius needed to know, too," Harry said. "However, if Sirius had come had learned how abused I was at the Dursleys, I was afraid he might attack them, or you."

"Wait. Just how abused were you?" Hermione demanded, pushing Harry back slightly so she could see him more clearly.

Harry lifted her from the chair, sat down, and pulled her onto his lap, much to everyone's shock. For the next eighteen minutes, holding Hermione tightly, he briefly told them what life had been like at the Dursleys'. Long before Harry finished, Dumbledore was glad that mere looks could rarely kill, because the glares that Remus and Hermione were directing at him were nearly deadly.

"I don't understand," Hermione finally said. "Muggle authorities, at least in places like the Dursleys' suburb, are usually pretty good at rooting out that sort of abuse."

"Care to answer her, Professor?" Harry, his voice now ragged from the emotional recitation, demanded. When Dumbledore said nothing, Harry went on, "What? You don't want to tell her how many times you or your pet Obliviated Muggles to keep me at that abusive place? I really will never fully forgive you for keeping me there after my fifth birthday or so. That's when they broke my arm in public and you and Snape had to come, Obliviate half the neighborhood, most of the local police force, and three social workers, and then magically healed me before you Obliviated me. You could have so easily sent me on to some place better after that. And that's why you had Snape try to teach me Occlumency and no one else. Any competent teacher would have found the Obliviated memories. Instead of teaching me anything, he raped my mind, opening it up to Voldemort instead. I know he did that in part because he's a sadist, and in part because he really is more loyal to Voldemort than to you. Still, I've always wondered if he had your permission to do that as well."

Dumbledore said nothing.

"I take it you learned Occlumency later, then?" Remus managed to say.

Harry merely nodded. Hermione slipped off Harry lap and stood behind him, her hands lightly on his shoulders to reassure him of her support and presence. All her life, Hermione had trusted authority figures, none more so than the Headmaster. All that trust now disappeared and moved to Harry.

"Before we leave, we need to discuss 'Professor' Snape," Harry said.

"Harry. . . ."

"Snape is loyal to Voldemort, not you, if he's loyal to anyone beyond himself," Harry snapped. "He murdered you. He didn't do it just because there was little choice in that situation, because he then went on to be Voldemort's number two in the second war. I won't say with total certainty that his mind was totally made up before he cast the Killing Curse on you, but after that night if not before he decided that Voldemort would win."

"Now, knowing you, you might say something like 'then Severus might still be redeemed' or something equally stupid. Well, I doubt it, but yes, it is possible. Allowing him free reign to abuse the students, especially Gryffindors and most especially me, however, didn't work last time."

Harry stood and moved to lean over the Headmaster's desk. "Your way failed last time, Professor. It totally failed. If you can honestly admit that, we might at least work together."

"I will consider what you have said, Harry," Dumbledore answered. "I can not refute what you have said, but you will pardon me if it takes me some time to assimilate all of this."

Harry nodded. "Fine. Just remember this. Professor Snape has been using passive Legilimency on me since the first day of class my first year. He will likely react badly to my surface thoughts not being opened to him. I am very likely to react . . . strongly to his reacting badly."

"You must understand. . . ."

"No," Harry snapped. "He was thirty-one, I was eleven. Why was I expected to act like the adult? Now he's thirty-four, and I may have the emotional age of twenty or so. Again, why am I expected to act more responsibly than he does? Because he's from an abusive household? Well, so am I. I will not start anything with him, but I will finish anything he starts, against me or against Hermione."

"Harry, do not break the Life-debt between the two of you," Dumbledore warned.

"He held that debt right up until my seventeenth birthday, when he attack the Dursleys, hoping to find me there, so he could torture me and serve me up to his Master," Harry said coldly. "He tortured them to death. So, I advise you to warn your pet that I have learned Occlumency, and if he presses too hard, he will not like the results. And remember, anything an Occlumens does to a Legilimencer is legal. Anything. Even the Killing Curse isn't ruled out in some circumstances."

Harry stood, and his magical aura suddenly blossomed brightly around him. "I was slightly more powerful than Tom Riddle, Headmaster, and he is slightly more powerful than you. I am even stronger now. And on the subjects of Voldemort, Snape, and Pettigrew, I am as ruthless as Riddle ever was, although I hope not in anyway as sadistic. Control your pet project, or else I will."

And with that, the magic died down and Harry escorted Hermione from the Headmaster's office, and was followed by Remus.

"You were afraid of how powerful the boy would become," a fourteenth century headmaster scolded. "You may have, at least in part, created what you were most afraid of."

"Nonsense," an icon representing Godric Gryffindor stated firmly. "Harry is a true paladin. He will not stand for any injustice, and your Snape is a walking injustice. Reign the snake in, Dumbledore, or else Snape will be treated as he deserves."

"I know that look on your face," a fifteenth century headmistress chided. "Do not move against the child. Consider where he is from. Do you think he has revealed all the secrets you want kept that he knows?"

"Harry Potter, by nature, is mostly Gryffindor and Hufflepuff," the Sorting Hat stated, "although his mind is more than good enough for Ravenclaw. However, because of his life experiences with the Dursleys, because of the manipulation you have put him through, he has the cunning of any Slytherin when he takes the time to think about it. Even I could not read his mind at the distance he was from me, but I am willing to bet that he indeed knows that he is the Senior Heir of Gryffindor, and is now the rightful Magical Heir of Slytherin. He has more distant claims on the blood of Hufflepuff and even Ravenclaw, so he if calls, Hogwarts herself will likely answer. Take care, Albus Dumbledore. In any contest between yourself and young Potter, the castle itself may side against you, stripping you of the right to be Headmaster."

Dumbledore frowned. He had not considered that.

"I could not read the detailed thoughts in his head, but I could read his heart," the Hat insisted.

"There are no black spots there, and most of the gray areas are ones that you yourself put into place. Bow to the simple fact that Harry Potter is the Chosen One, and that you have made yourself largely redundant. If you oppose him, if you try and force him to follow your lead, you will become irrelevant. You have to reearn his trust, and then you may be able to offer him advice."

"That means, tighten the reins on your snake," Gryffindor stated again. "If you do not, there will be little left of the man."

"But. . . ."

"How many people was the older Harry forced to kill?" Headmaster Dippet asked sadly. "If he already killed Severus Snape in one life-time, do you believe he would hesitate to do so again?"

After seeing Remus off, Harry again took Hermione to the Room of Requirement. "I told you Tuesday night that I hadn't meant to confess how much I love you that quickly. That I should have waited."

Hermione merely nodded, and watched Harry pace nervously.

"The Harry you knew had never really killed anyone," Harry said. "He was complicit in the death of Professor Quirrell back in our First year, but it wasn't totally his actions that killed him. He had also killed a seventh of Voldemort when he stabbed the diary with the basilisk fang, and had killed the basilisk for that matter, which was nearly sentient. I can't tell you how many people, how many other sentient beings, the older Harry killed or was partially responsible for killing. At least sixty and hopefully less than a hundred, depending on how you want to define the guilt and responsibility." He stopped and looked at Hermione. "If murder stains or tears the soul, then I bear the guilt of both Harrys. I've already again killed most of Voldemort in the short time I've been back. I could, and would, willingly kill Snape or the other two Marked Death Eaters here at school, or Rita Skeeter or Draco Malfoy, if given any further reason to."

"Why Skeeter?" Hermione asked, in part to divert Harry.

"That's right, I have to tell the Headmaster that she's an illegal Animagus, a beetle. She hurt you and Hagrid in the near future, but more importantly she snooped around and discovered some of the Order's plans. She tried to publish them, believe it or not, but a sympathizer sent them on to a Death Eater, so they were waiting for the Order and us. We lost Ron, Remus, and Mister Weasley, among others. She shrugged her shoulders and said that the public had the right to know what was planned and damn the consequences. We trapped her in her form a few days later and fed her to Trevor."

"We did, or I did?" Hermione asked.

"Well, I knew what you were doing and didn't stop you, so I'd say we."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Did I kill many people?"

"I'm not certain. You were in several fire fights, and people you fought died. I'm not certain how many were primarily due to you. I only know of three that you killed for certain, including Skeeter."

"Is all that erased, do you think?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know if it's erased or if I've started a new time stream. If you mean to suggest that my soul would not be scarred if the other time line was erased, remember that it came back as it was, the good and the bad."

"And you're worried that I'll reject you," Hermione stated. She paused and then said, "Actually, knowing you, you feel I should reject you, that you don't deserve my love."

"It was one thing to share my life with an eighteen year-old who had grown to that point with me," Harry said. "Is it wrong for me to expose a more innocent fifteen year-old?"

Hermione wanted to answer that question immediately, but she didn't. She thought about it from all the angles she could think of. Finally, she said, "It's certainly not wrong for you to be concerned. You're right, I am the same person the other Hermione was up until a week ago Friday, but I'm already different than her. She was torn between you and Ron. I can see that she was torn because you didn't encourage her, even once. Harry, as soon as you asked me, it was like my sight cleared up. I had been repressing most of my feelings for you for the last year or so. I guess I wasn't wrong to do so; you weren't ready then, any more than Ron is now."

She looked at Harry. "When did the other Hermione lose her faith in the Headmaster?"

"A few weeks after his death, when she realized how poorly he had prepared us to face Voldemort without his backup, and how much time he had wasted that year when he could have been preparing

me, if not us." Harry looked at Hermione. "Do you know he stripped the restricted section of books that could have helped us? Any book you see that's noted as 'LOST'? It means 'Location: Other Storage/Tower' -- there's a storeroom under the Ravenclaw Tower where they keep the most sensitive books."

Hermione's jaw was slack from the shock. Finally, she said. "That's horrible! Hiding books!"

Harry smiled. "Don't ever change, Hermione."

Hermione gave him a mock glare. "Ha, ha. Seriously, Harry. I knew from the spring of our First year that my life was tied to yours." Harry started to say something. "If you say one thing about my 'inner eye', you'll regret it."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry answered seriously.

"Good. The point, Harry Potter, is that I knew I loved you from the end of our First year on, I just wasn't sure how I loved you. Now I know. Don't try to change my mind."

Harry moved and pulled Hermione into a tight hug, and they stayed in that hug for many minutes.

There was still more than an hour before dinner started, so when Harry and Hermione ran into Luna, they all decided to get [The Quibbler](#) interview over. Harry repeated most of the information he had about Tom Riddle (other than the Horcruxes), and promised that he had the information from Voldemort himself and other witnesses. Luna was happy with the story, even if Harry didn't want to talk about himself, and agreed to dig in the sources that Harry had written out for her for verification and for further information. He agreed that Luna could ask again later, once the first story had come out.

When they were done, Harry asked, "Do you two know why dress robes were recommended for students Fourth year and above?"

"Maybe there's some sort of formal function after the last Task," Hermione suggested.

"I would think it would be before then," Luna said thoughtfully. "After the Third Task, a number of people from two schools won't feel like having a party."

"In fact, there's going to be a Yule Ball," Harry said. "They'll announce it later this week. Hermione, will you accompany me to the Ball?"

"Yes," Hermione said, smiling widely.

"Luna, Third years can only go if someone Fourth year and up asks. If you don't know many people like that outside of Ravenclaw. . . ."

"Would you think Ronald would be interested?" she asked hopefully.

"I don't know," Harry lied. "If he's not. . . ."

Luna looked at Harry. "I am trusting you a great deal, Harry Potter."

"I know that," Harry agreed. "I promise you, I'm not trying to trick you or prank you. I really don't want to see you hurt."

"Is that why you just lied about Ronald?" Luna asked.

"Yes," Harry admitted. "I really suspect he doesn't like you, but I was planning on checking with him before asking around." Luna cocked her head to the left and looked at Harry, who went on, "I think if you got together with Ron, you would be hurt, but since you want it, I'll ask him for you."

"So you care about me, even though you don't know me, and also respect me," Luna said.

Harry took off his glasses and looked into Luna's wide eyes. "I know you, Luna Lovegood," Harry said. "You and Hermione look at the world, and magic, in almost totally opposite ways. Neither

way is the right way all the time, but together one of you will always be right. Should you ever agree on anything, only a fool would fail to take your opinions into account." Harry smiled and put his glasses back on. "While I am often foolish, I would hope I am not a fool."

"I also do very foolish things," a shaken and thrilled Luna said. "I do not believe trusting you is one of them, and I trust you will explain all of this to me when you can. Yes, I would like to go to the Ball, even if Hermione here is going with Prince Charming."

Harry grinned and said, "I wasn't raised to be charming, just sincere."

Hermione frowned, and then asked, "When did you see that musical?"

"I'll tell you about it sometime," Harry said.

"I'm sorry?" Luna asked, a bit lost.

"It's a Muggle musical play, about what the Muggles call fairy tales," Hermione explained. "When Cinderella complains to the Prince about his cheating on her, he says 'I was raised to be charming, not sincere'."

"Ah," Luna said. She looked at Harry and considered. "Will you be able to tell me a complete story after the Tournament?" She looked at the parchment in front of her and added, "And I don't mean for publication."

"I hope so," Harry said.

"Then please sound out Ronald for me, and if he says no, I trust you to find me an escort. I would very much like to go."

Chapter IV

"A ball?" Ron demanded, appalled. He had been stopped by Harry and taken aside just as they were going to go into dinner. Ron was more easily upset on an empty stomach, but he was also more open to compromise when he knew he was going to eat immediately after.

Harry nodded. "That's why they said to bring dress robes," he added.

"Ugly thing's more like a dress," Ron muttered.

"Look, Ron, these seem to be your choices about the robe," Harry said. "One, decide to wear the thing, ignore how it looks, and maybe you can carry it off. Two, don't go. Three, whinge and annoy everyone. Four, let me buy you new ones in Hogsmeade."

Ron struggled with himself. Harry then suggested, "Look, if you want, we can start a tab. No interest, and you agree to pay me back by, say, by ten years after we leave."

Ron really thought about that, instead of just reacting. "How about you charge me a little interest if I don't pay you back in five years?"

"Done. I have some Gringotts drafts, and you can start an account at the Post Office for up to what? Three hundred Galleons?"

"Okay," Ron said. He was immature for his age in many ways, but money was actually not one of them. He, and Harry, knew he would pay his friend back no matter what.

"So, you're going and you're going to look good," Harry said. "The next question is, who will you take?"

"Oh, Merlin help me," Ron whimpered.

"Who do you like?" Harry asked.

"I don't know! Who likes me well enough to go with me?" Ron whined.

"Luna Lovegood."

"Ginny's nutcase friend?"

"She's cute, she's nearly as smart as Hermione, and she's odd because she has a strong Second Sight," Harry said firmly. "If that would embarrass you, don't ask her. If it wouldn't, ask her, because I'm sure she'll say yes because she likes you. At this point, you could ask any Fourth or Third year girl who isn't actually seeing anyone, and you have a fair chance of them saying yes just because they want to go. But as soon as it's announced, which should be tomorrow or Friday, they'll be snapped up."

"Good point," Ron conceded.

"So, who do you want to dance with?"

"Dance!" Ron's voice broke as he said that.

"Yes, dance. That's what people do at a Ball," Harry retorted. "The first two dances will be formal, a slow waltz and then a faster one. Then whatever band they have will play whatever they want to, and we won't have formal steps."

Ron's eyes were twitching in terror and he was pale and sweaty.

"I suggest you think of a Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw," Harry said.

"Why?"

"If it doesn't go well, you don't have to see them in the common room all the time, and if it does go well, it will give you a reason to sneak around, which you like doing anyway."

"True," Ron admitted. "Suggestions? Besides Loony, I mean."

"I don't really know the Third years, other than the Gryffindors and Luna," Harry said. "Let's see, Hufflepuff. Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Eloise Midgen, Sally-Ann Perks, and Megan Jones."

"Not Midgen," Ron said instantly. "Perks and Jones are alright I suppose, but I don't really know them, they're so quiet in class."

"Shy might be good for you," Harry suggested.

Ron shrugged. "Maybe. Aren't Bones and Abbott sort of seeing Macmillan and Hopkins?"

"Could be," Harry agreed. "Ravenclaw. Lisa Turpin, Padma Patil, Marietta Edgecomb, Mandy Brocklehurst, Su Li, and Morag McDougal."

"Turpin and Goldstein are dating," Ron said. "Brocklehurst and McDougal are sort of like Perks and Jones, and Ginny said that Li is hanging about one of the Durmstrangers."

"That leaves Patil and Edgecomb," Harry said.

"The Patils can go with anyone they want," Ron said morosely, entertaining Harry. Ron frowned. "I don't really know Marietta. How do I ask someone I don't really know?"

"I'll make certain she's interested first," Harry said. Harry wondered about his friend's taste, but he decided that wasn't his problem.

"Thanks, Harry," Ron said. "I don't deserve a friend like you."

"Actually, you do," Harry retorted.

After dinner, Harry ambled by the Hufflepuff table, said hello to Cedric, and asked Justin Finch-Fletchley if he might have a word. Many of the Hufflepuffs glared at Harry, but Cedric called them on it. "You all heard what Potter, I mean Harry here, said to Davies."

"I didn't hear he actually took any oath," Zach Smith muttered.

"I don't owe one to you, Smith," Harry snapped. He turned to Cedric. "I do owe it to you. I am just a Champion participating in the Tournament. You are the true Hogwarts Champion."

Cedric stopped Harry from pulling his wand and glared at his Housemates. "You could have been a Hufflepuff, Harry."

Harry shook his head, "I have all the qualities but patience." He looked at Cedric. "If you want to come along, you're welcome." A thought occurred to Harry. "Actually, please come along, just in case Smith still thinks I'm the Heir of Slytherin."

Cedric smiled. "I trust you. Let's go."

"A Ball!" Justin wailed.

"You know, that's just what Ron said," Harry said to Cedric.

Cedric grinned, but merely asked, "Why tell us?"

"If you want to ask who I think you want to ask, don't you think you should get in before the announcement tomorrow?" Harry asked. "Just ask her, and say it's just in case there's some reason they had us buy dress robes."

"Do you think she'd buy that?" Cedric asked.

"You don't think most of the Ravenclaw girls have this sussed out?" Harry retorted.

"Good point," Cedric had to agree.

"I don't know what you've heard," Justin told Harry, "but I'm not gay."

Harry blinked. "What? NO! Hermione and I are a couple."

"Oh, then why tell me about the Ball?" Justin asked.

"If you didn't have anyone special in mind to ask, I was going to ask a favor," Harry answered.

"It's not Weasley, is it? Like I said, I'm NOT gay," Justin said. 'Dean Thomas, maybe,' he thought, 'but not Weasley.'

"No, it not a Weasley," Harry answered, ignoring what his passive Legilimency had picked up. "Do you know Luna Lovegood, in Ravenclaw?"

"She's the cute blonde Third year who dresses so oddly," Cedric told Justin. "She acts and sounds . . . eccentric, but my father thinks she might be something of a Seer."

Harry nodded, "She is. And she saw her mother die. That sent her father into his work. . . ."

"He publishes The Quibbler," Cedric told Justin. "I know you lot read my copy."

Harry nodded. "So we have a scarily brilliant girl who's also has really strong Second Sight, somewhat abandoned emotionally by her father after the death of her mother. She lives in a fantasy world for over two years, and then comes to Hogwarts, where she is picked on for being odd. She becomes even more eccentric as a response. . . ."

"They pick on Luna?" Cedric demanded, angry. Seeing the odd look Justin was giving him, Cedric explained, "They don't live too far from us, and my mother and her mother were second cousins. I was a Third year when her mother died."

"I talked with Davies about it, and he's helping. Cho agreed that the hazing had been going too far, and between the two of them, they should sort things out."

Justin frowned. "So you asking me if I'll date. . . ."

"My cute but eccentric friend, yes," Harry said, "but just to the Ball. After that, it's up to the two of you. She is incredibly honest and straightforward, and she can say the most outrageous things, which are often truths people don't want to hear." Harry smiled. "Do you know the story of the emperor's new clothes?"

Justin knew it, but he and Harry had to explain the reference to Cedric. "So," Justin said, "you're saying she'd be the one to point out that the emperor was naked?"

"No, I'm saying she say'd something like, 'Unless those clothes are made of spun demiguise fur, he's naked, and look! His willie is the size of a new-born's'," Harry confessed.

Justin laughed. "She sounds like fun. Alright, as a favor to you, I'll ask her."

"Don't hurt her," Harry and Cedric warned in stereo.

Justin laughed again. "I won't." He blushed when Harry leaned close and whispered, "If you're good, I'll put in a good word for you with Dean afterwards if you want."

"I probably don't want to know what you said," Cedric admitted. "So, give me some time with Harry, would you?"

"Right," Justin said.

"Hey Justin, do you know how to do a waltz?" Harry asked as Justin turned to leave.

"I do, why?"

"That's the opening dance. Could you teach some of us, after the announcement is made?"

Justin shrugged, "Sure." He left the two champions.

"Thanks again for telling me about the dragons," Cedric said. "Now tell me why."

"Did you know Karkaroff is a convicted Death Eater?" Harry asked. Cedric's eyes went wide. Harry nodded, and said, "He got a drastically reduced sentence, by turning over the names of other Death Eaters. Do you think he wasn't skulking about, looking for information for Krum, even if Krum might be honest?"

"And the Beauxbatons folk?"

"You don't take Care, do you?" Harry asked.

"Runes and Muggle Studies, why?"

"Hagrid's a friend of mine. I was looking for him and overheard the Headmaster and Hagrid talking, that's how I knew to sneak a look. So, Hagrid knew, and you should know he's a great friend but he can't keep a secret."

"I've heard that," Cedric admitted.

"I take it you haven't seen Hagrid making eyes at Madame Maxime?" Harry asked. "And her eyes fluttering back?" He imitated both.

"No, and I don't think I'd want to," Cedric pointed out.

"Fair enough," Harry conceded. "The point is, since Hagrid knew, Madame Maxime would find out, and we needn't speculate on how."

"No," Cedric agreed, "we don't. And if she knew, Fleur would find out."

"Exactly. Now," Harry said, "shall we go see Cho?"

"Why, are we triple dating or something?"

"Won't you want someone to distract Cho's shadow?" Harry asked.

"Edgecomb?" Cedric looked at Harry. "What are you up to?"

"Trying to get my friend Ron a date for the Ball," Harry confessed.

"'Harry's Dating Service'?" Cedric teased.

"I was going to call it 'Champion's Escort Service' actually," Harry replied archly.

"Harry, you're a very silly young man," Cedric said. "If my younger brother had lived, he would have been in your year, and I'd like to think he'd be a lot like you."

"Thanks," Harry said, vowing yet again to keep Cedric alive.

"Let's go get me and Ron a date."

Cho was thrilled to be asked to the Ball by Cedric. Marietta was less thrilled to be asked by proxy. Still, she was glad to have a date even before the announcement. She seemed a bit doubtful of Ron as a date, but perked up a bit at Harry's promise of dancing lessons for the first, formal dances. Harry decided that Marietta was cute enough when she was smiling and giggling with Cho, but otherwise was a rather dour girl. He also wondered if her reddish-gold hair would clash with Ron's more than Chudley Orange, but decided that he had been listening to Dean's theories on color too often.

Classes Thursday went well for Harry. The announcement had been made, and Ron had managed to

stammer a request to Marietta after lunch, which she accepted. Justin had formally requested Luna to accompany him, in such a formal-yet-natural way that she had merely assented and extended her hand, which Justin had kissed and smiled over. With that out of the way, it was Friday, with Double Potions, that Harry was worried about, not for the usual reasons (putting up with Snape's abuse). Harry was worried about what he might have to do in order to stop that abuse.

Harry and Hermione came into Potions at the last minute, in order to prevent Draco from causing problems. Snape, as expected, was already setting up the lesson. "About time, Potter," he snarled. "Just because you think you're a celebrity, that does not give you the right to be late. That's a point from you and Granger."

Harry stopped and looked at Snape. As agreed, Hermione went on towards her seat. "Tempus," Harry said. The time clearly showed he was not late for class.

Snape glowered, and Harry felt a brush against his Occlumency shields. Harry sent the memory of writhing under the Cruciatus down the tendril Snape had sent. Even the memory of the Cruciatus was painful, and as it was unexpected, Snape winced in agony for several seconds.

"How dare you!" Snape declared when he had recovered. "I shall see you. . . ." Snape broke into a long scream of agony, as his Dark Mark flared. Harry had nearly the same power over it as the Dark Lord himself. Harry increased the pain until Snape passed out.

The rest of the class sat, stunned. Harry looked at them. "Oh dear," Harry said dispassionately, "the Professor seems to have passed out for no apparent reason. Perhaps one of you should go around to Madam Pomfrey."

After a moment's silence, Tracey Davis said, "Come on, Daphne." She and her friend left. Harry noticed they both slipped off the 'Potter Stinks' badges as they left.

Harry glared at the other Slytherins. Zabini and the other two semi-neutral girls quickly took off, and the remaining five (Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson, and Bulstrode) left soon thereafter.

"Could I ask the rest of you to guard the door?" Harry asked mildly.

None of them took it as a suggestion, and they hustled out, even Ron and Hermione.

Harry went over and cast a spell on Snape to wake him up.

When Snape was finally aware of where he was, what had happened, and who was with him, he made the mistake of opening his mouth to threaten Harry. Harry wandlessly picked Snape up and bound him to the inner door of the potions lab.

"I'm going to tell you this once, Snape," Harry growled, his green eyes boring into Snape's mind, inspiring more fear than even the Dark Lord had usually produced. "My full powers have been unleashed. Your Master cannot win. Stand in my way, and I will kill you. Cut your loses now, and I might remove that Mark from your forearm before I kill your Master. Remember, stand in my way, and I will kill you. As for your little tantrums in class. . . ." Harry grabbed Snape's forearm so that his palm covered the Mark. Harry concentrated and pain again shot through Snape.

Harry opened his eyes. "Every time you insult me or Hermione, you will pass out in agony. Every time you misgrade us, each time you take a point or assign a detention, you will pass out in agony. If you try to expel either of us, you will die in agony. If you try to hurt either of us, you will die in greater agony. If you try and inform anyone of this, you will die almost instantly. Understand?"

"How. . . ?" "How is none of your concern," Harry said. "The only thing you have to worry about now is understanding. Now, do you understand?"

Snape opened his mouth, but winced as the Mark twinged at this thoughts. He shut it again.

"I asked, do you understand?" Harry demanded in a snarl.

"Yes," Snape hissed.

Harry released the Potions Professor, who stayed collapsed on the floor, terrified, until Madam Pomfrey could arrive and give him a stimulant.

Harry had been avoiding any one-on-one conversations with 'Professor Moody', but he caught up with Harry and his friends soon after they had left the potions lab, and he had sent the other Gryffindors away. "Should I even ask what you did to old Snape?" Moody demanded.

"Probably not," Harry said. He had hoped to delay this a bit longer, because the more anxious Barty Crouch Junior was, the more likely he was to believe the story Harry was about to spin for him. Still, Harry decided he could go with his plan.

Moody looked at him, confused. This was not the naive teen of two weeks before.

"I've changed, haven't I?" Harry asked.

"You have," Moody agreed.

"Do you have about three hours?"

Moody's real eye blinked in surprise. "Come to my office at Two."

"Harry, may I have another word with you?"

"If it is quick, Headmaster," Harry answered.

Seeing they were alone, Dumbledore said, "Thank you for not killing Severus. He won't tell me what you said, or allow me to see it, but it does seem to be making him reconsider his priorities."

"His salvation is totally in his hands," Harry said. "I hope I don't need to tell you not to share any information I have with anyone, not even Professors McGonagall or Moody, let alone Professor Snape."

"I thought you rather liked and trusted both of them," Dumbledore said, disappointed.

"I like and trust Professor McGonagall, but she can't help with this. And I did trust Professor Moody, but trust me when I say he has his own agenda. I will tell him a few things, but not what I told you and Remus. It's important that we do not contaminate the timelines more than I already have."

"Very well, Harry."

"Now, lad, what do you want to tell me?" Moody asked, taking a swing from his flask.

Harry smiled grimly, and related much of the story of Tom Marvolo Riddle, leaving out the entire idea of Horcruxes. Then Harry laid out his childhood, even exaggerating the abuse, while trying not to whine or complain about it. Then Harry laid out the events of the previous three years, making the Headmaster look even more manipulating than he probably could have been.

"Now," Harry concluded well over an hour later, "can you tell me why I would ever trust Dumbledore, even if he's not as bad as Riddle?"

"No, no I can see why you wouldn't," Moody agreed. "Still, why tell me? I grant you, I didn't know much of this -- Riddle and I didn't overlap at Hogwarts."

"Do you think there could be a third Death Eater at Hogwarts?" Harry asked bluntly.

"Third?" Moody prevaricated.

"You know perfectly well that Karkaroff is a convicted Death Eater, and the Headmaster got Snape off," Harry retorted.

"I didn't know you knew," Moody admitted.

"So, who put my name in the Goblet?" Harry asked. "Skeeter hinted that Bagman was suspected of being a Death Eater, but I don't see that being likely. And if he was, would he have had the talent to hex the Goblet of Fire?" He didn't say when Skeeter had told him this.

"To tell the truth, I don't think he was a Death Eater, and I agree he wouldn't have had the power to hex the Goblet," Moody agreed.

"And would he have been alone with it long enough to have done it?"

"Probably not, but maybe," Moody hedged.

"So, if it was a Death Eater, it was Snape, Karkaroff, or someone I don't know about . . . or Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore?!"

"Oh, I don't mean Dumbledore is a Death Eater, or even all that Dark, but wasn't it obvious from the way I explained things that he set me up to stop Voldemort from getting the Sorcerer's Stone? That he knew I would try and stop the memory of Tom Riddle and the bloody basilisk? He was training me by throwing me in to deep water and seeing if I could swim. Last year must have been a terrible disappointment."

"He hasn't told me the full story about what happened with Black," Moody hinted. Harry obliged and told him. "Well, at least I understand why Dumbledore told me not to hex Black if I saw him," Moody said at the end. "Would have been nice if he had given me the details."

"Does he ever?" Harry asked bitterly.

"No, no I suppose not," Moody agreed. "I congratulate you, Potter. You've made me suspicious of Albus Dumbledore, and I wouldn't have thought it possible. I can say, there are no known Death Eaters here, other than the two you've mentioned. I'm a suspicious man, and I have a difficult time believing Bagman was anything but an unwitting stooge."

"So if there is one, he or she's in disguise," Harry said. "Possible, but not likely."

"Is there something else, lad?" Moody asked, glad to get away from the idea of a third Death Eater in disguise. "If it's not about Miss Granger, I might be able to help."

"There is, and it's not about Hermione," Harry said, now ready to launch his tall tale.

Chapter V

"Is there something else, lad?" Moody asked. "If it's not about Miss Granger, I might be able to help."

"There is, and it's not about Hermione," Harry said, now ready to launch his tall tale. "Have you ever had a magical vision?"

"Like a prophecy or something?"

"No, sir, more like a vision quest."

"No, I can't say that I have," Moody admitted.

"I have, at least three times. Twice when I confronted Riddle, and once two weeks ago."

"Can you tell me about them, or are they too personal?"

"I really shouldn't trust anyone, but I do need to talk with someone," Harry said. "Hermione doesn't have the experience, and I doubt Sirius could help, even if I could reach him. And I can't get a hold of Remus Lupin."

"And you've explained why you don't feel you can trust Dumbledore," Moody concluded. "If you want, I can swear not to tell Dumbledore or the Ministry about this."

"Alright," Harry said, and Moody swore the Oath.

"When I was being held by Professor Quirrell, there was just a moment when it seemed like I wasn't in my body," Harry started, looking into the distance. "I was in a dark cavern, and I couldn't go back. There was a path to the left, and it was filled with dark red flames and some sort of pulsing black light. I knew that if I went down that path, I would crush Voldemort, but that I would be lost. I knew there was a path to the right, but I couldn't really see it. I refused to go to the left, and I came back into myself when Voldemort made himself known."

"Go on," Moody urged.

"In the Chamber of Secrets, right after Riddle told me that Ginny would die, I was back in the cavern. The left path was the same, except there was a strong wind trying to pull me in. It was so strong, I couldn't get to the path on the right, which was pure white, with phoenix song coming from it. And then the vision disappeared."

Moody looked enthralled.

"Then, two weeks ago, I learned two things," Harry said, looking at Moody.

"And they were?"

"First, that the Triwizard Tournament was canceled back in 1726, because the Goblet had been interfered with. That means this one could have been canceled and restarted. Well, I was off to complain to the Headmaster, and I overheard him asking Hagrid about the arrangements for the dragons. And there I was, back in the cavern, and this time I was able to take the right path."

"And where did it take you?"

"Well. . . I'm not sure. However, whatever was there told me that had I gone down the other path, I would have destroyed Voldemort and taken his place as the most powerful Dark Wizard in almost two thousand years." Harry looked at Moody. "Do you know there's a Prophecy about Voldemort and me?"

The fake Moody swallowed hard. He knew his Master wanted that Prophecy. "I do, but I have no idea what it's about." He just knew that it was about the Potter and/or the Longbottom boy, which is

why he and the Lestranges had been torturing the Longbottoms when they had been caught. "Do you know it? When did you learn it?"

"My father told Sirius, and Sirius decided that he had to tell me, even though the Headmaster had forbidden him to. It said that I had the power to destroy Voldemort, but that I couldn't until I decided my path. That if I chose Darkness, I would indeed be the Dark Lord who enslaved the world, which explains why Dumbledore doesn't trust me, although I still think he went about things in a very odd way. Since I didn't go Dark, however, I am now the Champion of Hogwarts."

"The what?"

"That's what I asked the Phoenix Song in my vision," Harry agreed. "I was told that it had nothing to do with being a Triwizard Champion. It seems, well, I suppose you know that it's not a big deal to be descended from Helga Hufflepuff."

"About ten percent of the older families are," Moody agreed. "Dumbledore, old Barty Crouch, Sprout, and McGonagall are, too."

"However, I am the senior Heir of Gryffindor."

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at that," Moody agreed.

"And when Voldemort killed the last direct heir of Ravenclaw, my mother became the closest blood heir who was magical, as she was the closest descendent through a Squib line."

Moody looked really surprised at that. "Interesting," he allowed.

"Now, when Voldemort Marked me, he accidentally imbued me with some of his magic," Harry said.

"Like Parseltongue," Moody agreed.

"Exactly. That made me a magical heir to Slytherin. And even if Voldemort's spirit is still around, his actual body was destroyed the night he murdered my parents. Even if he somehow regains a body, he won't be a blood heir to Slytherin. I am now the senior heir of Slytherin. So, I'm the senior heir of three of the four Founders, and a blood heir to the fourth." Harry smiled grimly. "Hogwarts has adopted me. If I confront Voldemort in the castle, or even on the grounds, I can't lose." Harry grinned, "That also gives you a clue on how I was able to 'spank' Snape, sort of." Harry sent out a mental apology to the castle, which actually answered him. Harry was not exaggerating his power for the most part, or his connections to Hogwarts, just the connections between his power and his connection to Hogwarts.

"Really?"

Harry nodded. "When I killed the basilisk, it also broke Slytherin's magic on the Chamber of Secrets. That in turn wiped away most of the bitter, older memories that Slytherin left in Hogwarts. He was actually the most pro-Muggle-born of the Founders, although he was pushing for a more complete severing with the Muggle world, much like we have today, except for kidnapping the Muggle-born and raising them as . . . what was the term Hermione used?" Harry looked at Moody. "The Muggle Ottoman Empire took Christian boys and raised them to be their shock troops in the wars against Christian Europe."

"I have to say I don't know that one, Potter," Moody admitted.

"Anyway, you get the idea," Harry said. "You kidnap the Muggle-born around the age of three or so and raise them to loath the Muggle world and use the wizards as your main guards against Muggles and the witches to breed with them and as extra consorts for the leadership. If any of the wizards die, you haven't lost any of your own. If they survive, they've earned a place in the magical community."

"Sounds like Slytherin, except for that last part," Moody agreed.

Harry shrugged. "Well, that doesn't matter. I just need to learn how to use my connections with Hogwarts, and hope it strengthens my magic along the way."

Barty Crouch the Younger considered his problems after Harry left. Like most True Believers, he had little difficulty in believing 'truths' which contradicted each other. Being told that his Master was a Half-Blood did not bother him all that much. Being told about Slytherin didn't bother him at all.

No, what concerned him was the need to tell all this information to his Master, hopefully without being punished.

The next day was not part of a normal Hogsmeade weekend. However, acknowledging that some students might have been caught unprepared for the Ball, students could apply to go into town. Ron really wanted to, of course, and Luna had confessed to Ginny, who told Harry, that she had forgotten that she had nothing to wear. She accepted Harry's promise that he owed her an incredible karmic debt and allowed him to take her shopping.

Therefore, Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Luna, Dean, and Lavender went into Hogsmeade (Dean to help Ron, Lavender to help Luna, and Ginny to keep an eye on all four of them). They trooped into Gladrags, where Harry established his authority by his manner, his scar, and a hefty line of credit. Despite Lavender's pouting, no one else was really interested in spending a great deal of time on general clothes shopping. Ron was quickly outfitted in robes much like Harry, Dean, and Justin would be wearing, the upper part cut much like a dinner jacket, which then flowed into formal robes.

Despite Ron's pleadings (after all, Harry's dress robes were a very dark green), he was not allowed a burnt orange set of robes, let alone the Cannon orange ensemble. Since Luna knew that Marietta would be in a pastel green robe, Ron was outfitted in black, with hints of pastel green trim that even Ron had to admit looked good. Luna, meanwhile, was outfitted in a deep maroon set of robes that showed off the rather incredible legs of the just-turned fourteen year old. She would have to come back for a final fitting, but then most of the girls at the castle would be in town the Saturday and Sunday before Christmas to have their outfits adjusted, even if bought elsewhere.

Ron went off to the post office, clutching his bank draft for the rest of the three hundred Galleons Harry was loaning him. Dean went off to look for art supplies. Ginny and Lavender stayed to help Luna decide on the details of her robes. All agreed to meet in the Three Broomsticks in an hour, where Harry would buy everyone lunch.

"And where are we off to?" Hermione asked.

"Right here," Harry said, bowing Hermione into a store simply called 'Gerrymander's'. She had never been inside before, but had casually wondered what kind of store it was. Hermione's eyes went wide when she saw that the store was filled with gemstones.

"Ah, Mister Potter," a small man said, smiling widely. "So glad to meet you at last." He shook Harry's hand and then Hermione's.

"What. . . ?" Hermione managed to get out.

"I think you'll be wearing a very remarkably beautiful blue gown," Harry said.

"Periwinkle," Hermione agreed, still somewhat in a daze.

"I thought you might want some accents," Harry said.

"You . . . you're going to be buying me . . . jewelry?" Hermione asked, stunned.

"Buy or lease, we have the finest selection in Britain," Gerrymander stated. "Not a magical or Muggle shop can compete with us." He smiled. "Mister Potter sent a note suggesting clip-on

earrings, although we can enchant them to stay attached, a necklace, and a bracelet. I have numerous options, if you would care to come into the display room. The room can be enchanted for natural light or any other lighting."

"We need lots of facets," Harry said. "The ambient light will be very indirect as we make our entrance, and if she doesn't mind, I want Hermione to sparkle, and I want the jewels to as well, and without magical enhancement."

Hermione flushed slightly, and followed the little man into the display room.

"Do you want contrast or compliments?" the little man asked. "Diamonds will give you the most sparkle, of course." He looked at Hermione. "What sort of neckline will you be wearing, my dear?"

Hermione shyly traced the discrete scooped neckline, and described the shoulders and sleeves, which left most of her arms bare.

Gerrymander nodded and said, "If you agree with Mister Potter that you want to make an impression, may I suggest one of these two necklaces?" He pulled a box from under a table and opened it atop the display counter.

Hermione and Harry drew in great breaths. The centerpiece of the first necklace was a star sapphire, about three quarters of an inch across. Except for the clasp, the rest of the necklace appeared to be all stones -- blue diamond, blue quartz, blue topaz, clear diamond, sapphire, repeated in sequence. The second's centerpiece was a ruby-cut blue topaz, slightly larger than the star sapphire, and the rest of the wide necklace was made up of over two hundred small blue and white diamonds. Harry and Hermione both pointed to the second to try first.

For the bracelet, Hermione selected one with three large baguette-cut and three smaller brilliant-cut blue topazes, and three dozen small diamonds. Hermione retreated to a washroom to transfigure her blouse into the approximate shape of her gown. That done, she decided to take the second necklace and the bracelet, and on matching blue topaz earrings, which each had a small diamond chip accent.

"You are leasing these," Hermione hissed.

Harry whispered back that he could buy them if she wanted them.

"I don't care! I shudder to think what these must cost!" she whispered back.

"Is there a problem?" Gerrymander asked.

"None at all," Harry said.

"The security goblins from Gringotts will be delivering a number of family jewels for the Ball," Gerrymander said. "From the bank, private vaults, and from here. These should arrive at Hogwarts at between One-thirty and Three o'clock Christmas Day. A house elf will collect them after the Ball and return them to the goblins. Is this satisfactory?"

Harry and Hermione nodded, and left. "Do I want to know how much this is costing?" Hermione asked.

"If they are lost or stolen, a whole lot," Harry said. "If not, one percent of the full retail price, which is about a third of what he would normally charge, but I agreed he could display a small copy of my coat of arms." Harry pointed, and Hermione saw that one large window was actually partially made up of small stain glass panels, all representing coats of arms.

"There's my family's," Harry said, pointing. "I agreed he could keep showing that, as it's been on display for three hundred years, and he'll be putting my personal one up today or tomorrow, I bet."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said, kissing his cheek.

"You're very welcome," Harry replied. "Let's get some warm butterbeer."

The next day, Harry took Hermione to the Room of Requirement. They sat on a sofa for a few

minutes, and finally Hermione said, "What's wrong?"

"Do you know how wizarding Britain works?" Harry finally asked.

"Not really," she admitted. Harry knew how difficult that was for Hermione to admit. "There aren't any books on it at all."

"Wouldn't you call that strange?" Harry asked.

"I'm starting to wonder if it isn't criminal," Hermione answered. "So, tell me."

"Let's start with the Wizengamot," Harry said. "The Wizengamot, the political and legislative body of the British Ministry as well as the court of appeal, is primarily an oligarchy. There are fifty seats and when a member dies or is kicked out, the new member is selected by the others of the group or subgroup that person represented. Five seats are reserved for the Minister, the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, and three of the Department Heads chosen by the Minister. Since it takes a vote of thirty to dismiss a Minister, that gives any incumbent a fair advantage."

Hermione nodded her understanding.

"Fifteen seats are reserved for the heads of the so-called Original First Families, also called the Ancient and Most Noble Families, the one hundred and twenty-three families which founded the English Wizengamot back in 924. Dumbledore and I would be examples, although I'm not eligible until I'm seventeen. Right now, there are only sixty-three people left eligible, because of intermarriage. I am eligible in at least four different ways, for example."

Hermione again nodded.

"Some of those family heads will never be really considered for seats, of course," Harry went on. "For example, Mister Weasley's great uncle is head of the Weasley family, and lives in a small cottage and barely interacts with his family, let alone anyone else." Seeing there were no pressing questions yet, Harry continued, "Other families were added to the Original First Families. Some were heads of Welsh, Scots, and Irish families which had formed their own councils, some were wealthy families brought in over the first three centuries. Actually, since Gryffindor founded both the English and Welsh Councils, I'm eligible that way as well."

Hermione nodded that she was following.

"Right now, there are ninety-six heads of these other families, who are eligible for a further fifteen seats, and those are the so-called Ancient and Noble Families. Now add in the Most Noble Family heads. So, we have fifteen seats drawn from sixty-three people, and a further fifteen drawn from a hundred and fifty-nine. The other fifteen are appointed by the Wizengamot as a whole. Right now, fourteen of the fifteen more-or-less open seats are drawn from the two groups of First Families, either the Heads of the House or other notable members, as are two of the five Ministry members. One reason Fudge is so politically insecure is that he's the first Minister in Britain not drawn from those families."

"I never realized that it was that restrictive," Hermione said, aghast.

Harry nodded. "And you know a lot of the heirs, because of the attrition of families during Voldemort's rising. Just in our Year at Hogwarts, Susan Bones, Neville, and myself are three heirs of the Original First Families; while Kevin Entwhistle is the younger son of an heir and Millicent Bulstrode would be an heir if the five remaining males in her family die without magical children. Malfoy and Goyle are the eldest sons of Heirs to their Ancient and Noble Families."

Hermione frowned. "What about Susan's aunt. . . ?"

"The daughter of the last male heir of the Bones line would inherit before the sister," Harry pointed out.

"Oh, of course." Another idea occurred to Hermione. "And what about Sirius?"

"Sirius is head of the Black line, an Ancient and Noble Family, but not Original. If he dies without magical children and without restoring a cousin of his who was officially banished from the family, Andromeda Tonks, then the eligibility dies out with Narcissa Malfoy and her other sister, as Draco is eligible already. The entire group of First Families would then appoint a new family, or more likely an additional branch of a Founding Family, to the group. It was decided back in 1803 that the two groups would not be allowed to drop below the current numbers. If an Ancient and Noble Family, say the Malfoys, were promoted, then they become a Most Noble Family. If a new family were added to the second group, they'd be known just as a Noble Family. If Sirius does restore her mother, then if Tonks has children, they will all inherit the eligibility."

"So what counts is magic, not legitimacy?" Hermione asked.

"If there are any legitimate, magical heirs, the illegitimate don't count," Harry said with a shrug. "Just like if there are any magical male heirs they can find, women don't count. They do allow for magic skipping one generation, at the discretion of the head of the family, or if it will prevent a line from dying out, but after that, Squibs don't count for Wizengamot membership. In addition, there are two types of marriage, and the children of a magical bonding would come ahead of children from a legal consort."

"So Voldemort could have entered some sort of power legitimately?" Hermione asked.

"I suppose, but the Gaunts hadn't won a seat in hundreds of years. Remember, Riddle was likely the illegitimate son of the last heiress, Merope Gaunt, and a Muggle she'd seduced with a love potion. It would have taken Riddle decades of hard work to restore his name to one worth being considered for the Wizengamot, not to mention needing at least some form of fortune. If there was any evidence of the marriage, then Riddle would have taken possession of the Riddle fortune after he killed them instead of squatting there like he likely is now."

Hermione decided to ignore Voldemort. "I take it from what you said at Gerrymander's that you have a fortune."

"Well, yes. And do you know all about magical taxes?"

"No," Hermione huffed. "Again, I couldn't find any printed information."

"Really? You'd think they wanted to keep the Muggle-raised ignorant." Hermione glared, so Harry went on. "Well, I'll let you research on how the Ministry was put under the Duchy of Lancaster in 1663, and the deal which allows all magical land to be subject to no governmental taxation if you really want to. Essentially, we pay very little in taxes. There are no death duties, for example, and we pay a one Knut per Galleon VAT on magical items, and three Knuts per Galleon on non-magical items sold through magical shops."

"That's . . . that's almost nothing!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry nodded. "And, since magical land ownership falls under a special trust of the Duchy of Lancaster, we don't pay any Crown taxes on most of it. We do have to pay for any utilities, but even in the cities most magical people don't bother with electricity. We do have to pay for water and the drains, but we mostly use a system that looks like gas lighting and heat, but which is magical, and both cheap to install and free to run. The Americans have a system that imitates panel lighting and which can run electrical appliances with an adaptor. The Pure-Bloods here are fighting its import."

"That figures," Hermione said.

"In addition, anything like income taxes on Muggle income, Muggle VAT, licenses, et cetera are dealt with on a sliding scale that makes magical accountants swoon, since they get a five percent commission. Basically, people pay upfront, and if they fill out the right forms, the Crown or local authority keeps between ten and thirty-three percent depending on which tax we're talking about, the Ministry gets between a fifth and a third, and they get the rest back."

"Really?" Hermione said, amazed.

Harry nodded. "If your parents gather up all their tax records and put the house and business in your name, I could give it all to the Potter Trust accountants at Gringotts. They'll get a fair amount of your parents' tax money back, less any commission, going back to the date of your Hogwarts letter. If most of their income is from the practice, which you would then own, they'd probably get about forty percent of the money back, although they'd technically be your dependents and employees."

"I'll be sure to tell them all of that," Hermione said, jotting herself a note.

"So, we pay very little in taxation, especially compared to Muggle Britain. For most other types of wealth, we can set up special trusts, so we have to pay almost nothing on certain types of income, including no taxes on most magical income. I still can't draw on it, of course, but last year the Potter Trust brought in over twenty-seven million pounds income from the Muggle world, net. It had to pay out under half a million pounds in taxes and accounting fees. The Trust had to pay less than ten thousand Galleons in fees and taxes on the magical income of just over two million Galleons. Most of it was just reinvested."

"I don't feel quite so bad about leasing the necklace," Hermione said.

"Hermione, I still have over two hundred thousand Galleons in my current account and it refills to the original amount every January until I turn seventeen. Don't worry, I don't see myself spending anywhere near two hundred thousand Galleons before the New Year, no matter how much I want to spoil you."

"I'll try not to worry," she said.

"As for the Ministry, the people there answer to the Minister, who has to answer to the Wizengamot and to the Queen."

"The Queen knows about us?" Hermione demanded.

"Yes, and she has more authority over us these days than she does over the Muggle Government, but less contact. Most of the Anglo-Saxon, Scots, Danish, and Norman kings had wizards as advisors, the most infamous being the ancestor of the Malfoys, who betrayed William II -- hence 'Bad Faith' for a family name. Elizabeth Woodville and Anne Boleyn each attended Hogwarts for five years and four years respectively -- Slytherins, unsurprisingly. With a witch for a mother and another for a paternal great-grandmother, it's hardly surprising that Elizabeth I had magical powers, although considering the times, she had to keep them hidden." Harry smiled. "Nicholas Flamel told me he trained her in Legilimency himself."

"But. . . ." Hermione protested, "but isn't he dead?"

Harry shook his head. "He did destroy the Stone, but he and his wife are living out normal wizarding lifetimes, up in the Yukon. Anyway, Mary Queen of Scots attended Beauxbatons for three years, and her great-grandson, Charles II, had magical powers, although he was trained by tutors, mostly during his exile. His intrigues with the magical world helped with his Restoration in 1660. The Minister of Magic is appointed by the Wizengamot, but he reports to both the Wizengamot and to the Crown, and he can really be dismissed by either -- technically the Minister of Magic is the Royal Wizard, or Witch as the case may be. I can assure you, Her Majesty knows a lot more about the wizarding world than the Prime Minister does. A fair number of the Royals have had magical powers, although no monarch since Charles II."

Hermione was trying to keep up with the flow of information -- not something she was used to having to do with Harry.

"Back to the Ministry, did you know that no Pure-Blood is ever hired at the lowest parts of the salary scale, and no one who isn't at least a Full-Blood is a sub-head of a Department or higher, other than a few of the aurors?"

"So the Ministry itself discriminates," Hermione said. "And I take it none of the Wizengamot are anything less than Full-Bloods either?"

"Forty-eight Pure-Bloods, two Full-Bloods," Harry said.

"So if you married, say, Luna or Ginny. . . ."

"Our children would have to marry someone of similar blood-status or 'purer' for their children to be considered Full-Bloods themselves, and the process would need two more generations before the children would be 'Pure-Bloods'." Harry grinned. "Of course, of the forty-eight Pure-Bloods on the Wizengamot, about ten just qualify themselves for that status, and another twenty-eight have at least one parent who just barely qualifies. And the blood terms only took on the current meanings in the late seventeen hundreds. The whole claptrap is really only a bit more than two hundred years old, meaning Dumbledore's grandparents were the first generation where it was commonly used. And, if they were to tell the truth, assuming they even know it, there are an awful lot of question marks about ancestry of anyone but the really rich and propertied even two hundred years ago."

"So it's mostly built on bogus ideas and bogus data," Hermione said.

"Exactly," Harry agreed.

"Leaving that aside, there's at least one more important thing you need to explain," Hermione said.

"And what's that?"

"How are you an heir to Merlin?"

"Well, that goes back to the other time stream," Harry said. "When I turned seventeen, I was asked to go to Gringotts. That's when I learned I was the Heir of Gryffindor. It turns out that the Founders also helped create the tunnel system, and they each had a vault, which will only open for those the recognize as heirs of some sort. I was quite surprised to see that all four accepted me."

"I can believe that," Hermione said.

"The governors were trying to close down Hogwarts. I stepped in and stopped them, essentially taking over the school for a bit. It turns out, all four Founders had secret chambers."

"Really? Then why all the fuss? Because of the basilisk?"

"In part because of the basilisk, and in part because Slytherin put the Chamber under something like the Fidelius when he left and outlived the other Founders," Harry answered. "I really have no idea how the entrance was built into Myrtle's bathroom, although I suspect that it was Hogwarts itself which did that. Anyway, its location was 'lost'. Ravenclaw's Chamber is now that annex of the Library I told you about. Dumbledore, Pince, and the four Heads of House know about that. Hufflepuff's was incorporated into the Hufflepuff Settle back in the fifteen hundreds."

"So it's true that the Hufflepuffs have tunnels all over Hogwarts?"

"Let's just say it's an exaggeration" Harry said.

"And Gryffindor's?"

"Did you ever wonder at how high the Divination and Gryffindor Towers are?"

"No," Hermione said, "not really."

"Gryffindor's 'room' is two stories in the Tower, which we ignore because of some very powerful charms," Harry said. "I could see them after I turned seventeen, and can again. In addition, tell me about the base of the Divination Tower."

Hermione frowned. "It's a solid base, built on an extension of bedrock that reaches through the dungeons and ground floor, providing a solid face on Hogwarts' most vulnerable point."

"That's what it looks like," Harry agreed. "It's actually Merlin's Sanctuary. He built it into the living rock, as they used to call it, and Hogwarts was built here in part because of the Sanctuary and in part because there is an ancient stone circle here. The stones of the circles, left in place, form some of the inner walls of the castle. The high altar is still in place, underneath the Headmaster's Office."

Harry gestured at the Room of Requirement. "This room is a magical node, drawing power from both."

"And?"

"And when I took over Hogwarts, I was allowed to be the first person to enter Merlin's Sanctuary since the death of Gryffindor," Harry said.

"None of this is in Hogwarts: A History," Hermione complained.

"I didn't write it, so don't blame me," Harry teased. Hermione frowned. Harry stood and said, "We have the first dancing lesson tomorrow night, but would you care to give me some private instruction now?"

Hermione's frown slowly twisted into a smile.

Chapter VI

The last three weeks of term went past fast for Harry. When the story of Tom Riddle came out in The Quibbler, there was something of an uproar. Luna had found a few photos in the library of Tom Riddle while at school, while Mr. Lovegood had found a few images of 'Lord Voldemort' during the period where he was preaching his hatred more directly to Pure-Blood groups in the late 1950s through the very early 1970s. There was also an image of Riddle from a Daily Prophet photo that showed many of the merchants of Knockturn Alley at a meeting to oppose proposed regulations on artifacts in 1948, and even a grainy image of Riddle in the crowd of an anti-Muggle rally in Vienna in the early 1950s.

The images showed the progressive dehumanization of Riddle -- Tom Riddle, Riddle the Head Boy with one Horcrux, and how Voldemort looked with three, four, and five, although the article did not speculate on what 'dehumanizing Dark rituals' Riddle had subjected himself to. There was documentation of Riddle's background, and it was clear from the article that Riddle's blood-status had not mattered to his followers in the 1940s through the early 1970s; what had mattered was his descent from Salazar Slytherin and his advocacy of Pure-Blood culture and hatred of the Muggle world. Several flyers and reprints of early speeches and pamphlets reminded people that they had known all along who Voldemort was, they just had not cared, as he had served as a rallying point for those who loved the Pure-Blood agenda, and for those who disliked it and who could then point at Voldemort as the extreme version and condemn it.

The article was more discreet when talking about the Death Eaters -- who might have been condemned unfairly, who might have gotten off claiming Imperius, who might have been never suspected were all mentioned as categories and in general, but not named, other than Sirius Black, whose case was stated to be 'confusing' and whose conviction 'was of doubtful legality'.

Voldemort's fate was also debated. That he had been defeated by The-Boy-Who-Lived was clear, but no body had been found. The choices seemed to be that Voldemort had lost his power or even his magic and was no longer a threat, or that he might yet stage a comeback.

On the personal front, Harry and his friends made great strides the hour after dinner Monday through Thursday each of those three weeks, as they practiced dancing. Ron was not overly-pleased that Neville had asked Ginny. Harry had made the suggestion early (Neville was thrilled by the idea, and Ginny wanted to go the Ball), and had cast protective charms on Ginny's feet the first few nights. By the end of term, Neville had enough confidence and skill that Ginny no longer needed the charms.

Harry and Hermione made every dance meeting, and made Ron go as well. While Hermione had, at least for the moment, given up nagging Harry about anything, she continued to have a go at Ron about homework and the dance practices. Harry made certain Ron arrived to them at least somewhat cheery, although that took walking a delicate line of encouraging Ron to enjoy holding a girl he was becoming more attracted to and denying that Neville was having anywhere near as good a time holding Ginny.

Ginny and Marietta, both very impressed with the dedication of their partners, were actually starting to feel some genuine affection for them. Harry and Hermione were already far past that stage of course, and Cedric and Cho (who were also present every night) were not far behind Harry and Hermione.

Meanwhile Justin was a very confused young man. Luna was unlike anyone he had ever thought of meeting. She was also nice, smart, and considerate, as well as very pretty and rather sweet. He was

starting to look past her eccentricities by the end of the second practice dance.

Luna was blossoming in the considerate, supportive atmosphere, much to Cho and Marietta's surprise. Luna would always be eccentric and naively and painfully honest, but she no longer felt it necessary to jump into every lull in a conversation with her observations or theories. She was made part of the conversations instead of being the perpetual outside observer awkwardly trying to add to them.

Any other number of couples showed up to the practices after the second night, and they were from all of the Houses (as two Slytherin girls, a Fifth and a Sixth year, had dragged their Ravenclaw dates there to make certain they could dance). Several Beauxbatons students also attended, as did a few of the Durmstrangers.

The Darker elements in Slytherin were confused by all this inter-House bonding, and also confused that they received so little direction from the Head of House. While Professor Snape had always been indirect and even subtle, his opinions and even at times directions had been very clear. Now it appeared he had abandoned his charges to what was threatening to become a rather sickening group hug, as a large section of the House fell in with the rest of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and even the Durmstrang students (although not their Headmaster) in being friendly with each other.

It wasn't that Snape was participating in the growing festive mood. In fact, Snape was being sullen and hostile to nearly everyone. Hostile towards everyone, Draco Malfoy and a few of the intelligent observers (Bulstrode, Davis, and Greengrass) in the Fourth year Slytherin/Gryffindor Potions class saw, except towards Potter and Granger, two of his three previously favorite targets. Snape was even treating Longbottom with more resigned contempt than active hostility.

Malfoy didn't understand the situation at all. The three teen girls, however, at least had a general idea. No one knew what had transpired when the rest of the class had cleared out that Friday after the First Task, but whatever had happened between Potter and Snape, there was no question that Snape was terrified it would happen again.

For Millicent Bulstrode, this posed a problem. One of her grandmothers was the product of a Pure-Blood wizard and a Muggle. She was therefore still not well-thought of, despite also being nearly an heiress to eligibility on the Wizengamot. She was certain if a few relatives would just die off, her treatment would improve a great deal. Of course, that was one reason that branch of the family stayed away from her's.

She had been drawn into Draco's faction early, and had supported him despite his many failings and failures. She wondered if it might not be the time to move a bit towards neutrality. She had decided she needed to observe what went on during the break. She therefore allowed Crabbe and Goyle fight for the right to take her to the Ball, as both had to go since Draco was, and both were desperate not to be dateless.

The two had managed to send each other to the Hospital Wing twice in the second-to-last week of term, and neither was ready to concede defeat. At that point, Ted Nott had stepped in and tricked them into sending each other to the Infirmary a third time, and claimed Millicent for himself. Deciding he might not be quite as spiritless as she had thought, Millicent had gone along.

Tracey and Daphne were already intriguing with others inclined to neutrality, and Millicent knew that she might not have long to change sides, if she wanted to. She had been surprised when Nott -- well, Ted -- had merely told her that it was his uncle who was the Death Eater, not his late father, as most people suspected. That told her that he was willing to at least investigate the possibilities with her, and if she was lucky, in many senses of the phrase.

Harry was surprised at how many students left on the train. Then he realized that he had been so preoccupied in trying to work up the courage to ask Cho out in the original time stream that he hadn't noticed that over a third of the older students had left, many intending on returning for the

Ball.

Hermione had been curious as to how Harry might be preparing for his future confrontation with Voldemort. She knew that Harry was usually about the last person to bed at night. When she had been called it a night at 10:45 every evening, she had seen Harry sit down with books on defense and dueling. That first Sunday morning of the Break, she had been shocked to be woken up at 5:10 by a hand and forearm sticking out from under an invisibility cloak. The hand uncovered her mouth and dropped a note, asking her to meet him in the Room of Requirement. Hermione vowed to make certain she went to bed dressed decently, as obviously Harry could now by-pass the anti-male alarms on the stairs.

It took Hermione nearly half an hour to wake up, dress, and make her way to the Room. For the next hour, she watched Harry as he continued to exercise and shadow-spar (with both dueling moves and hand-to-hand), followed by 15 minutes of fast swimming in a pool which had suddenly appeared.

At 6:55, the pool suddenly disappeared, leaving Harry resting on the floor for a few minutes. Then he dressed and the two went down for breakfast. "That was a hard workout," Hermione observed. "Do you do that every morning?"

"Every morning," Harry agreed.

"Harry, how little sleep are you getting?" Hermione asked, concerned. She had wanted to share a complete day with him, but this was a bit more than even she had expected.

"I need four to four-and-a-half," Harry answered, "and I've been getting at least four every night since I've been back."

"Well, I suppose that explains how you can do so much," she said.

"It certainly helps," Harry agreed, not telling her he also had Merlin's prototype time-turner available.

Hermione took Harry's hand and asked, "I know you hate fame. How do you think you'll handle it once you defeat Voldemort?"

"I'll be somewhat famous as the Triwizard Champion, but if I do it right, the only people who will know about Riddle will be you, me, Dumbledore, Sirius, Remus, and Luna," Harry said. "That does bring up a subject we need to talk about. I know you want to get your background research done for the winter homework, so how about we meet back at the Room at Two?"

"Alright," Hermione said.

"You look tired," Harry told Hermione as he paced outside the Room of Requirement to set it up.

"I am," Hermione said.

Harry smiled and kept pacing. When they entered the Room, Hermione gave a small squeak of surprise when their clothes changed into pajamas, dressing gowns, and slippers. Hermione looked around and shivered a bit in anticipation.

The room was a fairly good-sized bed chamber. One entire wall was a large window, showing a snowy night scene, and there was a strong chill coming from it. Opposite was the door leading out, and Harry assured her that their clothes would reappear on them as soon as they stepped out of the Room's environment. There was also another door which led to a lavatory. The third wall was a large fireplace with a warming fire, with a small loveseat for two just angling off to the side.

One the fourth side was taken up by an enormous bed. Hermione looked nervous.

"I thought you could use a nap, nothing more," Harry assured her. "I can use the time to meditate."

"Alright," Hermione said cautiously.

Harry gestured to the loveseat. "But first, we have to talk."

"Alright," Hermione repeated.

Harry sat and took Hermione hands in his. "I think you know I love you." Hermione nodded. "And I know why you can't make more of a commitment than you have at the moment. So again, don't think I'm pushing anything."

"I trust you, Harry," Hermione said simply, and with total faith that he wouldn't ask more than she was ready to give.

"Good," Harry said. "Before we lay down, we need to talk about something completely different."

"And that is?"

"House elves."

Hermione's mind jumped the tracks. "Well," she admitted, "I didn't think that's what we'd be discussing alone in our jammies."

"We'll come back to us in our 'jammies'," Harry said. "To go back to what we were talking about on our way to breakfast, if I were to kill Voldemort in front of a crowd, I think one of three things might happen. First, they'd never believe it was him, and I could be arrested for killing someone."

"I guess I could see that," Hermione said.

"Second, they'd believe it was him, but would arrest me anyway, because it would have to be an execution, Hermione. I couldn't risk bringing him in front of a group of people and his getting away or hurting or even killing by-standers." Seeing Hermione was processing it, Harry added, "You can't claim self-defense if you execute someone, at least not easily."

"I suppose not," Hermione conceded. "Now what aren't you telling me?"

"Well, when Voldemort dies, so does everyone who is Marked."

"What!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Voldemort is draining away a tiny part of their magic. When he was disembodied, they all passed out. When I killed him in the other time line, that yanked the magic out of them, and when that was drained, their life force."

"Does Dumbledore know that?"

"If he does, then he's been playing things fast and loose with Snape," Harry answered. "So, the most likely scenario is that I would be charged with the death of the Death Eaters. So, I won't be terribly famous, because I have to let Wormtail bring Voldemort back, and then kill Voldemort without anyone knowing."

"We might be able to think of some ways around those problems, just in case it gets out, but we can come back to that. Instead, what does that have to do with house elves?" Hermione asked, deciding to come back to this rather disturbing development later.

"When we leave Hogwarts, we will have been together for three and a half years."

"True."

"Even if you on to an apprenticeship or to University, well, it would be nice if we were at least planning our wedding, assuming we're still together."

"Also true," Hermione agreed, for she had thought all this out long before Harry had even joined with his future self.

"So, as things look now, if we stay in magical Britain we will have a difficult time, due to our

background," Harry said. "Our choices will be to stay and fight for the civil rights of elves and werewolves and such, or go to someplace like North America or Australia, where there aren't those sort of problems at least."

"I say we stay and fight," Hermione said. "I grant you, we might change our minds."

"Then here," Harry said, handing Hermione three sheets of parchment. "House elves are not really free anywhere, but they do have protection outside of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. This is the contract a wizard who is an elf contractor, as they are called in North America, has to sign."

Hermione frowned and looked the parchment over, while Harry said, "You have to understand that elves have to serve someone. If we can get the North American, or better yet the Australian rules adopted, at least they can't be abused."

Hermione finished reading and glared at Harry, who said, "I know, it's far from what you'd like, but you also have to consider what they would like, and what they've been conditioned to."

"Okay, say I do accept that. Then what?"

"There are two free elves here at Hogwarts."

"Dobby is one," Hermione said.

"Yes, and he's happy, but would be even happier employed by me with one of those contracts," Harry said. "Winky is here, too. She's very depressed and drinking a lot of butterbeer."

"And that's bad because?"

"Because even though it has only half a percent of alcohol, her drinking one butterbeer would be like you drinking a bottle of stout and she's drinking about twenty a day. She really wants to bond with someone the old-fashioned way, but she might go for this." Harry pointed at the contract.

"So, you want to contract two elves?" Hermione asked.

"No, just Dobby. I thought you might want to contract Winky, with something like this added," Harry said, handing Hermione another sheet of parchment.

Hermione read it and sighed, since it was mostly about how she would have to treat her elf. "Was I really so hard-nosed about elves' rights?" she asked.

"Yes," Harry said simply. "Dumbledore okayed their staying here, although we'd be paying their wages, of course. Winky would be taking care of the Gryffindor girls' dorms, Dobby the boys. We wouldn't see them unless we specifically called for them."

"I guess I really do trust you, Harry," Hermione said.

"Dobby!" Harry called.

Dobby popped into the room. "Harry Potter sir?"

Harry nodded, "She's agreed, Dobby."

"Thank you, sir, miss. Dobby will be right back!"

Dobby popped out and then popped back with a slightly swaying Winky. "Miss wants Winky?" Winky asked.

"Yes, Winky," Hermione said.

"Miss wants Winky with nasty contract, or will Miss allow Winky to bond with her properly?"

"The contract is proper," Harry said. "It just isn't as strict."

"Please, Winky, contract with me," Hermione said, feeling sorry for the little elf.

Dobby quickly explained how she and he would be working during the school year. Winky looked at Hermione. "This is Mistress' orders?"

"If Winky agrees to the contract," Harry said, to which Hermione nodded.

"Dobby will sign now," Dobby said. He pinched his finger, drawing a drop of blood, and placed a large X on the last sheet of the contract Harry held out. "Dobby has already read it."

Harry pricked his finger and signed with a new quill. "Master Harry. . . ." Dobby started. Harry raised a warning finger. "Mister Harry," Dobby corrected himself. "Dobby will take Winky away until she sobers up and Miss Hermione has napped."

"Good idea," Harry said. With that, the elves disappeared. Harry stood and held out his hand.

Hermione looked at the bed, took Harry's hand, and stood. "I do need a nap, but perhaps we can sleep in a bit?" she asked hopefully.

"As you wish," Harry said with a smile.

"Come, stable boy," Hermione said, for *The Princess Bride* was secretly her favorite movie.

Harry picked Hermione up in his arms. "As you wish, milady Buttercup."

Just before she fell asleep some forty minutes later, Hermione murmured in Harry's ear, "You were right about the Parseltongue."

The equally-satisfied Harry merely kissed his beloved and decided to nap as well.

The infatuated couple awoke and took a shower together, and then conducted the contracting ceremonies for Hermione and Winky. At Harry's suggestion, Winky would make room in her schedule to help Hermione prepare for the Ball.

The pair finally left the Room of Requirement and went to have an early dinner. Ginny looked at them and said, "You two look well-satisfied with the world."

"We are," Hermione said.

"Very," Harry agreed.

Ginny made a face, but only for an instant. Neville, she had found, was actually more interesting than she had given him credit for, and his willingness to learn how to dance properly for her had improved his standing with her. The fact that her three brothers were less than happy about her interests at only thirteen added to Neville's appeal. Harry had stepped in when the twins had tried to be a bit too over-protective, and Ron was easily distracted by Marietta, who, it turned out, was nearly as interested in Ron's doing his homework as Hermione had been. Since she rewarded him with kisses, however, Ron seemed willing enough to please.

Chapter VII

Harry hosted a buffet dinner in an unused classroom Christmas Eve. Everyone who had come to the dance practices had been invited, and Dobby and Winky had had a grand time cleaning the classroom, preparing and serving the food, and even cleaning up afterwards.

The party broke up around 10:00 (for there had been dancing for several hours after most of the food had disappeared), and everyone went to bed, thinking good thoughts for the holidays.

Luna woke up early, wondering what the day would bring, wondering if her feet would stop hurting before the Ball (she had danced every dance the night before, nearly all with Justin, and her shoes had been a bit tight), and wondering how Christmas at Hogwarts might differ from Christmas at home. She hoped her father would not be sad.

"What's the matter, Lovegood?" one of her dorm mates whispered. Only three of the six Third year Ravenclaws had stayed.

Luna considered. Shirley had always treated Luna with strict neutrality, unwilling to help her but she had never participated in the hazing. "I was just hoping Daddy isn't too lonely without me," she said, as usual opting for honest openness.

"Where's your mother?"

"Oh, she died years ago," Luna said.

"Sorry, I didn't know," Shirley replied, a bit ashamed that she hadn't known after sharing a room with the girl for two and a half years.

"Thank you." Luna looked at the small pile of presents at the bottom of her bed. "Do we open these now, or wait for everyone to be awake?"

"Since it isn't even Seven, we should visit the bog and then you should let me wake Marlo up," Shirley said, getting out of bed. "The other years can decide for themselves."

"I'm up, I'm up," Marlo said, still not moving.

"Are you coming to the Ball tonight?" Luna asked.

"No," Shirley answered. "I'm here because my parents are in Nepal and Tibet, helping with the winter yeti observations. I am helping Creevey, though."

"I'm going," Marlo said.

"Well, you two can talk," Shirley said, "I'm peeing and then opening presents."

"Happy Christmas, Mister Harry," Dobby said to his employer, who was in the lotus position, floating three inches above his mattress.

"Good morning, Dobby," Harry said very softly, floating down to the bed. "There are presents for you and Winky, and remember, under the contracts, we can give you clothing."

"Dobby knows, but Winky might not like it," Dobby hesitatingly pointed out.

"I know. We're giving her some material, so she can make whatever kind of covering she likes."

"That is being a good idea, Mister Harry. Dobby took the liberty of making you something."

"Thank you Dobby. Shall I open it now, or with my other presents?"

"What're you whispering about?" Ron asked.

"It's just Dobby. Go back to sleep."

"Naw," Ron said. "Presents."

"Wha?" Seamus half asked.

"I said 'presents!'" Ron called out.

Dean made a noise, while Neville mumbled.

"Dobby will get back to work. Happy Christmas!"

"Happy Christmas," Harry agreed, and the little elf disappeared.

In less than ten minutes, the boys were in their dressing gowns and ready to open their presents.

"Why do we have to wear these?" Seamus asked.

"Did you give Lavender a present?"

"Of course."

"Did we all give our dates presents?" Harry asked.

They all had.

"We can't visit the girls. Can they visit us?" The boys hadn't thought of that. And with that, they shrugged and dove into their presents.

Harry was very happy with his presents this year, although the Dursleys, unaffected by the changing time stream, had sent the tissue again. He had received all the same presents as before, plus a few more, and this time Remus had signed the card on the knife that had just had Sirius' name on it before -- Harry knew that the two had chosen it together, even if Sirius had paid for it. Luna had sent him a dream catcher. It had been made with her own hair, plus some from Ginny and Hermione, as the strings. Harry immediately hung it up, knowing that Luna actually made excellent dream catchers. While he did not sleep as much as he had the first time through Hogwarts, he still suffered from bad dreams.

Colin had sent him a gift certificate for free photos. Harry had convinced Dumbledore to allow the little photography club to set up a booth to take photos of couples during the dance, and this was Colin's way of thanking Harry (since Colin was the president). Ron had happily donated his old dress robes to Colin, and Dobby had tailored them to actually look good on the smaller boy. Cho and Cedric had sent Harry cards. And in addition to the book she had sent him before, Hermione had given him a green cashmere scarf.

Marlo had already gone off to breakfast, so Shirley asked, "Why are you tearing up over those earrings? They certainly are your style, but they aren't that special."

Luna was looking at the twenty-three pair of odd little plastic earrings and one pair of dress earrings -- large rock crystals with diamond chip accents. "Harry sent them." Luna sniffed. "They're the first Christmas gifts anyone has ever given me, other than my parents."

"Ever?"

"Well, since my last grandparent died nine years ago," Luna allowed. She held up three cards. "And Justin, Hermione, and Cedric sent me cards."

Shirley smiled. "Well, put in two of the earrings, and let's get breakfast." She decided that it was time to stop being neutral, and make another friend.

"Alright," Luna said happily. She hung a small plastic candy cane from one ear and a plastic holly leaf from the other. She skipped out of the room and skipped back. Laughing, Shirley and Luna skipped all the way down to the common room on their way to breakfast. When asked why they were skipping by the girls there, Luna merely asked in return, "Aren't you happy it's Yule? We are." In the end, a daisy chain of eight laughing Ravenclaw and three Beauxbaton girls (including Cho) skipped and danced into the great hall. Cedric, Justin, and several of the other Hufflepuffs, plus a few of the present Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, stood and applauded them.

The girls all bowed back, and took their places.

"That was fun," Luna said brightly.

"You know," Cho said thoughtfully to Shirley, "it actually was."

Shirley looked at the beaming Luna. "I think we've been missing out on a good thing."

Hermione, Lavender, Parvati (she and Dean were going to the Ball together this time around), and Ginny visited the boys just before 8:00, and they all went to breakfast together. Hermione pulled on Harry's arm and whispered, "I can't believe you bought me those earrings!"

"Just be glad I didn't buy the necklace and bracelet," Harry teased.

"I'm glad you didn't," Hermione said.

"Do you know why I didn't?"

"Because you didn't want to spend all the money in your current account vault?" Hermione asked.

"No. I didn't because I know there are about twelve trunks, some with extra magical compartments, stuffed with jewelry in the regular vaults," Harry said. He smiled at the stunned look on Hermione's face. "If Gerrymander still has the jewelry and you like it, we'll trade for it after I turn seventeen. I know a great grandmother of mine liked blue topaz and diamond jewelry, so I might already have something you like as much." Harry had seen her portraits.

Harry enjoyed Hermione's speechless state the rest of the way to breakfast.

A little after 2:00, Harry and Hermione disappeared from the common room. No one bothered commented on it, figuring when they didn't return that the champions and consorts were dressing elsewhere. No one had noticed the goblin who delivered some jewelry had given the largest package to Hermione.

Instead, the pair of course went to the Room of Requirement. After a vigorous snogging session, Harry gave Hermione both a bath and several orgasms. Hermione then joined Harry in the shower and brought him off as well. After Harry had magically dried them off, Winky appeared and gave Hermione a manicure and pedicure. By the end of all that, Hermione was ready for a nap.

Since she had Winky's assistance for her hair, Hermione did not need nearly as long to prepare this time. When she woke up, she and Harry went back to heavy snogging until Hermione had her fifth orgasm of the afternoon. It was a very relaxed and smiling Hermione who then ate a light snack and sent for Winky at 6:30.

The pair was ready before 7:30, and so they left early. Harry was not totally amused to see that Viktor was escorting Mandy Brocklehurst from Ravenclaw, showing that he liked brainy, pretty fourteen and fifteen year old girls with lots of light brown hair.

Nearly half an hour later, as the champions and escorts lined up, Hermione whispered to Harry, "What's wrong?"

"I was wrong to lease those extra jewels," Harry almost growled.

"Why?"

"I thought they would add to your beauty. Last time, everyone was stunned by seeing for the first time that you are one of the most beautiful women on Earth," Harry answered in her ear. "Now they're partially distracted by the diamonds."

"Good," Hermione answered. "If I'm really that beautiful, I only want you knowing it. I'm going to drape myself in those family diamonds you talked about, so only you see just me."

That left Harry speechless as they lined up for the march in. Fleur and Roger Davies again were closest to the door, followed by Cho and Cedric, Mandy and Viktor, and Hermione and Harry. As all the students walked past, Hermione noted that Harry had been correct about the few who had seen her before. They were dazzled by the jewels, as every movement in the flickering touch light (which Harry had dimmed slightly to increase the effect, much to Professor McGonagall's confusion, as she couldn't tell who had over-powered her own magic) made them sparkle. Anyone who knew anything about jewelry (not that there were many in this group) understood that these were real diamonds.

Hermione had never understood what the fuss was about diamonds before. She had never seen them in this quantity or in this lighting. She wondered briefly what the women of the Russian Imperial court had looked under similar lighting.

Hermione saw Draco whisper something in Pansy's ear with a sneer. Pansy shook her head, and Hermione heard her response of, "Those are real, Draco." Draco looked shocked.

Harry whispered to Hermione, "Draco was stunned because he realized that the joint Malfoy-Black family jewels his mother has aren't even half what you're wearing."

"How can that be?" Hermione whispered back.

Harry shrugged. "Lucius' uncle was one of the early followers, and his father was Voldemort's first financial backer. They probably cashed in some of the unproductive wealth."

Harry saw that Percy was again present, which reminded him of the unpleasant future. Harry manoeuvred things so that while he was forced next to Percy, Viktor was seated next to Hermione, while Karkaroff was next to Mandy. Dumbledore was between Percy and Bagman, followed by Cedric, Cho, Roger, Fleur, and Madam Maxime, who completed the circle next to Karkaroff.

"I've been promoted," Percy said proudly as they sat.

"Congratulations," Harry said. "Was Penny unable to join you?"

Percy flushed, since Penny had just broken things off because of Percy's preference to work. "Yes," was all he said, however.

Dumbledore took the silence as a chance to order his pork chops. Harry decided to again change the time line and ordered the Beef Wellington instead of the goulash. Harry also decided to ignore the chatter from Fleur's side of the table, and to taunt Karkaroff a bit instead.

"So, Viktor," Harry said, "did you lot practice sailing on the Gulf of Finland before taking the Dutchman out, or did you sail her cold?"

Karkaroff almost choked on his goulash.

"Ve practiced, but ve are not allowed to say where," Viktor replied, "or to say name of ship."

"Then I suppose you can't tell me if Durmstrang is set above a small, deep bay or a fjord," Harry said mournfully. "I've never been certain of the difference." The look Hermione gave him said that either she was going to tell him the difference later, or that she would research the question and tell him later anyway. "In any case, I've always thought its setting there, seen from the water, was even

more spectacular than seeing Hogwarts from the lake."

"Really?" Mandy asked breathlessly.

"Oh, yes," Harry answered. "From the landward sides, though, I think Hogwarts has your castle beat."

"You . . . you have seen the castle?" Karkaroff demanded.

"Of course, many times," Harry answered nonchalantly. He turned to Hermione. "Their great hall isn't as high, as enchanted, or as old, but it certainly has a northern Gothic charm."

Karkaroff was turning interesting shades.

"And 'ave you seen Beauxbatons also, Mister Potter?" Madam Maxime demanded.

"Oh, yes, but of course," Harry answered in French which was grammatically perfect but still mostly had schoolboy English accents. "I do wish you had kept the original buildings. Sometimes it seems as so many of the great chateau were pulled down in the time of Louis the XIV and XV and replaced. Pretty styles, but the original castle was partially Roman and even had some Gallic foundations."

"So I understand," Maxime acknowledged, sticking to English.

"Is it true that there's still an old altar to Wotan set deep in the forest near Durmstrang?" Harry asked Karkaroff, switching back to English.

"I really cannot say," Karkaroff growled.

"Harry!" Percy protested.

"This tournament is to foster international cooperation and all that," Harry said in an injured tone. "I'm just trying to learn about our guests."

"And could you enlighten us as to when you visited out schools?" Karkaroff asked through clenched teeth.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Harry said, and started chewing another chunk of beef.

When the food had disappeared, Dumbledore stood and signalled for everyone else to do the same. The tables moved to the sides and the Weird Sisters came out to perform, looking a bit unhappy to have to do waltzes for the first numbers. They soon forgot their artistic preferences, and simply enjoyed playing two nice pieces, even if they weren't their own.

"Thank you for learning to dance," Hermione said between the two waltzes. "I know you did it for me."

"I wasn't about to disappoint you," Harry said.

"When do you want to sit down?"

"When you're tired of dancing, or the dance is over," Harry answered. They shared a quick kiss before the second waltz started. When that flowed into the first original song, Harry and Hermione simply flowed into the next set.

About a third of the way through the Ball, Harry said, "I almost forgot, we need to take a walk."

"If you say so," Hermione said. "Do we have time to stop at the toilets?"

"Good idea."

Coming out of the toilets, Hermione smiled to see Harry wearing his cashmere scarf and holding out a white stole. "Fur?" she asked.

"I asked the goblins permission for Dobby to search the vaults," Harry said. "I would never buy you a new fur."

Hermione thought about it. "Then thank you."

The pair witnessed Karkaroff leaving Snape, and Snape chasing a few couples back into the castle. "And what are you two up to?" Snape demanded, almost politely for him.

"Just getting some air, sir," Harry said. "I promise, nothing more."

"Very well. Do not stray from the path."

"No sir, not in any sense."

Snape made a face and moved off.

Harry took Hermione to near where Hagrid and Maxime were talking, and just before Hagrid made the confession about his ancestry, Harry had pulled out a small jar, muttered an invisible spell, and then closed the jar back up when a small dark object flew into it. Harry then moved back towards the dance.

"Harry, what was that?" Hermione asked.

"You'll see."

"I see you're a young man of your word," Snape said when they approached. "Perhaps you are slightly less like your father than I thought."

"I would hope I'm very different than he was when he was my age," Harry said. "He was an arrogant, egotistical, almost Malfoy-like prat his first five years. He did grow into something better, I believe."

"Perhaps," Snape said, allowing himself to be slightly impressed.

"Sir, did you know that Rita Skeeter was forbidden the grounds, except during the actual tasks?"

"I did," Snape agreed.

"Did you know that she is also not only an Animagus, but an illegal one as well?"

"No," Snape said, now interested, "that I did not know."

"She's a rather unattractive if gaudy beetle," he said, holding out the jar where the bug was buzzing angrily. "The paths really aren't warm enough to bring a stray tropical beetle out of hibernation or whatever, are they?"

"No, it isn't." Snape took the jar. "You are serious?"

"I am," Harry said. "I can't explain it, but the Headmaster would understand. I promise you, this isn't a trick."

"I see." Snape held up the jar. "And?"

"If you prefer, I can give her to the Headmaster. However, I believe there are two aurors on duty, since they always have at least two at any Weird Sisters concert."

"True."

"I understand the reward for turning in an illegal animagus is nine hundred Galleons." Snape looked torn. "If I'm wrong, I'll pay you double it," Harry said. "I'm not so rich that I would pay eighteen

hundred Galleons to make you look mistaken."

"Why?" Snape asked.

"You've heard of the carrot and the stick?" Harry asked. Snape nodded. Harry pointed at the very angry beetle. "Behold, a carrot."

"And you want no credit?"

"No credit, just any blame," Harry said.

"Very well." Snape took the jar and strode off.

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"So she couldn't hurt Hagrid, who was about to admit to having a giant for a mum. So she would stop hurting people, at least so easily. So we wouldn't have to kill her later. And as for Snape, so he might choose to let me modify his Dark Mark. The Headmaster believes in him. In the other time stream, he still chose wrong. On the off-chance he hasn't made that choice, that he really is torn, this is a chance for him to trust me. And if he betrays that trust, I'll have to kill him anyway."

Harry and Hermione had their picture taken by the photo club, and decided to leave a bit early. As they left the great hall, they ran into Snape. "It was Skeeter," he said. "You do realize what the penalty is?"

"She's fined three thousand Galleons and should be sentenced to living for six months without using magic?"

"She will loathe you," Snape warned.

"I know," Harry agreed. "Still, it was either give her to the aurors or feed her to Neville's toad. Since it was a preventative strike, I thought this best. For now."

Snape almost smiled, almost bowed, and moved on.

At that point, Cedric came over. "Harry. . . ."

"Have you figured out the egg, too?" Harry asked as they moved away from their dates to talk privately.

"You know?"

"Mermaids? Yes."

"But what are they going to take?" Cedric asked.

"My guess is Hermione, Cho, and Mandy," Harry said. "I don't think Fleur cares enough about Davies, but I don't see how she could rescue herself."

Cedric snorted, but quickly sobered. "I'm worried about that, Harry."

"I don't think they'd be in any actual danger, but I don't think we should mention it to them." Harry scowled. "I will talk with the Headmaster about their safety."

"You know him better than I do," Cedric admitted. "Thanks."

The two shook hands.

Chapter VIII

Rita Skeeter's arrest was buried in the back pages of The Daily Prophet, along with the information that she was also banned from reporting until July 1. Harry was glad to know that she was out of the way at least.

Harry had rather hoped that Sirius could be sneaked into the castle for at least a visit. Other than seeing Hermione and Luna, Harry most wanted to see Sirius again. Still, Harry was quite happy to spend most of the time he wasn't spending training with Hermione.

On New Year's Day, as Harry and Hermione snuggled in the large bed in the Room of Requirements, Hermione asked, "Is there any other news you can share, like about Hagrid being half-giant?"

Harry told Hermione the stories of Barty Crouch, father and son (although not how they were currently faring), Karkaroff, and Ludo Bagman. "I never could like Mister Crouch, but I do feel sorry for him," Hermione said. "How much are you keeping from me?"

"Quite a lot," Harry admitted. "It's not because I don't trust you, but because the future is a burden. Sharing it with you wouldn't lighten the load for me at all, and I know exactly what I need to do. I promise you, if there was any way that telling you could help, I would in an instant."

"I don't like not knowing, but I have to trust you," Hermione said.

"I understand," Harry agreed. "Tell me, how does knowing that Snape could die at the end of June if he doesn't allow me to work on his Dark Mark make you feel? Or that the other Death Eaters probably won't even have his chance?"

"Like I should be doing something about it, even though I know anything I do would make things worse," Hermione admitted.

"I'm juggling about two dozen different eggs, just like that one," Harry said. "Well, one less since Skeeter is out of the way. And I have different concerns about Snape now."

"Does all this stop when Voldemort's gone?"

"I would think so," Harry said. "I don't think I'll have any more relevant secrets that I would need to keep from you. I should be able to answer any question you have, if I know the answer."

"Like how you visited Durmstrang and Beauxbatons?"

Harry shrugged. "I taught Defense here and at those two schools for one year each, plus at two schools in North America."

Hermione snuggled down into Harry's arms, and listened to his strong, slow heart beat.

Harry was quite surprised when Snape gave him a short detention during the first Potions Class after the break, since Snape didn't fall down screaming in pain. He found out why when he came back to the Potions Lab at 3:30.

"Potter, be honest with me," Snape said. "You know the Dark Mark can't be removed without killing me, and that if the Dark Lord is truly killed, all of Marked die as well, don't you."

"I do, Professor," Harry said. "I didn't know any of the Death Eaters knew."

"I doubt if many do, besides myself and Rookwood."

"The Unspeakable now in Azkaban? Yes, I can see where you two might figure it out. I can modify your Mark so that when I kill the Dark Lord, you won't die with him."

"Modify," Snape growled. "You mean transfer my enslavement from him to you."

"I am going to win," Harry said.

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"You do believe it, you just hate it," Harry answered. "Other than the fact I'm my father's son, why do you hate it? You're no more a Pure-Blood than Tom Riddle was or I am, o Half-Blood Prince."

"You know about that?" Snape demanded.

"Isn't that what you called yourself when you were a student?" Harry asked, surprised.

"No, that's what my uncle, my mother's brother, called me," Snape retorted. "I used it while at school because if I adopted it, it could not be easily used against me. Even then, I only used it in Slytherin."

"That makes sense," Harry said. "You do know that Voldemort can't win?"

Snape glared at Harry but said nothing.

"I don't mean against me, I mean in general," Harry went on. "He tried for eleven years to overthrow wizarding Britain, and he failed. Do you think the rest of the wizarding world would stand by and ignore his revealing to the Muggles that we exist by trying to take them over as well? Do you think that the techno-mages of North America wouldn't use a magically modified cruise missile to fly up Tom Riddle's arse and explode? I don't care what he's done to himself, at best he'll need to be reembodied again every few years after being put back together again, if I don't destroy him whenever he does come back."

Harry stood. "I don't want anything from you, Professor Snape, except to be treated as a student should be treated, as Professors McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick treat the average Slytherin student. Once I leave Hogwarts, I never have to see you again. You have until the weekend before the Third Task to decide."

"Why?" Snape asked just before Harry left. "Why even give me the chance?"

"Maybe as a favor to the Headmaster," Harry said. "Maybe as a way of apologizing for my father. Maybe because the Sorting Hat thought I should be in your House. Does it matter?" He left.

"Perhaps it doesn't matter," Snape muttered. Snape realized both that Potter knew more than he had realized, but that the Boy did not know enough.

It wasn't clear what he should do about it, but he had to decide fast.

It was a happy group of friends who made their way to Hogsmeade the last Saturday of January. The weather was cold, and the snow had a hard crust on it. Draco Malfoy observed the group as they left Hogwarts: Potter and the Mudblood; the Weasel and Edgecombe; Diggory and the Chink; the Squib and the Weaselette; another Mudblood and the Loony. "What a bunch," he sneered. "Hogwarts' best? My arse." Pansy patted his shoulder in sympathy.

"Well, you are an arse and an ass," came a sneering voice.

"Getting a bit above yourself, are we, Davis?" Pansy sneered back.

"It's easy to get above you when you're always on your back or your knees," Tracey retorted.

"Shut it, trash," Draco snarled.

"You don't have a magical ancestor beyond the first Malfoy," Tracey retorted with a sniff. "At least some of my ancestors date back to pre-Roman Britain."

"And many of mine date back to ancient Babylon and Ur," Tracey's friend Daphne retorted. "It is time that those of us with real ancestry and talent take back our House."

"That lets both of you out on both counts," Tracey added.

Draco tried to whip out his wand, but fumbled it. Tracey grabbed it before he could gain control.

"It would do the gene pool a great deal of good if you lot would drown in it," Tracey said.

"What the hell does that mean?" Pansy demanded, never having heard the term before.

"Give me that back, or I swear I'll kill. . . ." Draco started, but his mouth disappeared before he could finish.

Snape snatched Draco's wand from Tracey. "Off to the village with the pair of you," he commanded. Since he had added no threats or punishments, they were glad to make their escape.

"You, too, Parkinson," he growled. Pansy scampered away fearfully.

Snape restored Draco's mouth and then his wand. "You are a grave disappointment," Snape said. "Your father suggested I stand back and let you assume leadership of the House, as he did when he was a Fourth year. You have failed. I suggest you keep your mouth shut and your head low for the rest of the year."

"Is that what you're doing?" Draco demanded.

"You are the Heir of an Ancient and Noble family," Snape reminded Draco. "What is your duty?"

"Cleansing our culture of everything Muggle," Draco declared, "and then destroy the Muggles."

"Then you are an idiot," Snape stated. Draco couldn't believe his ears.

Snape handed Draco a small pamphlet. "What's this?"

"If there were no Muggle-borns or mixing with Muggles, our society would totally die off in less than ten generations," Snape said. "With no economic connections to the Muggles, you'd have to learn how to magically control a plow and how to slaughter your own meat, or starve. Learn to grow your own fiber, weave your own cloth, or go naked. There are dozens of families with blood as pure as yours, families which have to live exactly as I described, families you despise. We are part of the human world, Draco. The superior part of course, but still part of it. We are the evolutionary future."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Draco demanded.

"It means, some day the Muggles will expand beyond their technology's capacity to produce both food and the energy needed to fuel their industry, and that, combined with their poisoning of the planet, will likely cause another Dark Age. A Dark Age where we shall come to power. We will need the wizarding-raised for our knowledge of magic. We will need the Muggle-raised for their abilities to manipulate what is left of Muggle technology. We will prevail. It is a variation of Salazar Slytherin's truest vision. It was all very well-explained by wizard named Malthus Bern, in a series of pamphlets written in the early nineteenth century. His ideas are summarized in that booklet. Lord Grindelwald tried to hurry along the Muggle collapse, and ended up creating two Muggle world wars and helping the Russian Revolution. But the Muggles weren't ready to collapse yet."

Snape's eyes bore into Draco's. "The Dark Lord has taken another tack. He knows we cannot overthrow the Muggle Government of Britain, let alone the world. The Muggles would destroy us if we push them too hard. No, he wants to destroy the magical Government, and being nearly immortal, he would be in a position to help the final overthrow of the Muggles, no matter if that is in a hundred years or a thousand."

"But . . . but he loathes the Muggles! and the Mudbloods!"

"He loathes the Muggles, and the Muggle-lovers," Snape corrected. "He loathes the aristocrats who rule magical Europe, too."

"But. . . ."

"But you think of yourself as one of them? Your grandfather and great uncle didn't think so. They were excluded from the Wizengamot because of their financial dealings with Muggles. Your father understood this as well. He sits on the Wizengamot because of wealth made in the Muggle world and the backing of the Dark Lord, and he hates everyone who is not of use on both sides."

"I don't understand," Draco admitted, confused.

"Read that pamphlet," Snape commanded. "Then bring your questions to me."

Draco picked up the pamphlet and looked at Snape. "Does Potter know any of this?"

"No, he does not," Snape said. 'But he seems to be getting close on his own,' he thought. 'It's time to tell him.'

Harry looked at Snape and simply said, "What?"

"Can you possibly deny the possibilities? Think Potter. One, the Muggles do somehow keep their technology ahead of their destructiveness. In that case, we will likely be forced up against a wall and destroyed. Two, their technology destroys them, and possibly us as well -- in some sort of nuclear war perhaps? Three, they collapse and we take over."

"I think you're over-simplifying," Harry said. "I must say, a plan for a limited take-over at least seems more plausible than Riddle taking over everything. Still, why all the killings of innocents?"

"Innocents? To the Dark Lord, there are those who are with him and those who aren't," Snape said. "And tell me, was the Headmaster wrong in telling me that you told Lupin that he wanted to spare your mother? She was just the sort of person he valued, Potter, just as he valued me. Why do you think there were no deaths from the basilisk? He was trying to assert authority."

"How about Myrtle?"

"Myrtle? Oh, that annoying ghost? What about her?"

"Wasn't she a Muggle-born?"

"The daughter of a Muggle-born and a Muggle, but she was Sorted into Slytherin," Snape said. "She still hasn't realized that her rather annoying crush on her Prefect and her defense of all things Muggle are what led to her death."

Harry knew that this didn't square with what Harry had heard from the basilisk in the pipes, but it did seem as if Snape actually believed this nonsense. "I think you may believe all this, but if so, Voldemort was just feeding you what you wanted to hear," Harry said. "If we are destined to take over, pushing things along won't help."

"What?" Snape said sardonically, "no grand Dumbledorean defenses of the Muggles?"

"No," Harry said. "They're more imaginative than we are, but they're just people, like us. If their cultural customs condemns them, then it will. If our cultural customs condemns us, it will. Voldemort just wants power."

"And you don't?"

"No," Harry spat.

"Can you prove it?" Snape asked.

"No." Harry grimaced. "I do know that keeping power is as difficult as getting it. Even if I wanted power, I wouldn't want to have to keep looking over my shoulder."

"What do you want?"

"I want at least a slightly fairer wizarding world. To put it in your terms, I would want to bring the various parts together, so that we'd be stronger against direct Muggle interference."

"Like werewolves?" Snape asked with his trademark sneer.

"Yes. Not the freedoms werewolves like Greyback want, but something more like the vampires were granted last century."

"You know about Greyback?" Snape demanded.

"I do," Harry answered. "If you want to bag a werewolf, go hunt him."

"You know, your mother was in some ways a wiser, far less pedantic version of your Granger," Snape mused. "She also wanted to improve creature rights, until your father convinced her that all would be well when he and Black managed to take their rightful places on the Wizengamot."

"I hope you're wrong about that," Harry said.

"Why?"

"Because either he was fooling her, or he was fooling himself," Harry answered. "If they ever selected either my father or Sirius, it would only be after decades of intrigue, if ever."

"You're correct," Snape said, surprised. "I really do believe your father believed that he would be selected by the time he was thirty, as Dumbledore's representative in the rising generation."

"I can't see Dumbledore exerting that much direct influence," Harry said.

"I can't either, but he and Black were both raised to believe they would automatically go onto the Wizengamot."

"If I can destroy Voldemort publicly and get away with it, I'll be happy if, over the decades, I can get ten seats added to the Wizengamot that are actually elected, plus secure the creatures rights."

"Plausible, if not likely," Snape said. "And you did say decades. You at least know it won't be easy." Snape shook his head. "I don't like those ideas, but they are at least reasonable reforms. Your father was a genius in some ways, but an arrogant, idle spoiled prat in others. You like to think he would have changed. Maybe. I doubt it."

"Then why are you trying so hard to change Malfoy?" Harry asked. "He's much more arrogant and spoiled than my father ever was, and has less to be arrogant about."

"Your paternal grandfather was, by all accounts, a decent man, and a conscientious member of the Wizengamot. He may have spoiled your father for all I know, but I am sure he didn't sadistically twist your father's mind. Lucius twisted Draco, I don't know why, as he was the most pragmatic of the Dark Lord's followers. He seems to have come to believe everything people said about our values. I am trying to fix the damage."

"Why?"

"The Dark Lord sought control over all aspects of our lives," Snape said. "He assigned me to be Draco's godfather."

"Fair enough," Harry said.

"Here," Snape said. "I would appreciate these back." He handed Harry a set of the pamphlets. "If you loan them to Miss Granger before returning them to me, remind her not to pencil in comments."

"I will."

The next Saturday, Harry asked Hermione, "What did you think of those pamphlets?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "They read well, and they're well-argued. They certainly put

Grindelwald and even Voldemort into context. I'd hate to think they were overly-accurate, but I suppose they might be."

"I know what you mean," Harry said. "They do explain why Voldemort could possibly think he could get away with it. It still shows his egotism, though, just like it does Grindelwald's."

"In what way?"

"Let's say Bern is right, and Muggle society will some day crash and burn, leaving the magically-raised to rule and the Muggle-raised as the bridge between magic and whatever is left of technology. That we are the future of humanity, and it's not all the wizarding version of the racist Muggle eugenics of the nineteenth and early twentieth century."

"Go on," Hermione urged.

"Well, if they make Muggle culture crash too early, it might recover and fight the magical," Harry said. "Still, their egos demanded that they take a hand in creating fate. If they really believed in the message of the pamphlets, they would have worked to reform wizarding society and work with the Muggle-raised. Grindelwald did that to some extent, but it back-fired on him when the Muggle-born involved in the Russian Revolution turned on the magical communities and led the Bolsheviks right to their hidden communities, where they mowed them down with machine guns. They both just used these theories to promote themselves."

"And the theories themselves?"

Harry shrugged. "You and I could use them to sell our ideas, which is no doubt what Snape hopes we'll do. Since it's Snape's idea, I know we don't do that without a lot more background checking."

"With whom?"

"I suggest Remus and maybe Sirius," Harry said.

"May I write them for us?" Hermione asked.

"Sure."

"I'm surprised you never heard of these booklets," Hermione mused.

Harry shrugged. "Not many people were trying to defend Grindelwald or Voldemort at the time." And they went on to talk about Valentine's Day, which was on a Tuesday that year.

"What are you giggling about, Loony?" one of Luna's less sympathetic roommates demanded. It was Valentine's Day, and she had woken up in a bad mood, as Loony had, of all things, admirers and she didn't.

"Shut it, Smythe," Shirley growled. All the Ravenclaws knew lots of magic, but Shirley was willing to take a slap or curse in order to administer a beating to any opponent. The others had learned not to cross her over the previous two and a half years. Now that she was friends with Lovegood, it had become impossible to prank the girl. "You get a haul already?" Shirley asked Luna.

"Huh-uh, come look," Luna said.

Shirley saw that Luna had gotten cards from Justin and Harry, and a large pile of chocolates and other candies. Luna said, "Please everyone, help yourselves to any of the sweets."

All her dorm mates, save Marlo Smythe, did just that, thanking Luna as they took them.

"No jewelry today?" Lavender teased.

"No, thank goodness," Hermione said.

"Really?" Parvati asked.

"Really," Hermione stated. "I'm not dating Harry for presents. I would be dating him even if he was poor." She smiled, deciding to twist the knife in her dorm mates where it would hurt them. "If you want to look at things that way, if we stay together, I'll have every material thing I could possibly want Why push?"

Parvati and Lavender wandered off, a bit confused but thoughtful.

Chapter IX

Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Luna walked Harry down to the lake for the Second Task. "Where's Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Professor Dumbledore asked for her last night," Ginny asked. "Is she alright?"

"She had better be," Harry growled. "Why don't you two go pump Percy and see if he knows anything about his boss. Crouch should be here."

"Right," Ginny said.

"Prat doesn't know anything but cauldron bottoms," Ron muttered, but did as Harry asked. Neville waved and followed Ginny.

"Is Hermione at the bottom of the lake, Harry?" Luna asked, worried.

"She is, but she should be in a magical sleep," Harry said.

Luna held on to Harry's arm. "Be careful. Something feels off."

"I agree, and I will," Harry answered. Luna kissed Harry's cheek and went to stand next to Justin. Harry went to stand next to the other champions. On the signal, all four striped down to their bathing costumes. Harry had been too nervous to notice the first time, and was disappointed to see that Fleur wasn't in a bikini.

After the announcements, the whistle sounded and three of the champions waded into the water about waist high, cast their spells, and went in deep. Harry waded in and pulled out the gillyweed he had decided to go ahead with. It took nearly a minute to work, and Harry again heard the catcalls from Malfoy and his diminished group of sycophants.

Finally though, Harry felt the gills coming, and he dove into the water.

This time, Harry stuck to the upper water, where he had good visibility. He knew where the hostages had been held. He stroked out and dove down. In less than five minutes from the whistle, Harry was approaching the native singing of the merpeople.

When Harry got to the place the hostages had been held, he saw that there were only six merpeople, who suddenly sang in English:

*If you look for what was took,
Someplace else you'd best had look.*

Bubbles flew out of Harry's mouth for a few seconds as he cursed out Dumbledore. Still, he had thought this might happen, and Luna's warning had taken the surprise out. He pulled out his wand and did an auror's location spell. His wand pointed him towards the furthest, and deepest, end of the lake. Harry huffed as best he could underwater and took off as fast as he possible.

When Harry approached the singing merpeople, he was glad to see that all four hostages were still in their enchanted sleep. Despite everything he knew, Harry had to fight the urge to save all four. The fact that there were twice the number of merpeople than in the original time line, and looking even more hostile than they had that first time, worried him.

Harry wandlessly cast a spell so he could speak to the merpeople. "The others will be safely returned," he stated.

"You may only take yours," a chief said.

Harry scowled and drew Merlin's wand from the invisible sheath on his left thigh. He held it up and the emerald started to glow.

Two of the merpeople swam over close, their eyes bright. They examined the wand and then closed their eyes saying, "Show us that is the true wand. Show us you are the Heir."

Harry knew what they wanted, so he closed his eyes and concentrated. For the first time since he had returned, really for the first time ever, Harry channeled all his magical power.

An overpowering flash of red erupted from the wand. It ripped through the water as if it were a vacuum and up into the sky.

It wasn't the Dark Mark, it was the Red Dragon, Merlin's Mark, seen for the first time since Godric Gryffindor and the other three Founders, channeling all their power together, had managed to cast it for the founding of Hogwarts, over a thousand years before.

Harry put Merlin's wand away as the merpeople bowed to him. "I am the Heir of Merlin, and an Heir of all Four Founders," Harry said as he pulled his own wand out and used it to cut the rope anchoring Hermione.

"If the secret can be kept, we shall do so," the chieftainess stated. "And yes, the others will be safely returned."

"Thank you," Harry said. "I have been honored to have spoken with you, heirs to friends of Merlin. I hope to speak to you again." He made a suggestion as to how to deal with the Dragon Mark, ended the spell on his voice, and swam off with Hermione. A quarter of the way back, he saw Krum swimming past Cedric, both obviously attracted to the area by Harry's light display. To Harry's surprise, he saw Fleur less than a half a minute later. Obviously the Mark had frightened the grindylows off her.

Harry reached shore about five minutes later. Now in six feet of water, he pulled out a thorn from the base of the gillyweed plant. Its sting would counteract the sap. Harry pricked the vein in his left elbow, and he quickly felt the gills retracting. He cradled Hermione in his arms and made his way to shore.

Just before Harry stepped on shore, Hermione opened her eyes and said, "I think I'll like waking up to those eyes."

"And I'll enjoy waking up to your smile," Harry answered. He looked at the clock. He had taken 42 minutes.

"Harry!" Dumbledore demanded, running over, "what did you do?"

"Do?" Harry asked innocently.

Dumbledore pointed back over the loch. Harry swung around, and saw that the Red Dragon of Merlin was still in the sky.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"That . . . that's Merlin's Mark!" Hermione said.

Harry swung them back towards shore. "Excuse me, Headmaster, but we getting rather chilled. . . ."

"Out of the way!" Madam Pomfrey ordered. She quickly had the pair magically dried off, dosed with Pepper-Up, and once Harry put his clothes back on, they sat and drank hot chocolate and waited for the others.

"Do you know anything about that?" Percy demanded, as the Mark still hung in the sky.

"Merlin's Mark. . . ." Hermione started.

"I wasn't asking you, you were asleep," Percy snapped. "I know what that looks like, I want to know how it got there."

"I was approaching the hostages. . . ."

"Hostages?" Dumbledore asked, hurt.

"Whatever you want to call them," Harry said. "I touched a rock, and that shot out of it. I wasn't hurt, and had been facing away from it, so I just took Hermione and left."

"Let me talk to some of the merpeople," Dumbledore said, seeing that three were near the surface. Dumbledore came back with the announcement that the Treaty Rock, given to the merpeople by Merlin himself, had reacted to the presence of Harry and released Merlin's Mark, but that no one knew why. Still, the merpeople regarded it as a good omen.

Harry paid no attention, merely hugging Hermione close while she hugged him back. Viktor made to the shore next, but was obviously having difficulty getting his transfiguration reversed. Cedric therefore was able to pass him by. Cedric made it out at 54 minutes, Viktor less than a minute later. Fleur made it back just a few seconds before the time ran out.

This time, even Karkaroff had to award Harry full points. Cedric was awarded 45 points and after a conference called by Karkaroff, Viktor was awarded 43 points, while Fleur was awarded 35. Viktor still maintained a slight lead on Cedric for second place.

Dumbledore had demanded that Harry come to his office after dinner. Harry was coming with Hermione and Remus. On the way to meeting Remus, Harry and Hermione were stopped by a strangely nervous Luna. Harry obliged her by halting and looking at her, and she carefully looked at Harry and then looked up and down the corridor.

"No one is nearby," Harry assured her.

Luna did a full curtsy, and stayed down on one knee, her eyes lowered. "Am I the first?" she asked.

"You are," Harry said. He let go of Hermione's hand and helped Luna stand. "Please, if you are my friend, never do that again."

Luna looked thoughtful, and said, "I cannot promise you that, my. . . ."

"Please," Harry said, "just Harry. To you, I am forever Harry."

"Thank you," Luna said, a tear running down her face. She took Harry's hand and kissed it, and then kissed Hermione's cheek and left.

"Are you sure she's fully there?" Hermione asked after she left.

"Hermione, she knows I am the Heir of Merlin. She knows that even Gryffindor wasn't powerful enough to cast the Mark without help from the other Founders. She knows I have the power to defend the realm, when Voldemort returns."

"How do you know that?"

"Because she explained it to the two of us last time around," Harry answered. "She's a direct descendent of Sir Lancelot's magical daughter. Like many of us, she is much more than she seems."

"Sir Lancelot was real?" Hermione demanded.

"Fine, she's descended from the Frankish-Breton warrior Sir Lancelot was modeled on," Harry said. "He was a Squib who married a witch and had three children, two of them magical. Neither son was the model of Galahad. Instead, they both returned to France. The wizard son founded a family which had two branches, both centered in Brittany, one Squib and the other magical. The Squib branch ended with Roland. The wizarding branch co-founded Beauxbatons in the eleventh century and died out in the direct line in the 1790s. Lancelot's non-magical son founded a branch that intermarried with the old Frankish nobility in north-central family and emerged as a noble family

called Capet. The daughter. . . ."

"Wait, did you say 'Capet'? C A P E T? Harry. . . !"

Harry grinned, "Yes, I know, the royal family of France since Hugh Capet seized the throne just before the year 1000. 987 or something like that."

"And she's the one who drank the poison meant for you, who took you to Canada to recover, isn't she?"

"She is," Harry said. "She means more to me than anyone, except for you. And you two look at the world very differently, and are both very bright. When the two of you analyze anything, if you come up with the same answer, it's pretty sure to be the right one."

"I understand," Hermione said, knowing that she would always have first place in Harry's heart. "Come on, Professor Lupin will be here soon, and the Headmaster will be waiting for us."

Harry, Hermione, and Remus found the Headmaster looking out the window of his office which overlooked the lake. Merlin's Mark still glowed in the sky. "How long will it stay there?" Dumbledore asked.

"I have no idea," Harry answered. "I never cast it with all my power behind it before. The longest it lasted in the other time line was twelve hours."

"According to legend, Merlin once cast it so strongly that it only faded during the third night," Dumbledore said.

"Then we'll see how long this one lasts," Harry said.

"Did you have to cast it?" Dumbledore asked.

"Did you have to move where the hostages were being kept?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore shrugged. "I thought I should give the others a fighting chance. After all, it did not matter if you did well today."

"And I wanted an assurance from the merpeople that they would all be returned safely," Harry said.

"I gave you mine," Dumbledore reminded Harry.

"So you did," Harry answered. Dumbledore winced at that. "The merpeople wanted a sign of my power. I gave it to them. People who want to believe I am the Heir of Merlin will believe I am. People who don't wouldn't believe it if Merlin appeared and anointed me in the great hall. None of this will stop Voldemort. If anything, it will just make him want to disprove my powers all the more."

Harry turned to Hermione. "Now that the Second Task is over, I need you to wear this." He handed Hermione a jewelry box.

"More jewelry?"

"This is special," Harry said.

Hermione opened it box and took out a red gold bracelet. There were seven charms on it -- a ruby dragon, a ruby griffin, a sapphire raven, an emerald snake, a yellow topaz badger, an aquamarine bear, and an opal ermine.

"Nothing can harm you while you wear that and are on Hogwarts' grounds," Harry said. "Neither can you be taken away by portkey or taken over by potion, the Imperius, or possession. Please, for my peace of mind if nothing else, don't take it off."

"I won't," Hermione said, holding out her left wrist so that Harry could place it there.

Harry put the bracelet on Hermione, kissed the inside of her wrist, and turned to Dumbledore. "I can only create a limited number of these charms. Nine, in fact." He turned back to Hermione. "I'd like to give the other two to Luna, to make certain she can't be portkeyed out or poisoned." He smiled. "I'd give one to Ron, but I don't think he'd accept jewelry from me."

"Not likely, at least not without an explanation that I don't know if he could handle without being jealous," Hermione agreed. She knew that Harry had only deferred to her in case she was jealous, which made her feel a bit ashamed. "Give the other ones to Luna."

"So," Remus said, "you're the Heir of Merlin?"

"And the Four Founders," Harry agreed. He repeated most of the same story he had already told Hermione.

"Even if I tell him everything, Sirius isn't going to be happy to be left out," Remus said.

"Maybe you can walk your doggie in Hogsmeade the next Hogsmeade weekend?" Harry suggested. "It's in two weeks."

"Remember, they do have a leash law," Hermione said with a giggle.

Remus smiled. "I like it. We know some places where we can talk."

"Good." Harry turned back to the Headmaster. "Was there anything else?"

"You're not going to tell me anything more about what is going on around us, are you?"

"No, sir," Harry said. "No student should be in danger. Cedric died last time because he was too close to me when I was whisked away by a portkey and got caught up. That won't happen again. Don't interfere unless you see a student in danger."

"Is there anyone else in danger?" Dumbledore asked.

"One, if you don't count Voldemort or his Death Eaters," Harry said. "I hope to rescue him when the time comes. That person and another are currently under duress, but aren't being tortured or otherwise harmed as far as I know. If something changes, I think they can be rescued before the crises that came last time, but then Voldemort might not be destroyed this June."

"What do we do with the Heir of Merlin when all this is over?" Dumbledore asked.

"I can't step in and try to run things as a super-minister," Harry said. "I have no desire in being more powerful than that, either. You tried to sit back and run things behind the scenes. Voldemort proved that doesn't work well, either. I'll need to go away after I leave Hogwarts. I'm still hoping to arrange things so I can stay here until the end of my Seventh year, and reveal all then."

"And what are your chances of pulling that off?" Remus asked.

"Until today, I thought about ninety percent," Harry said. "Now maybe fifty."

Draco Malfoy glared at the Dragon Mark, Merlin's Mark. Was it possible that Potter -- POTTER, of all people! -- could have been favored by an artifact of Merlin's? There were still a few artifacts of his around, after all, but people had learned it best not to touch one. If you were lucky, you would be knocked on your arse.

One over-confident wanna-be Dark Lord had seized a drinking cup of Merlin's on display and had been dissolved into a puddle of ashy goo.

Draco looked up again. The Dragon Mark was a bit smaller than the Dark Mark conjured that past summer. But the Dark Mark looked like oily heavy smoke.

This looked like a real dragon, except it glowed softly. Draco could see the people from the Ministry on their broomsticks quite clearly as they tried to examine it. He smiled a little when one

got too close -- that seemed to drain all the magic from the broom and the witch fell into the lake. People would be saying Scarhead was the Heir of Merlin no doubt.

Draco believed that Potter could no more be the Heir of Merlin than he could be the Heir of Slytherin.

Luna was pleased with her red gold bracelet, with the sapphire raven and ruby dragon. At her suggestion, Harry magically fused the clasps of the two bracelets. Only Harry could remove them. She cried joyfully when Harry told her that she would always be his Second Councillor.

"I shall follow you always, and if I may never call you 'my lord', 'Master', or any other title, I know I may always call you my first real friend," Luna said.

"I hope you will call me your second," Hermione told Luna. Harry and Hermione then hugged her and dried her tears.

To the shock of Albus Dumbledore, and to the elation of Luna and Hermione, Harry's Dragon Mark also lasted into the third night.

The next Friday, Snape again held Harry after class. "Did you cast that Mark, Potter?" Snape demanded.

"Yes," Harry said. "And yes, it's Merlin's Mark. I am the Heir of Merlin."

"There is great debate amongst the students," Snape said. "Even some of the Slytherins believe that you might be the Heir to Merlin, but I do not believe a majority of any House believe that. Most are, however, saying that it is a sign that you are the Chosen One."

"Good," Harry said. "I hope to keep them guessing, until I leave school."

"And then?"

"And then let the Wizengamot and Ministry know what I think of the current set-up, what I'd liked changed, and that I'm off and won't be back unless they screw up and allow another Dark Lord to emerge."

"They won't enact your reforms," Snape said.

"They will the first time they get scared, if not before," Harry retorted.

"I concede your point." Snape made a face, and then said through gritted teeth, "Then I consent . . . no, I ask you to modify my Dark Mark."

"We'll do it the weekend before the Third Task," Harry said.

"Did you and Miss Granger read those pamphlets?" Snape asked.

"We did," Harry agreed. "They're giving us a lot to think about."

"Fair enough."

Chapter X

On the next Hogsmeade weekend, Remus Sirius, Hermione, and Harry got together as planned. As Justin had dragon pox, Harry brought Luna with him. They went to the cave above Hogsmeade, where Remus and Harry cast some warming charms on the rocks.

Luna was happy to see Professor Lupin again and was very joyful to meet Sirius, until he managed to convince her that he was not Stubby Boardman. Sirius had no idea what to make of Luna, which amused Remus to no end. Harry had been unsurprised to learn that Luna knew about the Bern pamphlets, although she had only read two of them before Harry had loaned her the others.

As Sirius argued with Luna, Harry observed his godfather. Had he really been just 14-year-old Harry, he would have hugged Sirius immediately. This Harry was just barely able to contain his impulse.

Harry had convinced Remus to take Sirius to Grimmauld Place over the Yule holiday, and Dumbledore had cast the Fidelius. Not having to live rough this time around, Sirius was looking much healthier than Harry had ever seen him in the first time stream. Since Sirius was still a wanted man, but not being sought out by Death Eaters this time, he did go out, wearing glamors.

Finally, Luna seemed convinced. "Now, let me ask you something," Harry said to Sirius. "Did you and my dad think you were going to be on the Wizengamot before you were thirty?"

"No," Sirius said.

"Yes," Remus said.

"Well, that clears that up," Harry retorted.

"My great-great-grandfather was a Headmaster at Hogwarts," Sirius said, "and he was a general member of the Wizengamot. Hogwarts headmasters usually are members of some sort. His son managed to get elected to a noble seat. His older son, my grandfather, was too drunk to be electable, and the younger son, my mother's father, was just too damn mean."

"Pretty shallow gene pool there, Padfoot," Harry teased.

"Shut it," Sirius grumbled. "I heard all about that from Lily, and she was right. As for my father, he was too lazy, and his brother, much as I liked him, wasn't much better. My mother wasn't politically active, and was nearly as mean as her father. Her aunt was crueller than she was and her brother, well, let's just say Bellatrix was his favorite daughter. I knew what was expected of me if I wanted to get selected, and I was in no hurry to act 'respectable'."

"Now your father was different," Sirius went on.

"Potters have been on the Wizengamot far more often than they've been off," Remus agreed. "James was sure that, with his father's and Dumbledore's backing, he'd have a good chance of becoming the public face of the opposition to Voldemort. Don't misunderstand, he loved your mother."

"But as far as James was concerned, her being Muggle-born was a bonus, a political statement," Sirius agreed. "It showed the bigots and the Death Eaters what James Potter, the Heir to Gryffindor, thought of the ideas of someone like Voldemort, who claimed to adore Slytherin."

"Your mother totally agreed," Remus said.

"And that was why he came after me?" Harry asked, deciding to ignore the fact that everyone had known he was the Heir of Gryffindor but had not bothered to tell him. Harry had rather thought it a family secret to some degree. "Not because I was I Half-Blood like him?"

"Who can say?" Remus said. "It might not have been clear to Voldemort exactly what his full motives were."

"True," Harry acknowledged. "Anyway, before we start talking about important things, Dobby!"

Dobby appeared and quickly set up a small feast. Harry and Hermione admired the spread and praised Dobby, who flushed and disappeared.

Once the meal got started, Harry spoke up. "Hermione and I have read the pamphlets. They read well, and really make internal sense."

"They certainly explain Grindelwald, and Voldemort to a lesser extent," Hermione agreed.

"Still, were they misused by Grindelwald, or are we missing something?" Harry asked.

"You read the pamphlets," Remus said. "Did you read The Wizarding Struggle and The Last Testament?"

Harry shook his head, while Hermione said, "No, and there's nothing about Bern in the general library collection or the restricted section. The books the library does have are in the faculty library under Ravenclaw Tower."

"Is that what Ravenclaw's Chamber is used for?" Luna asked. "People talked about it during my First year, but no one was sure exactly where it is under the Tower, how to get there, or if it was indeed Ravenclaw's version of the Chamber of Secrets."

"It's the entire sub-dungeon under the tower," Harry said. He looked at Sirius and Remus.

"The Wizarding Struggle, which came out in the early 1830s, sums up the ideas in all the pamphlets, but while it doesn't advocate the racism of the Pure-Blood position, it does more than mention that 'blood-traitors' might have to be destroyed," Remus said.

"And 'blood-traitors' are?" Harry asked.

"Those who think Muggle culture superior to Magical, who want to bring in as much Muggle technology as possible which could make it as dependent on the technology as the Muggles, and those who marry Muggles," Sirius said. "In a sense, we've already lost the second battle. We're totally dependent on the Muggle world. We get all our food, all the cloth for our clothes, a fair amount of the clothes themselves from Muggles. Everything about butterbeer except the final brewing step is Muggle -- the ingredients, the bottles and barrels, the capping machines." He shrugged.

"There was a huge scandal late this past summer," Remus said. "I doubt you lot heard about it."

"It didn't have anything to do with cauldron bottoms, did it?" Harry asked.

"How did you know?" Remus asked, amazed.

"Percy Weasley works in the Ministry, and was dealing with sub-standard cauldron bottoms," Hermione said.

"There should be a joke there somewhere," Sirius mused. Remus, Harry, and Hermione rolled their eyes. Luna seemed concerned that she couldn't think of a decent joke either.

"It was something about them being too thin?" Hermione suggested.

Remus continued, "Anyway, yes, there are sub-standard cauldrons being imported. The reason they weren't working was one of three reasons, and these cauldrons could have any of the three problems: far too thick, far too thin, and many just had too much variation in the thickness."

Too thick, they all knew, and the cauldron would retain the heat too well. Too thin, and the potion would get too hot too fast. In both cases, a good brewer could learn to compensate, but it could be a challenge, especially for the thinner ones. An irregular thickness meant that many problems could occur. Cauldrons had been standardized two hundred years before.

"The real scandal was revealed in mid-September," Remus went on. "Do you know why there were all these problems for the first time on such a large scale?"

"Because standard cauldrons have been produced by reliable Muggle machinery, not by wizards?" Luna guessed before Harry or Hermione could make the same guess.

"Exactly," Remus said.

"Love 'em or loathe 'em, we are dependent on Muggles," Sirius stated simply.

"Wouldn't we die out if there wasn't some intermarriage with Muggles?" Hermione asked.

"Actually, not necessarily," Sirius said. "It would take careful tracking of the bloodlines of Squibs, but it seems as the vast majority of Muggleborns have at least one magical great-grandparent on both sides, if not closer in their family background. Bern didn't oppose the magical marrying into families like that, and certainly was not against Pure-bloods marrying Muggle-born, just marrying pure Muggles."

"He claimed to have tracked a hundred and two relationships where he knew the magical partner had two magical parents, and where he was certain the other partner was not magical and had no magical ancestors back to their great-great grandparents," Remus said. "I don't know if he did or not. In any case, he claimed that only one out of every four children was magical, most often the first-born, while if the second partner seemed Muggle but had at least one magical great-grandparent, three out of five children were magical."

"He also claimed that if all eight great-grandparents were magic users, then nine out of twelve children would be magical even if the parents were Squibs," Remus went on. "And eleven out of twelve if they were magical. He said he didn't have enough examples for all the stages between the extremes to give numbers to."

"And that's how we get having all eight great-grandparents and after as human magic users as the definition of a Full-Blood," Sirius said. "Add two more generations, and there we have the so-called 'Pure-Blood'."

"Now The Last Testament is nastier, but some have claimed it wasn't all written by Bern. He died in the 1840s, and the book appeared a few years later, edited by a wizard in his late twenties who called himself Grindelwald," Remus told them. "It doesn't repudiate one thing in the other works, but it does claim that the Muggles were getting more dangerous."

"How?" Luna asked.

"The first pamphlets appeared in the 1790s," Hermione mused. "The last one we saw was written in the mid-1820s. Over the next twenty years, you have the steam locomotive becoming common, telegraphs, and a huge upswing in industry throughout western Germany." She looked at Remus. "I take it they were at least German?"

"Bern was from Lorraine, Grindelwald was from near the Austrian-Swiss border," Remus said.

"Anyway, with the upswing in industry, he said that the Muggles would have to come to a violent political and economic collapse, and that if the wizards could give things a push in the right direction, well, the faster the collapse, the better everyone would be."

"Has anyone ever advocated something decent from these ideas?" Harry asked.

"As in?" Sirius demanded.

"As in trying to bring the different sentient together to keep us all protected from the expanding Muggle industrial complex," Harry suggested. "Treating the Muggle-born, the Squibs, the werewolves, those with giant and veela and whatever lines of blood as equals, because we're all in this little magical world together, and it's getting smaller by the year?"

"No," Sirius said. "Grindelwald preempted any other interpretations."

"What are your concerns, Harry?" Remus asked.

"I think Hermione and I know, better than most people in our world, exactly how dangerous it

would be for our world to be exposed to the Muggle world," Harry said. "The only way for us to survive and prosper would seem to be to work together, not split hairs about who counts as being more magical or more worthy."

"What the Pure-Blood agenda would do would actually make us weaker," Hermione said. "The wizarding world is getting stagnant. You either grow or die out. We love being magical," Hermione said, her chin quivering a bit from the emotion, "and we'd hate seeing it die out."

"The magical world is getting more and more eccentric, or at least wizarding Europe is," Harry went on. "There's no reason why we can't pass as Muggles when we pass through their world. Most Pure-Bloods are just too lazy to bother doing it right."

"Like Archie," Hermione agreed, and she told the story of the wizard at the World Cup who 'liked a breeze around his privates'.

"And what is it you'd like to do?" Sirius asked.

"Several things," Harry said. "One, full rights for werewolves and part-humans who can do wizarding magic."

"Two, better, less condescending relations with other magical sentients, including ending House Elf slavery, along the lines of the elf regulations in North America and Australia," Hermione stated firmly.

"Three, integrating the magical community here in Britain and Ireland," Harry said. "The best estimate for our population is 27 to 30,000, right?"

Everyone nodded.

"Even given the longer life-times of wizards, that still should mean there are at least two hundred to two hundred and fifty magic users born every year," Harry said. Again, everyone nodded.

"The current student population of Hogwarts is three-hundred and twelve," Harry said. "Our year is the smallest, with just forty-two. Where are the other twelve-hundred to fifteen-hundred children? There is the Tara Academy in Ireland, with less than a hundred students. There's the Ysgol in Wales, where all the instruction is in Welsh, but that's less than a hundred and fifty students. I'm sure a few go to continental schools, but not more than a few dozen. Every year, the Examiners test between twenty and twenty-five students who were privately tutored for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. We're still missing a thousand or more children." Harry turned to Sirius. "Tell us."

"They're there, hidden away in valley and glens, in the middle of fens, moors, and peat bogs," Sirius said. "They're very poor, and very proud. They're educated at home or with their neighbors, and what little money they somehow scrape together goes to replace things like the family wands or to buy cloth or cauldrons that they can't really make themselves. Their lifestyles are still pretty medieval, and many still plow the land to make their living, usually growing magical plants to sell and trade and vegetable gardens for themselves. Many are pretty inbred, but a few integrate into the general magical population. Probably the most well-known example is the Weasleys. They are famous for large families and red hair. Arthur's grandfather shocked the family when he left the clan enclave in Dartmoor and moved to Diagon Alley, worked hard, married out of the clan, and sent his sons to Hogwarts, the first to attend in some five hundred years. Two sons went back to the clan, two died in the first war of Grindelwald, one supposedly died after seeing a grim right after he left Hogwarts. The other, the youngest, was Arthur's father. The grandfather died of over-work, trying to send six boys to Hogwarts. Arthur's father worked for over thirty years paying off the debts, and only then did he marry. He only had three sons, and his wife and two of the boys were killed in one of the last rocket attacks on London in 1945."

Harry knew all that of course, and that Molly, two years younger than Arthur, had defied her family and married him right out of school. They had still had to wait several years before starting the big family both dreamed of because of financial pressures. Harry knew that the Gaunt family was a

small-scale version of the Weasley clan, and that Stan Shunpike was the first in his family to have entered the mainstream magical world in centuries.

"So, we need to bring them back into the magical world," Harry said firmly. "Hogwarts was designed to hold up to a thousand students. The Ministry claims some jurisdiction over Hogwarts. They either need to end the claim or start extending money for scholarships."

"That wouldn't be enough," Remus said.

"No, it wouldn't," Hermione agreed, and she looked at Harry with loving adoration.

"What do you have planned?" Remus asked.

"It turns out that I own a large unplottable tract of land in Wales," Harry said.

"Vale Gryffindor," Sirius agreed. "James and I visited there once. It's very pretty. The castle is in good shape. . . ." Sirius' jaw dropped.

"You're going to build a school?" Remus demanded.

"Well, the main building is already built," Harry said. "It can be used for most things, except for the dormitories and greenhouses. For the dormitories, we'll build a series of lodges. There'll be a sliding scale of payments for students. To avoid people screaming about us undermining Hogwarts or the other schools, we'll only offer First through Fifth year courses, but with the proviso that the Examiners do our students' O.W.L.s just like the other schools, and those students who get at least three E O.W.L.s may attend one of the other three schools for their N.E.W.T. courses on the same sliding scale. We'll also need access to the Great Book that records the names of all magical births, but since Hogwarts shares that with Tara and the Ysgol, that shouldn't be a problem."

"Although most of the teachers at Hogwarts are very good, they have to teach too much," Hermione said. "We actually spend very little time in the classroom and learn mostly from homework. The student-teacher ratio at the British School of Magics will be half Hogwarts'. We'll have all the same courses, but also have mandatory Muggle Studies, taught properly, as in how to blend in to the Muggle world as well as the out-of-date nonsense they teach at Hogwarts, so they can get the O.W.L."

"The . . . the Muggle material is 'out-of-date' nonsense?" Luna asked, shocked.

"Afraid so," Hermione said sympathetically.

"And the money to pay for all this?" Remus asked.

"I can afford the salaries and the food easily," Harry said. "I'd give half my fortune as a foundation. That will still leave my children disgustingly wealthy. I had Dobby put out the word that so-called 'disgraced elves' would be welcome there. We already have a dozen elves from all over Europe who were so abused by their masters that they kicked them out for being too injured and deformed to want to have around. They can still do magic, and love the idea of the BSM." When Sirius opened his mouth, Harry cut him off, saying, "Yes, I know all the jokes and bad puns you were about to make. Believe me, the other names we came up with were worse. When the school opens in 2000, we should only be really missing one thing."

"And what's that?" Sirius asked.

"A proper student library," Remus said.

Hermione nodded. "Harry has more than enough books for a really good start on a staff library and our own restricted section. What we might not have is a proper student library."

"We'll appeal for donations, but that won't be enough," Harry said.

"Remus and I will cull through the library at Grimmauld Place," Sirius said. "Anything we personally don't want I'll donate. That will increase your restricted section, if nothing else."

"Oh, Professor Lupin," Hermione added, "may we hire you as a consultant? We have a long list of questions and projects for you to work on if you'll take the job."

Remus looked at Harry, who grinned and nodded. "I'd be honored."

"We need to write up a manifesto or something before the end of the Tournament," Harry said. "We were asking about Bern because we want to wrap all our ideas up into this one package. We can use Bern's ideas to justify what we're doing, and by doing so we'll be using a theoretical basis the magical establishment is used to seeing, even if it's a novel approach. We needed to know if it is so discredited in people's eyes that it would do more harm than good."

"I'd actually say no to that," Sirius mused. "They'll yell about your interpretation, but they'll be so stunned by the idea of a new school that it might actually cushion the shock to use Bern a lot."

"A school where werewolves and half-giants and half-veela will be welcome, if they have the magic, as well as the magical-but-poor," Hermione said. "Plus any of the Muggle-born who prefer to go there."

"You're still short on the money front," Sirius said.

"We are," Harry agreed, "in the sense that our students would still need supplies, uniforms, books, and a proper wand."

"I might be able to help with the wands," Luna said.

"How is that?" Hermione asked, suspecting Harry probably already knew the answer.

"My great-uncle Ollie has said he might apprentice me," Luna said. "My mother was an Ollivander. He told me once that his store has over ten thousand wands made by him and his family, and over two thousand wands from around the world that meet his specifications. In addition, though, he has thousands of other wands, which aren't defective but which don't quite meet the craft standards. He might be willing to part with those at a low price. I could at least write and ask."

"We can write him," Harry said. "We'll also be lacking a lot of depth. Anything beyond the minimal equipment or stock of potion ingredients or potions for the Infirmary, for example."

"And you won't be lacking teachers?" Sirius asked.

"Probably not," Harry said. "Snape, Trelawney, and Sinistra are the only Hogwarts teachers under fifty. Even if we don't add in Binns or Dumbledore, the average age of the teaching staff is about seventy-five. Now that might be solid middle-age for the magical, but I bet we can find younger people who are well-qualified who would jump at the chance." Harry winked at Sirius. "Who knows, you two might end up as the elders of the school, teaching Transfiguration and either Defense or Creatures."

"Ha bloody ha," Sirius retorted, knowing full well that he was already hooked, should he be pardoned.

The three students took their leave soon thereafter, intending on making the Three Broomsticks in time to have a mug of warm butterbeer before making the trek back to the castle.

"He thinks big, doesn't he?" Remus asked.

"He does," Sirius admitted. "Bigger than James, and with more practicality than Lily." He looked at Remus. "Why do you think the Lovegood girl was here? Just for the reasons he showed? To make certain we can't ask him about Voldemort or the alternate future? Or because he's intending on having two wives, in the old-style?"

"I wouldn't want to guess, but I think he just values her outlook."

"Too bad. She has nice legs for her age."

Chapter XI

The weeks flew past. The furor over Merlin's Mark died out, and Harry's plans, both those he had shared and those he kept private, were maturing nicely. Harry therefore enjoyed those two months. He played with the nifflers in Hagrid's class, led the Gryffindors out for flying obstacle courses during good weather, enjoyed the companionship of his friends, and mostly basked in Hermione's affection.

The changes in Harry puzzled Ron. The two were having more fun than ever, even if they really were spending far less time together. Since Ron was spending many hours outside of Gryffindor studying with Marietta, Ron didn't miss the time spent with Harry, but as much as he was glad to see Harry's happy attitude, it still confused him.

Harry therefore confided to Ron that Dumbledore had agreed that Harry probably wouldn't ever have to go back to the Dursleys' ever again. In reality, Harry had simply informed Dumbledore, but Dumbledore knew better than to force the issue. The explanation had satisfied Ron, and he was growing used to the new Harry.

Ginny was not so pleased with the new Harry, as that included 'attached Hermione' instead of the 'very attached Ginny' she still sometimes dreamed of. Still, she was able to hold back her jealousy of this for several reasons. First, Neville was proving a very companionable substitute. Second and third, Hermione was a good friend and also very dangerous when crossed. Ginny therefore had decided to take the long view and see how things developed, both for her and Neville as well as with Harry in general.

If Ginny and Ron were really jealous of anyone, it was Luna. She was often with Harry and Hermione in the library, and often just with Hermione. There were also many times when Harry and Hermione seemed to just disappear, but sometimes it was Harry, Hermione, and Luna. Harry had also seemed to make friends with Cedric.

Then there were Saturday nights. In late March, Harry announced that Professor Dumbledore had given permission that every Saturday night would be a dance night in the great Hall from 7:30-10:00. Informal clothes only, and the music was from the WNN or various types of recordings, Muggle and magical. Ron would have sworn that this had come as a surprise to Dumbledore. It certainly seemed to surprise the staff.

In the end, Professors Vector and Sprout, and Madam Hooch, did most of the chaperoning. The first three dances were unstructured, but the last nine all had themes (the Current Magical Hits, early rock, Current Muggle Hits, Waltz & Polka Night -- which had strangely enough been the biggest hit, Pick-a-Station -- where students drawn at random had to find a new dance on the radio (enhanced to receive at Hogwarts) or WNN in less than a minute, Disco Night, Swing Night, Magical Classics, and a second Waltz Night. Students found that once they learned the steps, it was rather nice holding their partner close doing the waltz and other old dances, and there was enough variation in tempo to make it interesting.

Only Hermione and Luna noticed how tense Harry was starting to become around the middle of May. Luna thought that it was likely because Harry was to learn what the Third Task would be on May 24. Hermione dismissed that thought at first, until she noticed the tension leave Harry after that date.

On the night of the 24th, Harry first met Cedric and then Fleur followed by Viktor. The four were more companionable than they had been the first time. Viktor was still escorting Mandy to the dances, but Harry wasn't sure if there was anything serious going on or not. Fleur had dated four different Seventh years, including one Durmstrang student.

Harry listened to Cedric complain about the hedges, and then to Bagman's explanation of the Third Task. On the way back to the castle, Harry merely said he was going to enjoy the night air. Fleur and Cedric merely nodded. Bagman shrugged. Since Harry was winning, he had not attempted to influence or help Harry at all this time. Viktor kept an eye on Harry until he was certain Harry wasn't going to double back and look at the growing maze.

Harry very much hoped that Mister Crouch had again managed to escape.

Harry searched through the fringes of the woods, and just as he was getting worried, he found Barty Crouch Senior. He looked even worse, Harry thought, than he had in the original time line. Then he had been talking to himself. This time, he was barely able to mutter.

Seeing the man's condition, Harry didn't even bother trying to talk to him. He just walked up and triggered the portkey he had prepared just for this.

Since Crouch had been murdered in the last time stream, Harry had no idea if he would recover. He knew Crouch had been kept under the Imperius and then had been stunned for long periods. Only now did Harry realize that neither accounted for how disoriented he had been in either time line. Harry had little doubt that as Crouch's value to Voldemort had dwindled, Voldemort had indulged in some torture and no doubt deep Legilimency, looking for both dirt on Ministry officials and other secrets.

Harry left Crouch in a cleaned-up Chamber of Secrets. He now had two dozen cast-off elves working for him, not counting Dobby. They would take turns substituting for Winky, who was taking care of her former Master. Harry had set down strict rules for Winky's behavior, and she had accepted them, determined to be loyal to her new Mistress.

It took Crouch three weeks before he was both coherent enough and strong enough to really talk. Harry had a long talk with the older man, and had to reveal some things he would have preferred keeping secret and had to promise to reveal more. Crouch, having endured months of abuse, drove a hard bargain, but had quickly decided his only hope of escaping this ordeal with at least some credit meant dealing with this apparently fourteen year old who could prove he was the Heir to Merlin and seemed to actually be from the future.

Albus Dumbledore came into his office the Sunday before the Third Task and was surprised to find Harry there. "Harry! Why are you here? And why do you look so tired?" Harry was slouched back in a soft chair, his feet on two strongboxes.

Harry smiled wanly. "I am tired. I've been awake for most of the last thirty-six hours."

"May I ask why?"

"You may, and I'll even answer, but not right away," Harry said, sitting up straight. He slowly got to his feet and handed Dumbledore some envelopes, and then sat down heavily. "One is a list of people I'd like you to invite to the Third Task. The thick one is a summery of what Hermione and I hope to do after we leave Hogwarts. The thick one that's sealed is for Fudge. That one, and these two boxes, cannot be opened before their time. The time on the envelope is 11:59 next Sunday morning. The one on the boxes is 12:01, the Thirty-first of July, 1998. I suggest you hide one, which one doesn't matter. Give the other to Fudge along with the envelope after I leave Hogwarts next Saturday night."

"You're leaving?"

"Probably," Harry said. "I'll certainly be spending much of the summer in an unplottable location in Wales."

"You're that certain of how things will go next Saturday?"

Harry smiled tiredly and pulled out a primitive-looking time turner. "Since it's my past, yes. Don't interfere until I give you a wand just before I go into the maze. Follow the instructions. Now, if you don't mind, I need to go help my slightly younger self alter Snape's Dark Mark."

"Alter?"

Harry nodded. "Consider this in part a present to you. You still believe in him, even though I told you what he did in the original time line."

"I do."

"Then on your head be his future sins, not mine." Harry left.

Dumbledore was anxious for his Potions Master, but was not surprised when he did not come to lunch. Dumbledore instead spent the day reading over Harry's plans and hopes for the wizarding world, or at least for wizarding Britain. They were broad, liberal, and yet couched in such terms as the Wizengamot would have to accept most of them sooner or later. He recognized Hermione and Remus' researching skills and their and Harry's sense of justness. There was no doubt, however, that the vision was nearly all Harry's.

When Snape did not show up for dinner, Dumbledore made his way to Snape's chambers, where he found a note, magically sealed and addressed to him. It simply read: *All is well, but he needs his rest. H&H.*

Needless to say, Severus Snape was very uncommunicative about his experience when he appeared the next morning.

"Are you nervous about this maze tonight, Harry?" Ron asked as Harry dressed after his morning shower the day of the Final Task.

"A bit," Harry admitted, although the nerves were not caused by the exact reasons Ron would have expected. Seeing the others were already gone to breakfast, Harry turned to Ron. He stuck out his hand.

"What's that for?" Ron asked, confused as he shook Harry's hand.

"You've been a great friend, Ron," Harry said.

"You're starting to worry me," Ron admitted.

"Ron, my life has never been a very good one. Meeting you was one of the best things that ever happened to me," Harry said ignoring what Ron had actually said.

"Right, now you're really scaring me," Ron said.

"Ron, for some reason, I think that today my life changes. Good or bad, thanks for everything."

Ron looked at his friend, who had grown from about 5 foot 1 at the World Cup to just short of a more respectable 5 foot 6. "Good luck," Ron said. And the two went down for breakfast, picking up Hermione on the way.

Hermione's eyes went wide when she saw the two people that Professor Dumbledore and Remus Lupin were talking to at the entrance of the great hall. "Mum? Dad?"

"Hi, Pumpkin," Mr. Granger said, making Hermione roll her eyes.

"The champions will have their families with them today," Dumbledore explained. "Harry asked Mister Lupin to attend, and thoughtfully asked if I could make arrangements for your parents to come."

"Your parents didn't come close to exaggerating," Mrs. Granger told Ron, her eyes darting around the grand entrance hall.

"I suppose I should ask you your intentions towards my daughter," Mr. Granger said teasingly to Harry.

"Daddy!" Hermione protested.

"Dan!" Emma Granger scolded.

Harry merely smiled and took Hermione's hand in his. "We intend to be as serious as is appropriate for people our age," he said simply. "I'm sure you'd say all teens think their love is true love. We'll see. Would you two, and you Remus, care to join us for breakfast? Then Hermione and I can show you around."

The adults had eaten, but joined the teens for some juice. "Do you always just eat eggs and meat for breakfast?" Dan Granger asked Harry.

"No, sir," Harry said. "I figure I might need the protein and fats. I'll do a more balanced lunch and then carb-load at dinner."

Dan beamed, while Remus and Ron tried to figure out what they were saying. Hermione had two more exams that morning, but skipped off to them happily, knowing her parents were nearby. Harry escorted them into the small room off the great hall and introduced Remus and the Grangers to the Diggorys and the Delacours. Amos Diggory did not look overly-pleased by having to shake Remus' hand, but he did it without actually grimacing. The Delacours commended Harry on his French grammar, although not his pronunciation. The Grangers were also as technically fluent as Harry. Remus, whose grandparents had immigrated to Britain during World War II, spoke French with a Norman accent.

No one spoke Bulgarian nor did Viktor's parents speak English, but Viktor's father spoke French, while his mother and Remus both spoke Italian. Therefore, they all got along. In the end, the group toured Hogwarts together. Harry arranged with Dobby to bring a picnic lunch out by the lake, where Hermione joined them.

Dinner would be late that night, as the Third Task did not start until dusk, and dusk was very late in Scotland just after the summer solstice. Therefore, the group stayed together until 6:00, which is when the champions went to get dressed for the final task of the tournament. Harry and Hermione went off hand-in-hand.

"They do look sweet together, don't they?" Emma almost cooed.

"No father thinks his fifteen year old daughter looks sweet with any boy," Dan grumbled. Emma gave him an elbow. "They do look sweet on each other, though, don't they?"

"I do have a bad feeling about tonight, though," Emma said.

"Let's just hope no one gets hurt," Dan said. He looked around the grounds as they approached the castle. "It's pretty, in a fairy tale kind of way, but sometimes we forget how bloody those fairy tales were."

While Bagman and Fudge were making the announcements which told the crowd what the Third Task was et cetera, Harry turned to Remus and Dumbledore and said softly, "It might interest you to know that that isn't Alastor Moody. Moody was kidnapped by two Death Eaters before he ever arrived at Hogwarts. They got the drop on him in part because he was shocked to see two men he thought were dead."

"Peter and who else?" Remus asked.

"That man, Barty Crouch Junior. He's on polyjuice, and it's been over forty minutes since his last

dose. It's in that flask he's always nipping at."

"I saw him at his flask just a few moments ago," Dumbledore protested.

"I switched flasks on him when I first showed up," Harry said. "He's drinking plain polyjuice, no bits of anyone added. The real Moody was rescued about two hours ago. He'll be pumped up on stimulants when he gets here. Get the fake Moody under the stands over there as soon as I enter the maze, and get Fudge there, too. Snape should be bringing Karkaroff. At that point, you'll be joined by the real Moody and a high ministry official who was also kidnapped, and mind-raped, by Voldemort and Pettigrew."

"Who might that be?" Dumbledore asked.

"Mister Crouch," Harry answered. "He knows a chunk of the truth, and he knows the story he has to tell if he has any chance of not being sent to Azkaban for freeing his son. I should be back in less than two hours after I enter the maze. I'll be taken to Voldemort because the cup is a portkey, and it will actually appear just about here. Voldemort wanted to send my dead body back to scare all of you, you see."

"Good luck," Remus said, seeing that it was time to start.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said.

"Keep track of the others' times if they reach where the cup was," Harry said. "Whoever comes in first after me should be declared the winner."

"We shall," Dumbledore said.

"Oh, and here," Harry handed Dumbledore a wand. "I also switched wands with 'Professor' Moody. He'll have quite a surprise if he draws the one in his pocket."

And with that, Harry went off to await the actual start.

Since the maze was set in the Quidditch Pitch, and that was on the Hogwarts grounds, Harry was easily able to tap into Hogwarts itself for quick guidance. As soon as he was out of sight of the entrance, he changed into his Animagus shape, a Kodiak bear, and loped quickly through the maze.

Barty Crouch Junior watched as Potter entered the maze first and took the first turn he needed to get to the cup. At that point, he was distracted by Dumbledore. "Alastor, I have just received a message that Barty Crouch arrived at the castle. He is being brought to the area under the stands. I need you to meet with him and guard him while I get Minister Fudge."

"Right," the fake Moody answered. He had wondered what had happened to his father since Pettigrew had allowed the old man to escape. Voldemort had tortured Wormtail and had nearly cut him into pieces for his snake to feed on. It was only the fact that the fake Moody couldn't be two places at once tonight which had prevented Voldemort from killing the rat.

Once under the stands, he found not his father but the werewolf, wand in hand, and the Minister. Young Barty dodged behind Dumbledore and pulled his wand, which promptly turned into a rubber chicken. He was still looking at the 'Weasley special' when Remus stunned him.

"What is going on!" Fudge demanded.

"A very dangerous plot, Cornelius," a fresh voice said.

"Barty! And. . . ." Following Barty Crouch Senior, wearing his 'spare' leg and an eye patch, was a very disheveled and worn Mad-eye Moody.

"What I have to say will sound almost unbelievable," Mr. Crouch said. He held out his hand to Dumbledore, who handed Crouch the wand Harry had given him. "I swear on my magic it is true,

and that tonight, if Minister Fudge agrees to my conditions, I will retire from the Ministry of Magic at midnight."

Fudge's eyes went wide. He knew that while Dumbledore could likely take his job anytime he wanted, Crouch really wanted the job, and still had powerful friends on the Wizengamot. "What conditions?" Fudge frowned when he heard them, but agreed, "If any of this nonsense proves true," he concluded.

"It will all prove true, and more," Crouch said, just as Snape brought Karkaroff in at wand point. "I was held prisoner since last September by You-Know, oh bother, by . . ." he shuddered, "Voldemort and Peter Pettigrew."

"Pettigrew is dead and You-Know-Who is gone!"

"Pettigrew is alive, and Voldemort is back, although currently in a mutilated form," Crouch assured Fudge.

"Although I did not believe it then, that is the story Potter and his friends told last year," Snape said.

"I know you won't believe a werewolf, but there are truth serums that do affect us," Remus said.

"For now, I swear on my magic that Peter Pettigrew is alive and was the one who betrayed the Potters, not Sirius Black."

"I wouldn't have believed it either," Moody snarled, "but it was Pettigrew and that one who kidnapped me."

"And who is that?" Fudge demanded.

"In a moment," Crouch said. "Then you'll also see why I have to retire tonight and why I wanted assurances of non-persecution for myself. Voldemort is only partially back. He's in a body that can do little. He needs to recreate his body, and he intends to do it tonight. That one made the Triwizard Cup into a portkey. When Potter touches it, he'll be sent to Voldemort."

"What! We must stop him!"

"No," Dumbledore said firmly. "The ceremony Voldemort must use requires three things to be added to a vile potion at the last minute: a bone from his father, the willing sacrifice of flesh from a servant. . . ."

"Pettigrew," Crouch stated.

"And the blood taken unwillingly from an enemy."

"Harry," Remus pointed out.

"Harry knows this," Dumbledore said. "He was chosen by Prophecy to be the one to fight Voldemort to the death of one of them. If Harry willingly shares his blood, Voldemort will be poisoned in his new body, and this time, when he dies he should really be dead."

Fudge blinked at that. "Really?"

"Really," Dumbledore said, lying through his teeth. "Harry wants to be free of the Prophecy and have his revenge on Voldemort. He wants to be free of his rather nasty Muggle relatives, and would like to live with his godfather, if he had also manage to capture Pettigrew. However, if anyone interferes, it might delay the ceremony, or other blood might be used, which would bring Voldemort back, and we do not want that."

"No, we certainly don't," Fudge agreed. "But do you have any proof, other than your beliefs, that any of this is true? Show me someone who's supposed to be dead but isn't!"

Mister Crouch sighed. "There's someone right there." The polyjuice had worn off. Moody growled and retrieved his eye, plopping into a beaker of a solution to clean it.

"He looks familiar," Fudge said.

"But. . . ." Karkaroff said. He looked at Crouch, who nodded.

"Yes," Crouch said, "that is my son. Let me confess to what I did."

Chapter XII

It had taken Harry and Cedric over fifty minutes to get to the Cup in the original time stream, and then Harry was with Voldemort for over an hour (mostly waiting for the Death Eaters and listening to Voldemort harangue them). Harry in his huge bear form made it to the Cup in just over ten minutes. His aura warned the magical creatures that there was a magical alpha predator passing through, and none wanted to match itself against it since Harry wasn't marking territory.

Harry reverted to his human form, took out his wand, and grabbed the Cup.

In seconds, he was at the decaying Riddle house.

Harry made his way to the cauldron, where Wormtail was finishing the potion. Harry glanced around and saw no sign of Voldemort, but he could hear Nagini coming to investigate his presence. Harry had been uncertain of exactly what he would do once he arrived. He had all sorts of scenarios. He seemed to have stumbled into one he had thought rather unlikely. He would have preferred to have Pettigrew do the dirty work, but that would now risk Voldemort somehow surviving.

Pettigrew straightened up and muttered, "Finally finished." Harry therefore stunned him.

Nagini started to retreat. She had hoped this was a non-magic user, but since it wasn't she knew she had to warn her Master.

Harry apparated ahead of the retreating snake, and with one sweep of his wand cut off her head before she could strike. Even before the body stopped writhing, Harry had located the emerald Horcrux, located deep inside the snake's gullet. Getting it out was a quick but messy business.

Harry cleaned himself and the emerald off and apparated back to the cauldron. He grinned, stood behind a tall tombstone, and commanded with all his power, "Accio Voldemort!"

The nasty little humanoid thing that held Voldemort's bit of soul came screaming through the air face first. That face hit the tombstone Harry was hiding behind, stunning Voldemort semi-senseless for several minutes.

Voldemort's head cleared when he was dashed by a bucketful of conjured ice water. He was shocked not only by the pain in his face and by the water, but by the fact that he was bound. "Who dares!" he demanded.

"I dare," Harry said simply.

Voldemort was clearly surprised. "Potter?"

"That's me," Harry said. "Now, I've destroyed all your Horcruxes but one." Harry pointed at the emerald, sitting on a flat tombstone some ten meters away. Harry stepped back behind the tombstone and sent a powerful shattering curse at the emerald.

"NO!" Voldemort screamed as the Horcrux exploded. For a few seconds, the surprised image of an earlier Voldemort hung in the air.

"So, now you're almost mortal," Harry said, coming back around the tombstone. "If I destroy that poor excuse of a shell you're in, though, it will likely just turn you back into whatever you were for almost thirteen years, and I don't know how to kill that. So, let's see if the ingredients are the only thing that count, or if the intentions count as well."

The ugly face frowned for a moment, and then registered surprise when Harry picked up the form. "What? No! Potter, wait! We can rule together!"

"I don't want to rule, and if I did, I certainly couldn't trust you to share," Harry said. "You learned

not to share in the orphanage, and certainly never learned to share since." He tossed the struggling body into the cauldron, regretfully removing the bonds as he did so. He summoned a leg bone from Riddle Senior and tossed it into the cauldron, saying the formula as he did so. Then he tied a tourniquet around Wormtail's wrist, remembering to make it look as if Pettigrew had done it himself, and then sawed the hand off. Then Harry cut a slash into his left forearm, and let the blood drip into the cauldron as he said the last sentence.

In the first ceremony, the potion in the cauldron had instantly turned a bright white, sending out diamond-like sparks. This time, it was a bright cream color, and the sparks had a faint yellow tinge. When the sparks stopped, the billow of steam which extinguished the fire was also yellowish.

In the center of the dissipating mist, a thin figure was trying to straighten up -- it was debilitated compared to Voldemort's returning form in the first time line. Harry cast an Ennervate at Wormtail, who instantly woke up, screaming, unable to decide which pain was worse, the one from his missing right hand or the pain on his left forearm as Voldemort tried to draw more magic, more lifeforce, from the Dark Mark than it was ever designed to channel, to bring the new-but-crippled body to full life.

Harry knew he could not cast the Death Curse or the Cruciatius. He just did not have enough hate in him. Still, there were other spells, just as deadly if not as quick. Harry pulled Merlin's wand and cast a small bubble around Voldemort's head. Air could not get in or out. Two breaths quickly used up what oxygen there was inside the bubble.

Pettigrew shrieked in agony and then flopped over, dead.

All over the United Kingdom and Ireland, and on the island of Azkaban, the thirty-four remaining Death Eaters with unaltered Dark Marks died, one by one, as Voldemort tried to survive.

As Voldemort fell out of the cauldron and rolled on the ground, trying to gain access to oxygen in any possible way since without the magic and power flowing to him he would already be dead, Harry walked away and made certain that Nagini's body was destroyed.

After six more minutes, Voldemort seemingly died. Harry cast a detection spell, and it was another three minutes before the last little dribble of power petered out. Harry dumped the body back into the cauldron and wedged Pettigrew in next to it.

He waited another ten minutes before removing the bubble around Voldemort's head and then ran every test he knew to see if there was any trace of life.

There was none.

Harry cleared away all evidence of the spells and put away Merlin's wand. He summoned the Cup, and it whisked himself, the cauldron, and the two bodies in it away.

Without Barty Crouch Junior's interference, it had taken Viktor 42 minutes to get to the Cup's original location. Cedric was right behind, while Fleur took 54 minutes.

Dumbledore had made a partial announcement: the person who had entered Harry Potter's name into the Goblet of Fire had been caught, and had turned out to be a Marked Death Eater, escaped from Azkaban. The Cup had been used as a portkey, and even then, Harry Potter was struggling at an unknown location against at least one other Death Eater, who was trying to bring Lord Voldemort back into his power.

By now, there were two dozen aurors on the scene, and numerous reporters. Suddenly, Karkaroff screamed in pain. For the next five minutes, he writhed and screamed, although he did so under a silencing spell beneath the stands.

"What is it?" Fudge had demanded.

"It's his Dark Mark," Snape said, realizing now why Potter had been willing to spare him. He now owed two life debts to Potter, and now fulfilled them. "The connection to the Dark Lord was made through the magic and very life of the Death Eater. Karkaroff might have betrayed several of his fellow Death Eaters to earn his reprieve, but he did not renounce the Dark Lord in his heart." Snape rolled up the struggling Karkaroff's sleeve, and the Dark Mark showed, purplish-black and pulsing, until, with every muscle spasming, Karkaroff suddenly died.

Snape rolled up his sleeve, and there was just the faintest outline of the Mark on his skin, and it had gaps in it, as the flesh was slowly regenerating since Harry had altered it. "I, on the other hand, betrayed my former Master. On the night Potter broke his power, many of the Death Eaters passed out. My guess is the Headmaster was correct. By passively, even willingly, giving his blood, Potter contaminated the ceremony to the point that the Dark Lord is dying. When the last loyal Death Eater dies, he will truly die." 'I hope,' Snape added to himself.

Harry, the Cup, and the cauldron showed up less than twenty-five minutes after Karkaroff died. Before Fudge could order the lot to be swept up by the aurors, Harry had amplified his voice. "This is the body of the self-proclaimed Dark Lord Voldemort! His attempt to come back with new powers failed! Here is the Death Eater who tried to bring it about, Peter Pettigrew! He was the one who betrayed my parents, not the innocent Sirius Black!"

Harry turned to the officials and allowed himself to be led away to be questioned. Only he would be able to know that the Harry who had used the time-turner was near by, and was helping everything along by using undetectable charms which made everyone more willing to believe nearly anything Harry said.

Harry tried to give the Cup to Viktor, who refused it. Harry scowled at the invisible Harry, who just shrugged his shoulders. After an hour of questioning, Harry got permission to use the toilet. The two Harrys switched off. Time-turner Harry went back to the questioning. The Harry who had just killed Voldemort turned himself invisible and went down into Merlin's Sanctuary. He used Merlin's time-turner to go back a few hours at a time until the previous Friday night, and then he collapsed into sleep, knowing he had to get up in a few hours to finish working on the letters and boxes to turn over to Dumbledore in two mornings.

Back on what was now the early hours of June 25, Harry had had enough and said so.

"Just who do you think you are?" Fudge demanded.

"I think I am the Heir of Merlin," Harry said. "I didn't want to do this, but if I stay in here with you lot any longer, I'm going to start cursing you." He stood and with a gesture, everyone in the room, even Dumbledore, froze. Harry was being questioned in one of the Quidditch changing rooms. He walked out the door, which broke the spell. Fudge, the aurors, and Dumbledore all ran out after Harry.

The crowd had mostly stayed, and they cheered when Harry appeared. Then they gasped as Harry whipped out a wand and suddenly the Red Dragon shot into the sky. Harry again amplified his voice and turned towards the now-worried Minister. "The Minister answers to the Wizengamot and to the Queen. But in whose name was the Wizengamot formed?"

When Fudge didn't answer, Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Well?"

"The first Council of Wizards was the Welsh one, called by Godric Gryffindor in the name of Merlin," Dumbledore said. "A few years later, he did the same in England, and that was the first Wizengamot. Gryffindor was the senior member, because he was the magical heir of Merlin."

"Can anyone but the Heir of Merlin create Merlin's Mark?" Harry demanded.

"No," Dumbledore said.

Harry turned on Fudge. "By tradition, I could take over magical Britain, but just because I can do magic no one else has been able to do for a thousand years is a pretty stupid way to run a modern Government. But I tell you right now, leave me alone! I figured out a way to beat this Dark Lord and risked my life to do it. Why should a fourteen year old boy have to do that, Prophecy or no Prophecy, Heir of Merlin or no Heir of Merlin?"

Harry turned on the crowd, who mostly shrank back a few steps. "That goes for the rest of you! It will not be my job to solve your bloody problems! I've told the Headmaster and left the Minister a letter detailing what I intend to do with my life, and how I hope to make magical Britain a bit safer and a bit better for various parts of the community which have been forgotten. Part is outlined in a letter I gave to the Minister and the rest is in a box which will open on my eighteenth birthday. I also needed to come back here if I could to learn more. I may have a lot of raw power, but that doesn't bring knowledge or wisdom. The Minister, by refusing to be reasonable, has prevented that. As for all of you, if you end up trying to get me to solve all your problems, I will just leave. I'll leave you to a corrupt Ministry, the next Dark Lord, or to the mercy of the Muggles if I have to. The next moves are up to you."

And with that, Harry disappeared.

"So what did all this mean?" Dan Granger demanded late the next morning as a group gathered to put the pieces together.

"Merlin was the most accomplished, most powerful wizard in European history, and one of the most powerful known in world history," Dumbledore said. "Harry has his power, but not his knowledge. He, and your daughter, have plans to make wizarding Britain a better place. He had hoped he could accomplish what he did last night in a much lower-key way than he had to."

Dumbledore turned on Minister Fudge. "He nearly accomplished that, but you just couldn't let go, could you? You had to push and push until he had to declare himself the Heir of Merlin, just to get a bit of peace."

"I'm disappointed my son didn't win," Amos Diggory said to Fudge, "but I am proud of how well he did. I am ashamed, however, at how you acted."

"How about at how you acted, berating that poor elf last August?" Hermione asked. Remus and her parents rolled their eyes, while Snape merely sneered. Fudge rather echoed Snape. Madam Bones, the other person present, merely observed.

Diggory flushed. "Yes, well, after hearing your views on elf rights, I can see why you'd say that."

"She's just a child, and an ignorant one at that," Fudge snapped. "I am tired of being harangued by the lot of you! The MLES can decide what to do about Black. I don't care one way or another. . . ."

"Interesting," a voice from the door said.

Everyone looked over in surprise, even Dumbledore.

"The Minister and the Headmaster know who I am," the man said. "I am Lord Severn, Hogwarts Class of 1933. While I was Muggleborn, and therefore rather low in the eyes of you, Minister, and people like you, I have been the link between the Ministry and Her Majesty since 1955. I informed Her Majesty of the appearance of Merlin's Mark during the Second Task, and some of the oldest magical retainers had several interesting things to tell us about the role of Merlin in the magical royal families. The Heir of Merlin revealed himself to me in early May."

After a pause, he went on, "He came to me again last week and again early this morning. Mister Fudge? Her Majesty has revoked your appointment as the Royal Wizard." He turned to Dumbledore. "You are the Royal Wizard Pro-tempore until such a time as the Wizengamot suggests

a replacement. While the next meeting is of course on the equinox in September, her Majesty requests that it meet in emergency session soon."

"And if I must decline her Majesty's gracious offer?" Dumbledore asked.

"Then the next most qualified person would have to be the Heir of Merlin," his lordship stated.

"A fourteen year old boy!" Fudge protested.

"It would not be Her Majesty's first choice," Severn reminded them. "She does not expect you to take the position on anything but a temporary basis, and in fact that is part of your job description as Chief Warlock, unless you're giving up that position?"

"No," Dumbledore said, "I am not. I will serve until the emergency meeting."

"From what Mister Potter has said, the unrepentant Death Eaters are likely dead?"

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed.

"Then I would expect there will be some missing members of the Wizengamot," Severn stated.

"What do you mean? that there were Death Eaters on the Wizengamot?" Fudge protested.

"Nonsense!"

"As best we can determine, there were at least thirty people who died because they had the Dark Mark," Bones said. "Lucius Malfoy, Giles Goyle, and Marmaduke Parker among them. Two of the Noble members and one of the Regular members."

"I can't believe it," Fudge said.

"Her Majesty would look favorably at the recommendation of Madam Bones for the appointment as the Royal Witch," Severn said, ignoring Fudge. "She is also studying a proposal of the Heir of Merlin for changes to the Wizengamot, but will discuss that with whomever is appointed. We shall be notifying the Prime Minister to expect a new visitor. Oh," Severn added, handing two sealed parchments to Dumbledore. "One confirms the removal of Mister Fudge, the other is a Royal Pardon for Sirius Black." He bowed to the group and started to leave as abruptly as he had arrived.

"Lord Severn?" Hermione piped up.

"Yes, Miss?"

"Do you know where Harry is?"

Severn smiled. "Are you Miss Granger?"

"I am, my lord."

"I understand you are going to be co-founding a new school of magic with him."

"We hope to," Hermione agreed.

"He's at the castle which will form the nucleus of the Royal Academy of Magic." Hermione's eyes went wide. "His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, made the suggestion, and Her Majesty approved of the idea. I would imagine he'll be with you soon after you leave Hogwarts." Severn left.

"Come, Cornelius," Madam Bones stated as she stood. "Stop gaping and pointing like a fool. Albus, please call the Wizengamot as soon as you can. If you know where Mister Black is, have a talk with him. See if he's able to take a position on the Wizengamot. It might be good to have a friend of the Heir of Merlin in our deliberations."

Monday, July 17, 1995

It was a beautiful day in Norfolk, so Hermione slipped into the fenced-in back garden of her

parents' home just after lunch. There was one spot where there was both complete privacy and good sun. She laid down a towel on the grass and slipped off her sandals, shorts, and top. She laid on the towel in just her one set of thong panties, set an egg timer to ring in three minutes so she wouldn't get too much sun, and then closed her eyes.

She had received one note from Harry, saying the he was 'fine' -- and more importantly that things were going very well and that he would come to visit her some time soon. And of course, that he loved her. There was also a long statement attached, charmed for her eyes only, which described in detail his year, his plans, and what had happened the night of the Third Task.

The timer had gone off for the second time, and Hermione had just tuned back on her stomach, when she heard Harry say, "I could stay and watch you all day, but I thought I'd best take this chance to announce my self."

"How long have you been watching," Hermione said.

"About a minute," Harry admitted. "I wasn't sure if you were awake and I didn't want to startle you."

"Plus you wanted to look at my titties," Hermione teased.

"I wanted to look at all of you," Harry said, kneeling next to Hermione.

Hermione rolled over and asked, "Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Besides, as much as I enjoy breasts, I'm more of a leg man myself."

"Well, that does explain your physical attraction to myself, Luna, and Cho," Hermione conceded.

"Now what?" she teased, caressing Harry's face.

"I'd like to snog you senseless, but if we get started, I don't know if we could stop." He looked around. "I don't know if this is private enough for that."

"Perhaps not," Hermione agreed. She sat up and slipped on her top and then stood to finish dressing.

"My parents won't be back until after Five. My bedroom, then a shower, and then we talk?"

"Sounds like one of your usual brilliant plans."

Epilogue I

Harry and Hermione sat snuggled on the sofa in the Grangers' parlor. Harry finally said, "Before we talk about us and what I've been up to, you must have some questions about what happened."

"A few," she confessed. "What happened to the Crouches, and to Professor Moody for that matter."

"Moody is still embarrassed and very twitchy, but physically he's recovered," Harry said. "Crouch Junior is dead of course, while his father is in hiding, but we'll come back to him. Snape is still Snape, but part of our deal is that he has to treat you nicely for the next three years."

"Me? Not you?"

"Fine, we'll jump to that," Harry said. "You do know that the only reasons I wanted to stay at Hogwarts three more years is so that I could be with you and so I could establish my self in this time, right?"

"I keep forgetting that you're partially from an alternate future," Hermione admitted.

"Well, I blew my choices when I had to show I was the Heir of Merlin. Still, that and defeating Voldemort has given me some leverage. First, I was tested on my N.E.W.T.s over two weeks ago. I got the results this morning. They agreed that I could skip the O.W.L.s if I did well on the N.E.W.T.s."

"How did you do?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"O's in Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration, although I probably only got the O in Transfiguration, instead of an E, because I'm an Animagus. E in Muggle Studies. A's in Potions, Creatures, Runes, and Arithmancy."

"You never took Muggle Studies, Runes, or Arithmancy," Hermione pointed out.

"True, but I have a solid Muggle background, and I had to teach myself Runes and Arithmancy for the trip back."

Hermione pouted. "Eight. And I won't even be allowed to take eight N.E.W.T. classes."

"True," Harry admitted. "You could still do the Muggle Studies."

"True," she admitted in turn.

"And I think you might want to plan on doing Astronomy."

That made Hermione stop short. "Why?"

"Because Sinistra and Vector offer an advanced tutorial in Calculus and Higher Math Theory for those taking both," Harry said. "I know how much you like doing the runes and languages, but you are a natural and brilliant mathematician. Take both, and you can have a career that spans both Muggle and magical maths or astro-physics."

Hermione almost looked convinced, so Harry went on, "You told me that that should have been your dream career in your last life and that you regretted not doing that. That doesn't mean it has to be in this one, but I wanted you to know about it."

"I'll have to think about that," Hermione admitted. "What else?"

"There's the school, and how I'll be near you the next three years. Which first?"

"I'll be selfish and say us," Hermione said.

"Fair enough," Harry agreed. "First, you do know what a metamorphmagus is, right?"

"You're one of them, too?" Hermione asked.

"A very limited one," Harry said. "I haven't had a hair cut since I was about eight."

"Why'd you settle for that one, then?" Hermione asked, and then flushed.

"I think because I had a subconscious memory of my dad," Harry answered seriously. "Anyway, I can't really change anything. However, in the last lifetime, when I was trying to develop the gift and failing, I did discover I could do one really neat thing."

"And what is that?"

"If I concentrate, I can take a bit of polyjuice potion and keep the form I change into as long as I want."

"Really?"

Harry nodded, "As long as I don't change back to myself, I keep the polyjuiced form."

"And this means what, in the context of our being together?" Hermione asked.

"Ah, well, meet the next three Defense teachers at Hogwarts," Harry said.

Hermione had to pause to get her mind around that concept. "You mean, you're going to polyjuice into someone else. . . ."

"Some Muggle's form, yes," Harry agreed. "Three, actually."

"And teach Defense for the next three years?"

"Yes," Harry agreed. "We'll have to find some forms that physically appeal to you. The Headmaster has agreed to overlook the usual rules about staff-student relationships, as our relation preceded my being hired and of course because we'll be keeping it secret."

"So, you won't be Harry when we're together?" Hermione asked.

"Some times, but not too often. It takes about half an hour of my really working on it to make the transition stable. It's not a very comfortable thing to do," he admitted.

"And you're doing this. . . ."

"In part to get experience as a teacher, but mostly because I love you and want to be around you," Harry said. "Is that so difficult to understand?"

"Understand, no; believe, yes," Hermione admitted.

"Care to make a preliminary survey?" Harry asked.

"I suppose. . . ." Hermione's eyes went wide when suddenly there were over two hundred of what looked like action figures around them, all around eighteen inches high and dressed in white briefs.

"Who are all these men?" Hermione asked.

"Just Muggles," Harry answered. "Just take my wand and touch one on the head. You can say 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe'. If you want to see one life-sized, just say 'grow'. 'No' eliminates the choice, 'yes' and 'maybe' will simply sort them into two groups to be viewed later. And don't worry, the real person will never know, and we'll be making up fake biographies for them."

"Will anyone know besides the Headmaster and me?" Hermione asked, casting her eye. None of the men were ugly, and all seemed to be in decent shape or better and between the ages of 25 and 30.

"And Remus and Sirius, and Luna," Harry answered. Seeing the puzzled look, Harry simply said, "Trust me, Luna will know anyway."

"Alright," Hermione said, still looking.

"And no, I won't think that you'll fall in love with me in another body or anything like that," Harry

assured her.

"Good, because we won't be having sex in any forms but our own," Hermione said.

"I'll make certain to gather plenty of hair, then," Harry said.

"Well, not face to face sex, any way," Hermione amended, since a few were actually very cute.

Harry watched, amused, as Hermione first eliminated the nine with really red hair, the four strawberry blonds, and three of the four with auburn hair, and then made an assault that eliminated about thirty others. Hermione made three more sets of choices, which finally eliminated all of them. "What's the score, do you know?" she asked.

"There were two hundred and seven," Harry said. "You eliminated seventy-eight, said 'maybe' to a hundred and eleven, and were more positive about eighteen. You can choose the first tomorrow, but your parents will be home in half an hour or so."

"Will you stay?"

"I will go out and come back, so you can say I arrived after Four-thirty," Harry said.

"Good plan."

Harry formally asked the Grangers if Hermione might accompany him to Diagon Alley every day during the week until they left for two weeks in France in August (the three Grangers would be visiting the Delacours). They agreed, as Hermione had already finished all of her summer homework.

Harry showed up the next morning three minutes after the Grangers had left at 8:06. Harry apparated them away while they were kissing.

Hermione broke the kiss and saw that she was in a small flat. "I was going to ask how you were going to walk up and down Diagon Alley without being mobbed," she said, "but are we ever going to leave the flat?"

"Us getting mobbed," Harry corrected. "You are the Heir of Merlin's promised."

Hermione froze for a second, then admitted, "You're right. I guess we just stay here all day, every day, and fool around." She smirked. "Poor us."

"We can, but it turns out I own nine buildings in Diagon Alley, and almost every building in the Alley but Gringotts has apartments of some sort in them. I chose this flat because it has its own entrance. No one will pay much attention to us. We'll pick out my first identity and establish him as a person this summer. You will be my visiting girl friend -- I have about fifty women for you to choose from. We'll polyjuice together."

Hermione wrinkled her nose.

"It won't be too bad, I promise you," Harry said.

Harry had the eighteen choices reappear, although life sized and nude. Hermione eliminated all those who weren't circumcised or who didn't meet a certain minimal requirement. This left three of her eighteen first choices. They quickly made a preliminary choice, and then did a thorough exam -- they didn't want Harry's identity to have any hidden medical problems.

The end choice for Harry's first year was a shade under six feet tall, and moderately muscled. He had dark blue eyes and dark hair, but not as dark as Harry's, and it was slightly wavy. He was good looking, although not as coldly good looking as Tom Riddle had been. He looked to be about twenty-five or so.

Hermione had to admire the selection Harry had made for her to choose from for herself. They all looked to be between 20 and 25, and were all between 5 foot 4 and 5 foot 7. All were attractive, but none were stunningly beautiful. All had nice legs, and all had either masses of hair or very long slightly wavy hair.

"Harry, do you have a hair fetish?"

"I love running my fingers through your hair," Harry admitted.

"So, any preferences?"

"Hermione, I picked all of these," Harry pointed out.

"Okay, I'll pick her." Hermione's choice had hazel-green eyes, incredibly pale skin, and the most hair of any of them, masses of black curling tresses, and a bit more body hair than Hermione was used to, although the Muggle had shaved under her arms and her legs. Her basic shape was much like Hermione's current one.

"So, it's still only a bit after Nine," Harry said. "Shall we retire to the bedroom, and afterwards we can talk about the school and such, then go for lunch and shopping?"

"Sure."

A little after 10:20, the two threw on light dressing gowns and came back to the front room to talk. "So, what news about the school?" Hermione asked.

"The good news is that they agreed to license the school to me on my terms, and to allow the Examiners to test all our students at the end of the Fifth year. As we expected, students can only stay through their Fifth year. However, they've also decreed that we cannot compete for students with the other three schools."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, if either parent attended Hogwarts, Tara, or the Ysgol, or if a sibling attends one of them, no student can attend the Royal unless they can prove they can't afford the fees to one of the other three, at least until our students grow up and have children. So, that will leave five groups to draw from for the most part for our first few years: all those proud but impoverished magical families that we wanted to reach anyway; the home-schoolers who can afford to hire their own tutors and likely will anyway; those who send their children overseas; immigrants; and the Muggle-born. However, only one group will receive only an invitation to the Royal."

"Let me guess," Hermione said. "The Muggle-born."

"The Muggle-born who don't speak Gaelic or Welsh," Harry agreed.

"That sucks," Hermione said.

"It does. I've hired Barty Crouch to teach a Magical Traditions class. Every First year will take it, as will any Muggle-raised student after their First year."

"So, a First and Second year will take Astronomy, Charms, Defense, Herbology, History, Potions, Transfiguration, writing, science, and maths, plus Muggle Life and Magical Traditions?" Hermione thought about that, "Even I think that might be a bit much." They had talked about adding some Muggle subjects to the curriculum.

"I was thinking, maybe we could collapse the two year science course into one year. Sinistra ended up having to teach us a lot of math and physics anyway. Put all that into the First year and have them memorize the constellations over the summer for their homework. Then they can start Astronomy proper in their Second year."

"I'll talk to Sinistra about that," Hermione said.

"We may or may not keep the writing. The First year Muggle and Traditions courses would be pretty simple," Harry said. "That wouldn't take up a lot of their time. Also, I thought besides Flying the first year, we could also offer swimming for every other year. Get their magical butts moving."

"Good idea."

"I also talked with Mister Ollivander about setting up a little market once we get into our third year of operation, for merchants from both Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, and some others. He said if we can have at least sixty students with decent pocket money to sell to, he can sell the idea to the merchants."

"We'll have to wait and see how many have pocket money," Hermione admitted.

"The Wizengamot did agree to subsidize the cost of three work robes, a pair of shoes, and a cauldron for each student per year. Those that can afford them can use the money elsewhere. I was thinking, we could have school copies of the texts. If people wanted to pick up their own copies, that would be fine, too."

"More costs, less income," Hermione worried.

"True," Harry had to admit. "Still, we want as many as we can get to come."

"True," Hermione said with a sigh.

"They also agreed to take over a section of rail from the Muggles. It passes near an abandoned mining village, which is only six miles from the school. I can arrange a portal to take them safely from the village platform to the school."

"So, we get our own version of the Hogwarts' Express?"

Harry nodded. "And I was authorized to make portkeys to take students to Platform Nine and Three-quarters if they request it."

"Then it looks like we will have our selves a school."

"It does indeed."

Harry then took her back to the kitchen, where there were two large cauldrons of polyjuice simmering. "This will be something new," Harry said. "Snape developed it for Voldemort in 1997 in the last time line. You take the first dose like we did in Second year." Hermione wrinkled her nose. "After that, I can transform these into lozenges, that I can actually flavor with anise. Each carries a dose and you need to start sucking on it about five minutes before the dose runs out. To resume the same shape, you just pop a lozenge. You just have to drink the initial dose, as long as you don't take some other shape, besides your own, of course."

"Impressive," Hermione said.

Harry handed her a watch. "This will lightly vibrate seven minutes before the dose runs out."

"Even better," Hermione said.

Henry Clay was a fairly popular Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He was successful in getting about a quarter of the Fifth through Seventh years to produce a Patronus. His Fifth years did not particularly enjoy having to directly learn how to deal with boggarts again, but that was about the biggest complaint against him, other than the Slytherins' disdain of a teacher who claimed to hail from Australia.

They had complained of unfair treatment (meaning, in reality, being treated exactly as anyone else). That stopped after Snape's echoing their complaints had ended in a duel, and the Potions Master had

been defeated by being hit by seventy-five minor hexes in three minutes, after his shield had been blown up.

Clay's students scored well on the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, approximately equally those scored two years before, when Remus Lupin had taught. Together, they represented a high peak compared to most other years in recent history. Only the year in between them had even come close.

Most students were sad to see him leave after only one year. Clay had explained that the position had been cursed by Voldemort, and it would take three good Defense teachers working in a row to break the Curse, and that he had made a good start.

That made many of them feel a bit better.

Over the Yule Break, though, the students had been introduced to Henry's fiancée, Olga Romanova. Considered by herself, or if one just looked at a Muggle photo, she was nothing special. In person, she was a fiery Slav. If her hair hadn't been so dark, many would have sworn she was at least part-veela.

Most understood why Clay wanted to follow her to the Urals. Many of the boys, and some of a girls, would have as well, if they had been asked.

The next year's teacher was just as competent, but a lot more intimidating. James Kettle stood 6 foot 9 and was a burly 24+ stone (over 330 pounds) of solid muscle and sinew. Draco Malfoy had stared at the man during the feast, and changed his class schedule the next day. Severus Snape was the most well-behaved he had ever been. After a friendly tussle between Kettle and Hagrid ended with Hagrid only winning two out of three submissions in the friendly contest, Snape walked on eggshells, almost tried to smile, and never once did the world 'Mudblood' pass the lips of anyone near the Defense professor, who had announced that first day that he was a Muggle-born who was by profession an expert troll wrangler.

The students, especially the Fourth and Sixth years, were driven hard. By the end of the year, the Defense students were in good shape if they liked it or not. The O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students, with several good years of instruction now behind them, scored better than ever.

Kettle did have one weakness, however. Her name was Becky Ito, a Japanese-Canadian (Kettle was also Canadian). She was just barely 5 foot 4, and if she weighed 8 stone (112 pounds) it was because of the huge D-cups on her slender frame. A few of the students tried to win points by showing cleavage, only to find that it was not easy doing pushups in a push-up bra.

While very grateful for their training, most students were not terribly sad to see Kettle go.

The third Defense teacher was in many ways the oddest. He was a very average-looking man of about thirty, very slender with very short blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He wore a very plain brown robe, more like a habit, belted with rope. He wore odd sandals which, when asked a few days after the first night feast, he claimed were made from recycled automobile tires which he had bought in Lagos. He was merely introduced as Brother Z.

The students knew they had an odd one right from that first night. This was reenforced the next morning, when they found Brother Z awaiting the arrival of his colleagues at 7:00 am in a lotus position and floating a few inches above the staff table.

The students also knew they had another dangerous one when Professor Snape walked in and made a sneering comment about fakirs -- and was turned into a seal without Z making a movement. Fiery letters then erupted behind them: BETTER TO BE SILENT AND BE THOUGHT FOOLISH, THAN TO SPEAK AND BE PROVEN A FOOL. If any had missed the point, a small sign then appeared above Snape's head, which flashed 'FOOL' until the Headmaster had arrived.

"Feel the magic within you," had become a mantra that students would remember like they would
"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

"Magic can be logic, as in Arithmancy or Potions," Z lectured all of his first classes. "Magic can be music in your soul. Those who are in touch with both will be the true magicians. Those who obsess about the music or the logic will become lost. Those who try to force magic to do their bidding will lose their soul."

Even the over-worked Head Girl, Hermione Granger, who was also learning three languages magically and trying to complete Muggle courses in higher maths and physics, stopped and listened to the music of the magic within her under Z's graceful tutelage.

Luna Lovegood regretfully had to deny any relationship to the contemplative Brother. She did learn to listen to the logic of magic, just as Hermione had learned to listen to its music.

Again, the students taking the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s set a school record. Hermione was very grateful and proud to have scored 8 O N.E.W.T.s, and was accepted to Cambridge.

As for the Defense position, the next holder, a retired New Zealand auror, held the position for the next twenty-two years, before she retired from Hogwarts as well. And with the end of the Curse on the Defense Position, Voldemort's influence was held to be cleansed, at least from Hogwarts itself.

The plaque honoring T.M. Riddle's 'special service' to the school had disappeared by the time Brother Z had left.

No one ever mentioned missing it.

Epilogue II

Friday, September 1, 2000

Harry Potter looked out over the first students to attend the Royal Academy of Magics.

There were 147 impoverished 11 year old magical users eligible to attend. When only 51 had sent back their acceptances by July 31, Harry had extended the invitation to the 141 eligible students who were a year older. In the end, of the 288, 111 had accepted, 66 boys and 45 girls. Harry and Hermione intended to try harder to bring more girls in the next year.

There were just three Muggle-born eligible, and all three were attending. Nine of the twelve Magical children of immigrants who were eligible to attend either Hogwarts or the Royal had decided to attend Hogwarts, three the RAM. Of the other 42 students who were eligible to attend either school, all were going to be home- schooled or would attend an overseas school, except for three younger daughters attending the RAM.

Professor Flitwick had found six children who were part goblin. Hagrid and Remus had found three other students, two quarter- giants and a young werewolf, bringing the total number of students up to 129, 75 boys and 54 girls.

A few members of the magical establishment had privately grumbled about openly admitting a werewolf, the quarter-giants, and the part-goblins, of course. Since Harry had tracked down and killed the notorious werewolf Fenrir Greyback in the summer of 1996, and had killed a rampaging giant in Uzbekistan in 1998 with one curse, no one said anything openly.

Most of the magical establishment, in and out of the Ministry, had been shocked at the high number of impoverished magic users. (Harry, on the other hand, was surprised at the number, having expected twice as many. He wondered if the so called 'great book' was really working well, or if the population estimates weren't even lower than the Ministry claimed.) They had been mostly ignored for centuries, and many had jumped at the chance to send their children to a school of magic, and to get any sort of wand of their own.

The Royal Express had made its first run perfectly. All 129 children looked at him as he stood and walked forward. He was in a royal purple robe, and that was the color of the students' robes as well. Some of them looked a bit dirty, some looked ragged or hungry or wary. Some looked scared.

"Welcome!" Harry said. "Welcome, the first students of the Royal Academy of Magics! I am your Dean, Harry Potter. I would also like to introduce my wife, Hermione Potter, who will be with us most weekends, when she is not studying astronomy and astro- physics at Cambridge." Hermione stood and bowed, wondering what her mentor Stephen Hawking would think of all this.

"Some of you still need to be properly watched with wands. Miss Luna Lovegood here will be meeting with you after breakfast, tomorrow at Nine. Miss Lovegood will, for at least this year, also be joining us on the weekends, in order to allow some of the regular staff to rotate out for a rest." A few of the staff smiled at that.

"Over the next five years, our staff will grow. We will eventually have two or three instructors per subject. This year, of course, we start with one each, with one exception. The exception will be Potions. Professor Horace Slughorn is one of the world's preeminent potion brewers, as well as a long-time professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Over the next four years, he will be working on various experimental potions, and working to build up our stock of basic potions. He will then be teaching you Potions during your O.W.L. year."

Harry gave a twisted smile, thinking at how much flattery it had taken to get Slughorn to come. The old man still had lots of friends, however, and if he spoke well of the school, it would do the school

much good.

"Now in order, our Charms professor, who just retired from Hogwarts, Mister Filius Flitwick; our Defense professor, Mrs. Tonks-Lupin; our Flying instructor, Miss Ginevra Weasley; our Herbology professor, Mister Neville Longbottom; our History professor, Mister Remus Lupin; our Literature and Writing Tutor, Mrs. Arabella Figg; our Living with Muggles Professor, the Honourable Mister Justin Finch-Fletchley; our Magical Traditions Instructor, Mister Bartimeus Crouch; our Muggle Maths and Sciences tutor, Mister Dan Granger; our Potions professor, Mister Owain ap Caradoc, who recently retired from the Ysgol; our Transfiguration professor, Mrs. Sirius Black, who will be back to being a Mister as soon as a prank wears off him; our Infirmary Matron, Madam Poppy Pomfrey; our Librarian, Mister Marcus Jackson; our Groundskeeper, Mister Willie Shunpike; and last but not least, our Caretaker, Mister Dudley Dursley. Most of the cleaning work in the castle is done by elves, but Mister Dursley is the person to contact if there's a problem with the buildings themselves."

Harry smiled to himself, thinking of the financial crash of Grunnings in 1998, which had wiped out all of Vernon's investments as well. Dudley, unemployed, had owed a fair amount to drug dealers, and was happy to take anything his cousin had offered him to get away from them.

Harry had been forbidden to offer jobs to any current members of the teaching staffs of Hogwarts, Tara, or the Ysgol. Flitwick had therefore retired in 1999 so he could start teaching here in 2000, as had Professor Caradoc. Harry had been pleasantly surprised that Mrs. Figg had been a school teacher before retiring to look after him. Marcus Jackson was a werewolf, while Stan had recommended his older brother for a position. Madam Pomfrey had merely said, 'Who else could take care of YOU, Mister Potter?'

Dan Granger had to take time off from his practice, as a patient had panicked and crushed his index finger, which had gotten a very nasty infection. He would be alternating weekends, spending every other one in Norwich, which Emma came here to be with him on the other one.

Tuesday, September 1, 2020

"Welcome, to the start of the twenty-first year of the Royal Academy of Magics," Dean Harry Potter said. As the Dean looked out over his school, he beamed. Of the 153 eligible poor wizards and witches, he had, for the first time, all of them. Adding in the other students, including the four Muggle Born, and there were 183 in the class. There would be a total of an even 750 students spread over the five years of students, the highest number ever.

As Harry talked on, he also thought of those missing: Barty Crouch and Horace Slughorn were gone, and Flitwick had retired at the end of the previous year. Alastor Moody had come and gone, as had Albus Dumbledore, who had taught O.W.L. Transfiguration and First year Potions for ten years before dying two summers before.

The students who had gone on to Hogwarts (and over 80% of the Royal's students qualified to attend their last two years at Hogwarts, and nearly all did so) had shown that their O.W.L. scores were no fluke. Hogwarts had been forced to hire on more teachers and spend more class time with their students, not that any of the teaching staff complained, just the Board.

As of yet, there were no signs of any Dark Lords, but Harry knew that one would come, sooner or later. He hoped that he would not be called upon to take care of the problem when one did arise. He did expect his former students would be in a better position to resist the urge to join any Dark Lord than the still-divided students of Hogwarts -- for the RAM students were housed separately and the Houses still divided the students.

The Ministry was still fairly inefficient and at times even incompetent, but at least it seemed fairly honest. Elves were technically free, although sporadic reports of elf abuse were still reported. There

was still a great deal of discrimination against those with Muggle or mixed-species backgrounds, but it was all personal, not Ministry-sponsored.

Harry finished his opening remarks, started the feast, and sat next to Hermione, who taught First year Transfiguration, Fourth and Fifth year Astronomy, and co-taught a Fifth year tutorial on advanced maths with the Arithmancy instructor. He followed her line-of-sight and saw it was trained on their third of four children, just starting her First year.

It had taken some persuasion, but the Royal had been allowed to extend invitations to children of those who had attended the school, even if their other parent had attended one of the other three magical schools, or if their parents were on staff. Still, Lily Emma was their first child not to attend Hogwarts. Her best friend, Remus and Dora's youngest, Ted, was attending, and all of their children attended the Royal.

Next to Hermione, Luna was also looking at her second of two children. All three looked much like their mother, and so none knew (other than Hermione of course) that they were Harry's. Luna had taken her mother's maiden name, and now ran Ollivander's, although Mr. Ollivander still made wands in his semi-retirement.

Harry smiled as he heard laughing down the table. Who would have ever guessed that Dudley would actually enjoy working, and working at a magical place at that? Let alone fall in love with the older Squib sister of one of their early students? Now installed as Housekeeper, Fran Dursley was the only person Harry knew who was more naturally happy than Luna. He rather supposed she needed that good a sense of humor to love Dudley.

Yes, things were far from perfect in wizarding Britain. Harry's life was of course far from perfect.

But they were much better.