

# **Training and Confrontations**

By

DrT

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## **Chapter I**

Saturday, November 4, 1995

"Vernon Dursley?"

"Yes, I am," Vernon said, his best salesman's smile on his face. He held out his hand. "Are you Mister Marvolo?" Vernon might now be a manager of long standing, the youngest in the company who hadn't been related to a founder or major shareholder, but he still had the abilities that had helped him rise to the top of his world.

"Oh, no," the man answered with an equally practiced smile. Vernon nodded. This man looked too English to have a name like Marvolo. He was also far too young to be head of an established business like this one, although he could be related to the owner. Still, best to be polite. "I am one of Mister Marvolo's business managers, however. My name is Julian Commodore." Julian shook hands while Vernon looked about.

"I never noticed this building before," Vernon commented.

"It's rather out of the way," Julian said with a more genuine smile. "Shall we get right to business?" He gestured to a pair of armchairs next to a fireplace.

"Alright," Vernon answered. "You do know your request is . . . unusual."

"We can talk around the subject, or we can talk directly," Julian said. "I can assure you, this office is secure and there is no one else in the building, other than Peter."

"That's the doorman who let me in?"

"Well, more like the chairman's personal assistant." Vernon frowned at that, then shrugged.

Vernon looked around. The office reeked of old money. He looked at Julian and said, "We can play it either way."

"Alright. We want that shipment of drills. We are willing to pay Â£501,000. That is almost ten per cent over your usual price. In return, they must be delivered off the books, to a delivery company which will call on your warehouse. Your report shall simply say 'sold for cash'."

Vernon frowned. "But why? It's not illegal to sell these drills, or ship them."

"It is illegal to ship them to some people, in some places."

"Oh, I understand," Vernon said, seeing something confirmed. He managed to hold his tongue, but said to himself, 'Blood diamonds, probably in West Africa.'

"I see you understand the implications, for us and for your company."

Vernon frowned. He had many unadmirable qualities, but he always preferred staying on the right side of the law. "It wouldn't precisely be illegal," he hedged.

"But it would put us, and Grunnings, in a bad light," Julian said. "Neither of us would like that."

"True," Vernon agreed. "Still, if everyone is careful. . . ."

"Exactly." The young man smiled. "Feel free to remove any references to your company or serial numbers, but rest assured, we will remember where we bought them. Shall we call it a deal, Mister Dursley?"

Vernon smiled and held out his hand. They shook on it.

Julian Commodus Malfoy smiled as the fat Muggle walked out of the building, also smiling. The Marvolo Holding Company operated almost purely in the Muggle world. The current owner had not been aware of the company until he had turned twenty-one, and had taken some pleasure in making money out of the people he hated.

Sometimes, it had been very useful.

Julian was almost a Squib. He had shamed his family by barely making some minimum O.W.L.s, doing very well on magical theory and failing all the applied portions. He had not been invited to attempt any N.E.W.T.s. His cousin had also been ashamed of him, but had come to him with a proposition when his O.W.L.s had come out in 1982.

Julian turned around when he heard footsteps.

"He took the bait?"

Julian nodded. "Of course. After all, this isn't quite illegal, but it is just dirty enough to justify what we're doing, and we actually do need the drills for the illegal diamond mines. We just could have gotten what we wanted with only part of the premium. He probably thinks we're new at this."

"The Master will be pleased."

"I am glad I was able to serve Him directly," Julian answered. "What next?"

"Can you stand consorting with that . . . Muggle?" Peter Pettigrew asked.

"Of course."

"Well, he is, well. . . ."

"A Muggle? I've been working with the Muggle world for thirteen years. I don't care much for them, but they can be tolerated. I do admit that Dursley seems a bit more objectionable than most."

"But you can do it."

"Of course I can, that's my job. When do I find out why?"

Peter frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"Pettigrew, I am very good at what I do -- making money for the Master in the Muggle world. I have just wasted nearly five thousand Galleons of the Master's money because we paid enough extra to bait the Muggle. I would not like to be punished for it. I may not be an official Death Eater, but I am still His servant and employee."

Peter rolled up his left sleeve. Between the leather glove he wore and the rolled-up sleeve, flesh and silver met. At the end of the flesh, the Dark Mark was faintly visible. "You will have to take your cousin's and my word, unless you wish to discuss it directly with the Master."

"I asked a legitimate question," Julian retorted, unimpressed by the Dark Mark. "When do I find out why? I don't care when and I don't care why. That's up to the Master. I just want to know I won't be operating in the dark anymore at some point, so I don't make any stupid errors through ignorance."

Peter thought. He hated acting on his own. Still, Malfoy did have a point. "The Master has a plan other than this one. If that works, this one will be unnecessary. If it doesn't, then he will need access to the Dursley's home. Now Dursley has a nasty wife, and a son who has the worst of both of their qualities, although I've heard they spoil their spawn beyond belief. They also have guardianship over a Half-blood, whom they will **never** freely mention, so do not inquire. Can you figure things out?"

Julian thought about that, and everything he knew. After a few minutes, he asked, "Potter?"

Peter nodded. "So, become somewhat friendly with Dursley over the next few months. If necessary, we may ask you to become even friendlier, but that can wait until February at the earliest, May at the latest." Voldemort hoped that Potter would hurry up and visit the Department of Mysteries well before Christmas, in which case this plan would never be used.

"Very well. I shall do my best to please the Master."

Christmas, 1995

Petunia looked on fondly as Dudley ripped into his presents. Her attention wavered slightly as Vernon gave a grunt of mixed satisfaction and worry.

"What's wrong?" she asked as Dudley attacked yet another wrapped game cartridge.

"Present from a business associate," Vernon said. "Commodore; I told you about him. Sent him a good bottle of twelve year old scotch."

"And that is?"

"Top-of-the-line cognac."

Petunia nodded. "Then you must be an important contact for him. Is he married?"

"Don't think so," Vernon mused. "Of course, I doubt the man is twenty-five."

"Then invite him out or over for dinner after Dudley goes back to school."

Vernon nodded, and they turned their attention back to Dudley. No one could have sensed that magical wards were weakening, to allow yet another person access to #4 Privet Drive.

Friday, February 23, 1996

"Thank you for the lovely dinner, Mister Commodore," Petunia simpered. Vernon grunted in agreement. He was too satiated to do more. In fact, Vernon had dined so well, he decided perhaps he should begin listening to his physician, who not only wanted him to lose weight but also start on blood pressure medication.

"You're both very welcome," 'Commodore' replied. He smiled. "I only get to eat like this on the expense account, you know."

"We understand," Petunia said. "We do hope you'll join us for dinner sometime, perhaps even visit us for dinner one evening?"

"Are you sure you'd want me?" the young man said, with a charming wistfulness that Petunia totally fell for.

"Of course," she answered. "You are always welcome in our home."

This made the wards weaken for young Malfoy even more. Since he did not actually bear the Dark Mark, he would be able to walk into #4 Privet Drive whenever issued a specific invitation from Petunia. If he did not carry his wand, or use magic while there, he would not register on any of the ward detectors or other devices.

Marvolo's placed an even larger, if more legitimate, order with Grunnings in March, and Vernon got all of the credit for the sale. Commodore/Malfoy took the Dursleys out to dinner three more times, in late April, mid-May, and early June. The Dursleys took Commodore to dinner once, in early May, and had him to dinner at their home in late May. He expressed himself so pleased to have had 'a really proper English dinner' that the Dursleys were very happy to have him to dinner a second time at Privet Drive, this time in late June.

Malfoy was very nervous the afternoon of Monday, June 23. Something had happened the week before the previous Thursday night into Friday morning. The Dark Lord's primary plan had fallen apart, and then the Dark Lord himself had dueled Dumbledore to, at best, a draw.

At that point, rumor had it that the Dark Lord had been seriously injured. In any case, the Dark Lord was acknowledged as having returned.

Those were disturbing developments, from Julian's point of view. Pettigrew had been very evasive, most likely because he hadn't been present. Still, it seemed as if the Dark Lord had tried to do something to Potter, and had been hurt, although again Pettigrew had been very evasive.

Julian Malfoy sat in his office, staring out the window and thinking. His seniors had been warned off that afternoon, which meant someone important might be coming.

Julian didn't loathe Muggles, or Muggle life, like the rest of his small but widely-spread family did. He didn't like them, but he didn't want them all killed or enslaved. He just wanted them regulated somehow, and for Pure Bloods to have the proper leadership of the wizarding world.

Of course, meeting with Muggles like the Dursleys showed that some Muggles were much worse than others. And marginal wizards like himself? What might his place be in some new order of things?

"A very limited one, but perhaps not without some purpose, and even honor," a soft voice came from behind him.

Julian twisted around and then fell out of his chair. He was smart enough to stay on the floor. "Master?"

"You may barely be a wizard, but I see you have some sense at least," Voldemort stated. He moved over to one of the armchairs near the fireplace. "As you can see, rumors of my injuries have been greatly exaggerated."

"That is very gratifying to hear, Master." Julian kept his head down.

Voldemort watched one of his least important servants, at least in terms of magical power. He needed the time to collect his thoughts. While his body was mostly uninjured, he had had a splitting headache since his attempt to possess Potter. Had he stayed in Potter's mind, he knew he might have been critically injured, and perhaps even damaged his own mind permanently. Potter's power had been impressive, and had stayed impressive for the thirty-six hours after their confrontation. Had Potter kept that power positive, instead of angry, Voldemort knew he might have been injured even more severely than he had been.

"The primary plan has failed," Voldemort finally said. "We shall therefore switch over to your plan." Voldemort paused, and asked, "Tell me, and remember, I WILL know if you lie, why do you have doubts?"

"Even for a weak wizard, such as my self, no Muggle can take me on directly. But there are so many of them, Master. They are ignorant, but not all are stupid. Even in the days when they only out-numbered us at most two hundred to one, our ancestors could not defeat them. Now, there are some seven thousand million of them, many armed with weapons and technology that are more powerful than what we can stand up to. How many of us are there, world-wide, Master? Thirty million people connected to our world in some way? How many of them are Muggle-born, half-Bloods, mixed-bloods, Squibs, near-Squibs, or those no more powerful



than I am? That you can be, that you deserve to be, the greatest single power on Earth makes sense, Master, but how can you put the Movement in total control?"

"You have a mind, you have served me well, and you have a very different point of view than my other servants, therefore I shall not punish you," Voldemort stated, of course not adding that at the moment sending a Cruciatus curse would make his head hurt even worse. He could tolerate more pain than a normal person, but most people would already be screaming from his current pain.

"You are partially correct. We cannot take over, yet. We need to take over the magical parts of Western Europe, and put the Mudbloods in their place. When I was young, I wanted to see all the Mudbloods dead, and the Muggles destroyed. I have learned since then. We shall take over the magical world, and, with that unified, we shall be able to take over the Muggles. It will take decades, but I am in no great hurry. Operations such as this one shall help in those endeavors."

"I am pleased I am able to serve, Master."

"You have no decent place in the Wizarding world," Voldemort pointed out bluntly. "Your family would prevent you from marrying. You have been allowed a place where you can function, and become wealthier than the vast majority of wizards. Your cousin Lucius would have just as soon had you killed. Be grateful for what you have, boy!"

"Yes, Master!"

"When do you meet the Dursleys next?"

"Tonight, my Lord."

"Go on."

"They have only mentioned that their son will be home tomorrow afternoon, Master."

"No mention of Potter at all?"

"None, Master, and Pettigrew didn't think it wise to ask anything about him without specific instructions."

"Do you agree?"

"Yes, Master."

"Why?"

"Master, is it possible we were misled, and that Potter doesn't live with these people? Or at least doesn't anymore?"

"Why?"

"They have many photos throughout the house, Master. Potter is not in any of them. If it wasn't for one thing that Pettigrew told me. . . ."

"Which was?"

"That Potter had been locked into one bedroom, at least between his First and Second year."

"And?"

"The door to the smallest bedroom had marks where locks had once been placed, and, well. . ."

"Well what?"

"There was a small flap cut into the bottom of the door. Some Muggles have them on outside doors so that cats or small dogs can go in and out at will. Some prisons used to have similar arrangements."

"How interesting."

"Master, these Muggles must hate the boy. If he returns there this summer, that might work to your advantage. I merely saw no evidence that he will return."

"It's a shame that your powers do not equal your mind, Malfoy," Voldemort stated. "Tell me, do you know what these are?" Voldemort held out a dozen small squares of what looked like heavy cloth, each one perhaps an inch across.

"No, Master."

"Good. Then you can plant them with near innocence. These are inactive, so they should pass any detections the Old Man might have near the house. The magic, even when active, is neutral, so they would pass dark detectors in any event. Since they are neutral, and we shall not use them to directly harm the boy, they should even pass the strongest wards without so much as a shiver in the protective threads." Voldemort scowled. "You are certain you can access the house tonight?"

"I was told weeks ago that it might be critical to have access at some point this week or next. Pettigrew told me this late last week, and I have arranged for Potter's aunt to pick me up and take me there." Malfoy smiled. "I told them we were thinking of another questionable purchase in the autumn, which means a bonus for Dursley."

Voldemort smiled. If Potter's aunt, the one on whom the blood protection was based, brought Malfoy over the wards, he was assured admittance. "You are indeed going to go far in the New Order. Who knows, perhaps we will find you a Mudblood or two to stud. Perhaps the results, when raised properly, would be acceptable." Malfoy bowed, and Voldemort went on. "In order for you plant one of these, you scratch your thumb nail into one side and drop it. It will disappear within thirty seconds, and they will stay where they are dropped for ninety days, and then dissolve. You have twelve. Make note of where you drop them. Inside the house would be best. Inside Potter's room would be nice, but do not risk getting caught. If we can get rid of his Muggle relatives, too, well that would be an extra bonus."

"There is a toilet downstairs, where I can wash my hands at least, and I should be able to make my way upstairs to the main bath at least once."

"Good. I leave that to you."

"Yes, Master."

"Pettigrew will take your report in the morning."

"Yes, Master."

"Did you lay the portkey targets?"

"Is that what they were? Then yes, I did."

"Where?" Pettigrew demanded.

"I was lucky. The doors were all ajar upstairs. Two each in each of the three occupied bedrooms. One in the upstairs bathroom, one in the downstairs toilet. One on the downstairs landing. The other three are in the dining room. If anyone comes to the rescue too quickly, the people downstairs should be able to cover those upstairs."

"Good work. I shall so inform the Master."

Friday, June 27, 1996

"Go to your room, boy!"

Harry glared at his uncle. "No dinner, sir?" Harry managed to ask politely.

"I'm hungry!" Dudley declared.

Vernon looked indecisive.

Petunia took the problem into her hands. "Both you boys go to your rooms."

"But Mum!" Dudley protested, "I have to meet Piers. . . ."

"I SAID, both of you go to your rooms! I have some nice meat pies. I'll bring them up in a bit."

"I want three. . . ."

"**WHAT?**" Vernon roared. "If you want to compete in that tournament in August, you still have to drop at least six pounds of excess weight!"

"You may have two," Petunia said, "and a salad."

"But Piers. . . ."

"You have to get up at Six to make it to training," Vernon reminded his son. "If you have the energy to go out tomorrow night, go ahead!"

Five years before, Dudley would have thrown a tantrum without another thought. His parents, and Harry, could see the thought pass through Dudley's brain. Instead, however, he made a huge sigh of disgust and stomped up the stairs. Harry wisely followed without a word, taking his trunk, broom, and Hedwig in her cage awkwardly along.

Sitting down on the rickety desk chair, Harry suddenly smiled. Apparently, whatever else he could say about the Dursleys, the scene had jolted him out of the mild depression he had been in since Sirius' death, at least for the moment. He was far from happy, but he was thinking clearly, more clearly than he had in months.

Still, just the thought of Sirius nearly sent Harry back into that black feeling. Instead, he made some decisions. He opened the window and Hedwig's cage, and placed the cage near the window. "Fly out if Aunt Petunia comes before I'm ready to send some notes. If they won't let you back in, go to Ron."

Hedwig seemed to think about that, and then blinked twice.

"You'll know if I'm not here, right?"

Hedwig blinked twice again, and Harry smiled.

Harry pulled out parchment and a self-inking quill from his trunk, and sat down.

## Chapter II

*Dear Luna:*

*We missed you on the train today. I'm glad you let Ginny know that Padma and some of the other Ravenclaws wanted you to sit with them. Hopefully this means you got all your things back, and that life in your House will be better for you next year. I hope you can drop me a note before you go to Sweden next week. I really hope the six of us can stay in contact over the summer.*

*Thank you again for your words last night.*

*your friend  
Harry*

*Dear Ron & Ginny:*

*The Muggles seem about as nasty as usual, despite the warnings your parents and the rest of 'the Old Crowd' gave them. They already have me in my room without supper. Let your parents know, and they can let the others know. If three days really do go by without a note somehow getting to you or Professor Lupin, have someone check with Hermione (in case I was able to telephone her) and if I haven't contacted anyone, then get someone here to help me! I promise not to panic.*

*Harry*

*Dear Hermione:*

*I really hope everyone meant what they said this afternoon. The Dursleys seem as sour and surly as ever, so I am worried. They already have me in my room without dinner. About the only good thing going on is that they moved an old television into the room they store me in and haven't locked the door or tried to take my things.*

*I still have the phone numbers for your house and your parents' office. I'll try to use Hedwig to let 'the Old Crowd' know how I'm doing, but I may have to call you as a last resort. I'm telling them to contact you, and if I haven't contacted them or you after three full days, to get here and get me out. I know I can trust you to help.*

*love, your friend  
Harry*

28/06

*Dear Professor Lupin:*

*The Dursleys seem as nasty as usual, despite the warnings you and your friends tried to give them. They already have me in my room without supper. If three days go past without you or Ron hearing from me, contact Mrs. Figg or Hermione. I'll try to phone Hermione if I can't get word to anyone else. If no one hears from me, I promise it means I will need help! I will do my best to stick things out here, like the Headmaster wants me to, but I need to know I can get out.*

*Harry*

"Here you are," Harry said. "Good luck." Hedwig gave his hand a soft, friendly nip and took off.

Harry watched Hedwig fly off, and then moved his broom and trunk near the window. He then packed his book bag with a change of clothes, his invisibility cloak, and what little money he had left. He would stick things out at #4 Privet Drive if he could. However, Harry was not about to tolerate the treatment he had gotten after his First, Second, and Fourth years.

Sunday, June 30, 1996

Harry hadn't been able to sleep well at Hogwarts since Sirius' death, and things were even worse at the Dursleys. Harry had therefore spent the first forty minutes since the Dursleys had gone to bed polishing his broomstick (he had spent the previous night adjusting the bristles). As he moved to start polishing his wand, he noticed it was 11:52.

At that moment, he heard the sounds of rushing wind throughout the house, and then two figures appeared in his room, also with the sound of a strong wind. 'Portkeys,' Harry realized.

Harry saw that one of the figures was Antonin Dolohov. Then he saw the other was Bellatrix Lestrange.

Because Harry hadn't been seen outside of the Dursleys since he had arrived, there was no need of a guard to follow him around. Should Harry pop out of any of the doors, an alarm would sound and one of the people at Arabella Figg's (there were always at least three, if not four, people available during the day, and two at night) would grab an invisibility cloak and be transported over.

Tonight, however, there were nine people present at Mrs. Figg's. Two were low level members of the Ministry. Minister Fudge's acknowledgment of the Dark Lord's return had allowed Dumbledore access to a larger pool of fairly reliable people. They would follow Harry around the neighborhood, and call for help as needed.

The other seven had gathered quite simply because Harry had not been seen since early Friday evening. Remus Lupin, Tonks, 'Mad-Eye' Moody, Bill Weasley and his fiancée Fleur Delacour, a very unhappy Percy Weasley, and, just arrived before the meeting had started at 11:45, Kingsley Shacklebolt, sat around Mrs. Figg's dining room table, which was piled high with odds and ends as well as a thick layer of dust and cat hair.

"If Potter is supposed to contact one of you every three days, and it's barely been more than two, why is everyone so upset?" Percy demanded.

"Percy," Remus tried reasoning.

Percy glared at Remus as if his former professor was something scraped off his shoe. Before Bill or Tonks could react, Remus invaded Percy's personal space and said firmly, "Look, Percy, drop the bigotry. While you're here, you're at least working with us, if not for us. Now, get off that broomstick and think! I know there's still a mind in that self-satisfied bog of thoughtless regulations somewhere! Think back two and four summers ago. Harry was living in the same house as you. You spent three years living with him in Gryffindor, and you took your responsibilities as a prefect seriously. Now tell me, was he more of an indoor or an outdoor boy?"

Percy stopped and puzzled that out for a moment. Finally, Percy admitted, "Outdoors. He always wanted to be moving."

"Now, he hasn't been seen, and we know the Muggles have a history of locking him up. Is that legal?"

"No," Percy admitted, "that would be abuse."

"You're sure?"

Percy frowned. "Look, I still think Potter leans to the attention-grabbing and overly dramatic. I also believe he's potentially dangerous or at least dangerous to be around. Still, that's no excuse for the kind of punishments those Muggles are alleged to have inflicted."

Percy quirked a small smile. "Even the most of the bigoted Pure-Blood Supremacists I've met this last year or so would be appalled by any wizard, even a Muggle-born, being treated that way by a Muggle parent, and a Muggle harming a wizarding child is an additional count that can be brought against them if they don't behave. From what I've heard of that family, I would imagine being threatened with our punishments would be even more frightening to them than their own."

The others all had to admit that.

At that moment, all the alarms started screaming.

Monday, July 1, 1996  
12:42 am

Albus Dumbledore approached #4 Privet Drive with a feeling of dread. Something terrible had happened, or perhaps it would be better to say that several bad things must have happened. The first garbled message had been disturbing enough to bring him immediately from Hogwarts.

Dumbledore took a deep breath, and stepped beyond a powerful sheltering ward that had been hastily erected around the property, deflecting any interests from the surrounding Muggle world. Cornelius Fudge stomped into the front yard to confront him.

"Well, your boy wonder has done it now!"

"Done what?" Dumbledore demanded.

"He must have murdered those Muggles!"

"Now Cornelius!"

Fudge was actually waving his arms in agitation. "We recorded one powerful underage curse! And no others! And Weasley told me they're dead!"

"Let us wait until the aurors have completed their forensic sweeps before we do **anything**," Dumbledore stated.

"Very well, and then the manhunt begins!"

"Aye, that it will, but not the way you think," Moody stated, stumping towards them. Shackbolt and Percy were right behind him.

"What happened?" Fudge and Dumbledore demanded in perfect unison. The other three looked at each other, and Moody and Percy reluctantly let Shackbolt speak.

"It's almost all bad news," Shackbolt stated. "At some point, someone planted at least a dozen portkey targets inside the Dursleys' house."

Both Fudge and Dumbledore looked stunned. Whatever either had expected, that was not part of it.

"Where were the ones we found again, Moody?" Shackbolt inquired.

"There were two in each of the three bedrooms that were in use, none in what was apparently a guest room. There was one in the upstairs bathroom, one in the downstairs toilet, one on the downstairs landing and three were in the dining room. We collected all of them. This type lasts between ninety and a hundred days, and cannot be traced back. The aurors will watch them decay, and maybe we'll know which of the Dursleys' contacts was a plant, or at least give us a hint of who did it."

"Go on," Fudge ordered.

Shackbolt nodded and did so. "Twelve people portkeyed in at a little before 11:55, setting off all the wards. We responded immediately, but by the time we entered the house,



everything was over. There was just the one curse cast. Because we could test everything almost immediately, we could tell the curse was cast by a wand that we have a record for."

"And that was whose?" Fudge asked.

"Harry's. However, the three Muggles were knifed, not cursed, and it looks like the knives were poisoned. They died from the poison, not the wounds. Two knives were left, one in the uncle, one in the Dursley boy. Looks like both managed to get a few punches in. The boy even knocked one attacker's incisor out. We have prints off of the knives, and they don't match each other, the Dursleys', or Harry's. Harry did **not** murder his uncle or cousin, so there's no real reason to believe he murdered his aunt, either. We'll send the tooth to a Muggle lab. If we catch anyone, the Muggles have ways to match it to them, even if they've regrown it. We're still checking for foreign prints, and then we'll see if any of the evidence matches any of the processed Death Eaters or other suspects we might have."

"So you think Potter didn't kill his relatives? All right, I'll accept that for now. What exactly did the boy do?" Fudge demanded.

Shacklebolt sighed. "Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov were the two who portkeyed into Harry's room." He shut his eyes in pain. "Harry used one reductor curse that hit both of them."

"Did you send them to St. Mungo's?" Fudge asked eagerly. Reductor curses could do a lot of damage, but if it hit two people, at least one should have survived, and more likely both. Fudge knew catching those two would make him look good in the press.

"There really wasn't enough of them left to make it worthwhile, other than their heads, legs, and hands," Moody said drily. "That boy has gotten extraordinarily powerful. Most aurors could only have done that on a very good day."

"Both are dead?" Dumbledore asked sadly.

"Very," Percy answered, looking rather green.

"Self-defense," Moody said with a shrug.

"An underage. . . ." Fudge started hotly.

"Lestrange and Dolohov? The Ministry has had a dead or alive reward on both of them since they escaped!" Moody pointed out.

"True," Fudge acknowledged with a sigh. He looked at Percy. "You agree with their analysis?"

"Yes, Minister," Percy said, with some reluctance. "Anyone who knew who those two were, and Potter certainly should have, would know their lives were in immediate danger. Technically, we have to give him 20,000 Galleons."

"So where is Potter?" Fudge asked, ignoring that last point.

"That's the problem. We don't know," Shacklebolt answered.

"You mean they have him?" Dumbledore asked in a voice shrill with panic.

"Maybe," Moody said, "but if they took him, they also took him without another curse being thrown, and his broomstick is missing, along with what looks like some clothes, including a cloak." Dumbledore realized Moody meant Harry's invisibility cloak. "So, no, I doubt they have him." Moody looked up into the night sky. "More likely, the boy has escaped. He's escaped Voldemort, these Muggles," he transferred his disturbing eye to the two men, "and he's escaped both of you, too. The boy is free, if only for the night."

"Get your brother over here," Dumbledore ordered Percy. "Harry will likely head to the Burrow. Alastor, send someone over to the Grangers, just in case he goes that way." He would make certain someone was at headquarters at all times, in case Harry showed up there.

"Where are they!" Voldemort demanded.

No one had an answer. "Crucio!"

Voldemort looked over his cowering servants. "Begone! You are all worthless! I send twelve of you, twelve! and you run just because a few wizards show up and oppose you! A few common wizards, not even aurors from what you could tell! And all without throwing a curse! Not one curse! You on the ground floor were in a position to defend the house while those upstairs made certain the job was done properly! Two of you failed to keep a hold of your knives, and come back beaten by Muggles! Physically beaten! By Muggles! And two failed to come back at all? So, begone, worthless scum! Anyone who is still in this room in three minutes will never leave here alive! Go, until I summons you!"

The Death Eaters ran.

A little after 5:00 am, Harry Potter managed to land in front of Gringotts. Flying with the invisibility cloak wrapped around him had slowed him down a great deal. He approached the great doors, still wearing his invisibility cloak, and found them locked. Frowning, Harry went over to a small bronze sign he had remembered was on one side of the doors. It read:

***REGULAR BUSINESS HOURS***  
***8:00 - 6:30 Daily***  
***but always open***

"If they're always open, how do I get in," Harry muttered.

The two zeros in '8:00' blinked, and the 'u' in 'but' adjusted itself to become a mouth. "Who is there?" it asked.

Harry opened his cloak. "A customer."

"There is a ten Galleon fee for out of hours business," the sign stated.

"Agreed, after I go to my vault."

"Of course," the sign agreed. "Is there anyone with you?"

"No, just me."

"Take the cloak completely off, keep your wand put away, and then touch the number six on the sign."

Harry did as he was told, and was portkeyed into the bank.

Harry was confronted by six armed, muscular young goblins, and what appeared to him to be a middle-aged, hefty one. "I am Turnkey," the elder goblin said. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Harry reluctantly showed his scar, knowing that it should hurry things along. "Harry Potter, and I need to visit my vault and also exchange some gold into Muggle money. Is that possible?"

"You already owe us ten Galleons, so it's possible," Turnkey stated. "I hope you're taking enough out and exchanging enough to make it worth your while."

"I hope so, too," Harry said. "I'll need to exchange five hundred Galleons. . . ."

"That's a lot of cash to carry around," Turnkey pointed out, "even in Muggle paper money."

"Well, how else can I spend money? You don't have current accounts, do you?" Harry nearly snapped. He was exhausted from the long night flight without any sleep, and the weeks with little sleep.

"Of course we do, boy! This is a bank, isn't it? Designed to function in both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds! We also have Muggle credit and debit cards." The goblin hesitated, and then said, "For you, a special price."

"And that would be?"

"Normally, it is five Galleons for the card, three if you have a current account already. For you, Harry Potter, we shall set the whole thing up for two Galleons, unless you want it all by the time you leave. In that case, it shall be. . . ."

"One Sickle," came a voice from behind Harry. Harry turned, and saw an older, even heftier goblin. "I am Strongbox, a branch manager. You were never told of your assets beyond the storage vault, were you?"

"No, sir."

"I thought not. If you make it to twenty-one, you will be in primary charge of one of our larger trusts. At seventeen, you will be able to draw some of the money. Add in the fact that you are important to us all, wizard and goblin alike, and for you, one Sickle."

Turnkey made a noise, and Cashbox turned on him. "If the other managers disagree, I shall pay the difference myself."

Turnkey bowed respectfully. Cashbox turned back to Harry. "Both wizarding and Muggle checks, and the debit card which may be used as a credit card as well?"

"Yes, please," Harry said. "And I appreciate your offer, sir, but would it make things easier all around if I agreed to pay for everything at cost?"

Turnkey's and the six security goblins' eyes went wide, and Cashbox laughed. "You are a good boy, for a wizard, Potter. That would probably cost you a bit more than two Galleons, but yes, thank you." He turned to Turnkey. "Well? We don't want to keep Mister Potter waiting, do we? Send an attendant to him, and then get those checks printed and the card cut!" He paused and turned to Harry. "I think you can use a magical identity card as well. Passport? Driver's license?"

Harry smiled. "Can it be a school card of some sort? I don't think I could pass for an adult."

"I like you, Potter. Come along. We can do you a Muggle passport, too."

Dawn came to a very active Burrow. Bill had shown up a little after 1:00 am, and none of the residents had managed to go back to sleep yet.

Bill would stay until after breakfast, and there were two additional wizards from the Ministry stationed there as well. No one was sure of how long it might take Harry to fly to the Burrow, especially if he was wearing his invisibility cloak. Trying to keep that on would slow him considerably, something Bill had had to explain six times already.

Arthur Weasley had arranged for the Grangers' fireplace to be opened for fire-talking only the week before. There had been no sign of Harry at the Grangers', either.

A little before 7:00 am, the goblins let Harry, again in his invisibility cloak, out a side door. He was beyond exhausted, but he had made better arrangements than he had anticipated.

People were moving steady through the Alley by now, although there was nothing like a crowd anywhere. Harry had spent a few weeks in Diagon Alley right before his third year, and knew every business and even many of the residents' addresses. Only a few cafes and a bakery were open, and Harry headed towards the bakery. Despite being really hungry for the first time in many weeks, Harry kept going.

The building next to the bakery had six floors. The ground floor had a taxidermy shop and a magical timepiece store. The first floor had a group of magical solicitors. The second floor had the Office of the Consul of the Magical Ministry of Brazil on half the floor (the Consul's apartment was the entire third floor). The other half of the second floor had the offices for The Quibbler, and Ginny had once mentioned that the Lovegoods had one of the apartments on the

top floor, as well as a small cottage on the other side of Ottery St. Catchpole from the Weasleys.

The street door to the stairs was unlocked, so Harry slipped in. He was lucky not to have met anyone on the stairs, because he was running out of what little energy he had left.

Harry slowly and rather blearily looked for which of the four apartments on the top floor was the Lovegoods'. Before he could look at more than one door, however, the further door opened.

"Harry?" came a soft voice. "Are you there?"

Harry turned and saw Luna looking for him. A small part of his mind told him to be wary. It could still be a trap.

The rest of him was too tired to care.

The cloak fell off him, and caught on his left arm, between his wrist and his Firebolt.

"Oh, dear! What's happened?" Luna said softly. She hurried to help Harry into the flat, and as they passed over the threshold, Harry passed out from exhaustion.

## **Chapter III**

Harry woke up, stretched, and froze. His eyes were still shut, but he could tell he was naked in a large bed with crisp sheets. It felt even better than his bed at Hogwarts, and there was a subtle, pleasant, feminine smell in the large soft pillow.

Harry opened his eyes. Things were a tad fuzzy because he wasn't wearing his glasses, but he was in a room something like he imagined Hermione would someday have. To his left, there was a door and the rest of the wall was filled with bookshelves. In front of him, the wall had a small, curtained window in the center, with a larger mirrored dresser and a wardrobe on either side. Continuing his glance, the right wall had a desk cluttered with papers, phials, a battered cauldron, and assorted quills and ink bottles, with a Hogwarts trunk next to it.

And then there was a large man sitting in an large chair, looking back at him.

"Good morning, Mister Potter," he said very politely. The man was tallish, and seemed to be on the stout side, with very short, very light brown hair. And gray eyes.

"Mister Lovegood?" Harry asked. He started to sit up, but stopped when he remembered he was naked under the sheet.

"Daniel Lovegood," the man agreed. "Please, don't get up," he added. The man started to rise, but at that moment Luna came into her bedroom from a door next to the bed.

"Good morning, Harry. I hope you rested well?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," Harry managed to say, more than a bit embarrassed.

"Sit down, Luna," Mister Lovegood said. Luna gave her father a strange look, but sat down at the desk chair.

"Now, Mister Potter. . . ."

"Harry," Harry said.

"Thank you. Now, Harry, tell me what happened last night, and why you're here."

"It started a little before midnight. I wasn't ready to try and go to sleep yet, so first I polished my broomstick . . ." Luna giggled slightly, "and then started to polish my wand. . . ." Luna snorted with delight.

"Luna, calm down," her father commanded. "She took her potion a short time ago. It makes her a bit giggly."

Harry glanced at Luna, who was now the one blushing from embarrassment. He carried on. "I heard what sounded like people portkeying into the house. Before I could do anything, two people portkeyed into the room I stayed in. It was Antonin Dolohov and Bellatrix Lestrange."

Harry turned to Luna. "Dolohov is the one that nearly killed Hermione, and who gave us such a difficult time at the Ministry. Lestrange is the one that killed Sirius."

Luna nodded her understanding.

"I hexed them, and heard shouting downstairs. Now, you have to understand, living with the Dursleys is, well, it is hell."

"Didn't like living with Muggles, hey?"

Harry frowned. "I don't like living with THOSE people!" Harry then proceeded to give Mister Lovegood a twenty minute precis on what living with the Dursleys had been like. After seven minutes, Luna had started tearing up, and after twelve, Harry realized he was now somehow holding her, comforting her and getting comfort from her.

When he was finished, he hugged Luna and told her father, "That's why I don't like living with them, sir."

"Why did you, then? I'm sure there are other families who would have taken you in and cared for you. And how does Dumbledore enter in to it?"

Harry first gave Mister Lovegood a fifteen minute explanation of how Dumbledore had been running his life, and then concluded, "And why does he make me go back to the Dursleys every summer, even though he knows what it is like there? because I was supposed to be protected there! My mother died to protect me, and she invoked some kind of ancient magic. I was supposed to be safe from magical harm while I lived with them, and I thought they were supposed to be protected from my enemies. Obviously, Voldemort at least found a way to attack me there!"

Lovegood clearly disapproved of both the Dursleys and Dumbledore, but all he did was nod. "They were protected, in a sense. Somehow, your relatives managed to invite someone into their home who was acting for You-Know-Who. It would have had to have been a follower who didn't have the Dark Mark. A Dark Mark would have sent off alarms, I'm sure, as would anyone under the Imperius Curse. This person planted passive portkey targets. They are made in conjunction with the portkey, and would only register as magical when used. The Dursleys were all killed, but not by magic. That wouldn't have worked. They were stabbed to death, according to the accounts I've found out."

"No," Lovegood went on since Harry was too stunned to speak, "it's not in the paper yet, but I have lots of sources. The story will all come out tomorrow. Now, you didn't just hex the Death Eaters, did you? Why did you use the Reductor Curse?"

Harry hung his head. "I wanted to hurt them," he said softly. "I didn't realize it would do that much damage."

Luna looked up at Harry, and he averted his head in shame. "How much damage could it do?" she asked. "Even if it somehow killed one of them, the other shouldn't have been hurt too badly, and it should have only killed someone if it hit them in the head."

"You forget," Mister Lovegood answered, "your friend here is growing into one of the most powerful wizards alive. If I had done it -- and I am a very capable wizard, Harry, I was an auror for a few years -- one would likely have had very serious damage, perhaps fatal damage, while the other would have been incapacitated."

"What happened?" Luna asked.

When Harry couldn't answer, Lovegood said, "They were both blown apart, and there was actually some structural damage done to the house."

Harry squeezed his eyes tightly, but didn't cry.

"Now tell me, Harry," Lovegood went on, "why did you run? why did you run here?"

"I knew there were more in the house than those two, and that some people had come to fight them. Lestranger and Dolohov weren't in full costume, so I wasn't sure I could tell who was who. I didn't realize the others would . . . well, kill the Dursleys. I figured they would be furious with me for the noise. If Dumbledore made me stay with them, they would have been even worse than they had been. And if he didn't, where would he make me go? Where would I be safe? And what would the Ministry do? They tried to snap my wand last summer for driving off dementors. This was a lot worse." Harry was starting to panic, but Luna hugged him, calming him down.

"Why would you be safe here?" Lovegood asked.

"I knew I couldn't be here for long," Harry admitted, "but I can leave now that I've rested. I was going to hide out in Muggle London, but I was just too tired to go on this morning. It was a long flight"

Luna looked up at Harry and glared, and Lovegood shook his head. "Dumbledore doesn't have some safe house for you. . . ?"

"There is a place," Harry admitted. "In some ways, it would be as bad a prison as the Dursleys'. It's Dark, in every sense of the word."

"No matter where you are, you're going to feel confined," Lovegood pointed out. "Still, I tell you what. Stay for a few days while I think of something, and I won't tell Dumbledore or anyone else for that matter. If they can find you here, then You-Know-Who wouldn't be far behind."

"Alright," Harry said, "if you're sure."

"I am. Diagon Alley itself is fairly safe, as are the buildings. Unless you go outside, they should never know you're here, and none can easily enter an apartment without being invited. Luna, just buy food as you normally would. I'll be in and out of my office for the next two days or so. Leave me any messages there. Don't wander far off, alright?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"I'll see you for lunch in two days." Lovegood hesitated, decided not to say anything more, and left.

"Do you hate me?" Harry asked.

"Why would I?" Luna asked back.



"I did kill two people," Harry reminded her, his heart heavy.

"You did, and you feel remorse," Luna responded. "If you took real pleasure in it, then I would be worried, but I still wouldn't hate you."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"What else is bothering you?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess I'm wondering why I'm not feeling more, why I'm not feeling worse. I mean, I didn't like the Dursleys, and they hated me, but I didn't want them . . . dead."

"True. It will probably hit you more later."

"That could be. Where did your father put my robe?"

"What? Oh, no, Harry, Daddy was already at work this morning. I brought you in, gave you a bath, and put you to bed."

"You gave me. . . ?" Harry turned as bright red as any Weasley.

"I've never done it to anyone over the age of three, but the general principle seemed much the same," Luna went on in her typical fashion, and then came to a full stop. "Well, there was one difference. . . ." She giggled. "A big difference."

Harry made some inarticulate noises.

"Well, part way through, you . . . well, your. . . ." Now Luna had gotten shy. She took a deep breath and said, "Harry, you do know you've got an enormous penis? Right?"

Harry bumbled what might have been an agreement.

"Well, it was getting in the way, so I did what I had to. I hope you don't mind. . . . It was actually rather . . . interesting to, well, take things in hand."

"Err. . . ."

"You tasted lovely, too."

Harry went past ultra-embarrassed Weasley blush mode, and looked about ready to pass out from embarrassment.

"I know it was an invasion of your privacy . . . please forgive me."

"My first time, and I don't even remember it," Harry managed to mutter.

"Harry, if you want, if you would consider me . . . your girlfriend. . . ? No, of course not."

"I came to you, in part because I thought no one would think to look here, and in part because I know I can trust you," Harry answered, telling her part of the reasons he had come. "I do like you, and I think you're . . . attractive. I just wasn't planning on trying to date so soon."

"You don't have to say that just because you're here," Luna said.

"You're the only girl I would consider dating," Harry said, and to his slight surprise, he knew it was true. Ginny and especially Hermione were attractive, but seemed slightly more like sisters than dating material at the moment, and he didn't think he could date anyone other than one of those three close friends.

Luna kissed him, and stood up. "There's a toilet and sink through that door. I cleaned your robe, and it's in there. I'll finish cleaning the other stuff after lunch. Go on," she said, leaving Harry alone.

"Master," Julian acknowledged, bowing low.

"The attack on Potter failed."

"I regret any errors I might have made, Master."

"You are fortunate, Malfoy. You did everything correctly, and there is no hint of, well, never mind. You have almost no magical talent, but you have intelligence. Potter seems to have disappeared for the moment. Advise me."

"Master?"

"Advise me. You have some skills. While Potter lives, few will believe in my power."

"Potter is what? Sixteen, Master?"

"In a few weeks."

"Does he have any close friends, Master?"

"He does. Wormtail!"

Pettigrew poked his nose around the door. "Master?"

"Come here and tell Malfoy about Potter's friends. Malfoy, ask any questions you need to ask."

Both men bowed while Pettigrew spoke. "Yes, Master. Potter had two close friends two years ago, and they are still with him. Ron Weasley is in his year. They were best friends from the time they first met on the Hogwarts Express."

"Tell me about him. Is he related to Bill Weasley?"

"Yes. There are six brothers, and a sister. You know the family?"

"Vaguely. Weasley was a Gryffindor prefect in my year."

"The Weasleys were a large, if poor, ancient Pure-Blood family. Most were killed in the 1940s and 1970s. Bill is the oldest brother, Ron is the youngest. Ron is intelligent and fairly capable for his age, but lacks discipline. The sister, Ginny, is a year younger still. The father is a minor official in the Ministry."

"They should be easy to locate, unless they're under the Fidelius or something similar. And the other boy?"

"A girl, actually. Hermione Granger, also a Gryffindor. According to many of the teachers, she's supposed to be the most intelligent student to come through Hogwarts since, well. . . ."

"Since I went through?" Voldemort asked.

"Yes, Master," Pettigrew said apologetically.

"Granger? Half-blood?"

Pettigrew shook his head. "Mudblood."

"Really? Interesting. Anything on her family?"

"Not really. Very posh accent, and I think she might be an only child."

"It may take some time, Master, but I should be able to locate the Grangers before the students go back to school."

"Go on."

"Unless she stays in her house, and is very well protected there, I can easily arrange an accident which could injure or perhaps kill her. I may also be able to arrange to capture her, although that could take one of the more sophisticated portkeys. Would either be useful to your plans, Master?"

"Perhaps. Find her, and let me know how she is protected." "There is one more thing I want to try first," Voldemort thought but didn't say aloud. He was learning to keep some of his plans to himself.

"I really do apologize for embarrassing you, Harry," Luna said as she served up chicken soup and bread-and-cheese.

"Is this something to do with the potion your father mentioned?"

Luna looked away. "I told you my mother died in an experimental charms accident?"

"Yes."

"Well, she did. She was trying to help me. You see, Harry . . . I'm a Seer."

"Like Trelawney claims to be?"

Luna nodded. "Something like that. The problem is, from late childhood through late adolescence, those with the full Gift can find it very difficult to bear."

"In what way?" Harry wondered if Trelawney hadn't known about this, hadn't taught this, or if he hadn't paid close enough attention.

"Visions, disconnects with reality, speaking in tongues. Ghosts and other spirits are drawn to us. Some make prophecies, although not all do. To make things worse, many of the visions turn into hallucinations. Many were driven mad, until an inhibiting potion was developed a little more than a hundred years ago."

"An inhibiting potion? What does it do?"

"Just what it sounds like. It dampens the Gift. Not totally, of course, but it does prevent the false visions and the hallucinations, and most of the others. Still, when I saw you enter the compartment last September, I knew my life would be directly linked to yours."

Luna smiled her slight smile. "I grant you, at the time I thought it meant that my schoolgirl crush on Ronald would finally be fulfilled, and that I would be drawn into your circle that way. That idea lasted through November, and then died quickly."

"What else does the potion do, and what does it have to do with your mother's accident?"

"Mother was trying to develop a charm that had most of the same effects, and fewer side effects. Like I said, it backfired and killed her. As for the side effects, well, it does tend to make me rather giggly for about an hour or more afterwards, and it seems to hurt my concentration at times. I have to take it twice a day, on an empty stomach, so I can't eat for two hours before or an hour afterwards. I take it around 10:30. I don't think I'm normally as passive and dreamy as I would appear to others."

"That's why you did so much better in the DA than most people expected. We usually met in the evenings, and you hadn't had your dose recently."

"That's right. I hadn't had breakfast this morning when I found you. The combination of low blood sugar and the remains of the potion might have, well, lowered my inhibitions a bit."

"Alright."

"So don't feel compelled to, well, you know. . . ."

Harry leaned over and kissed Luna's forehead. "Don't be silly. You do still want to date, don't you?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Does this potion affect your school work?"

"Sometimes. Professor Dumbledore and Professor Flitwick were very good about scheduling my classes. I've never had a class between Ten and lunch."

"What are your other two classes, by the way? I don't think one of them is Care of Magical Creatures."

"Why do you say that?"

"You sort of put Hagrid down when we were getting off the train last September, but you only referred to what other people thought, not what you thought, which seemed out of character for you."

"I suppose you're right. Anyway, I take three classes, like almost every Ravenclaw," she said proudly. "I'm taking Divination, Muggle Studies, and Runes."

"Divination?"

"I have the Gift," Luna said simply. "I have to learn how to use it. I know Professor Trelawney is overly dramatic, and she's rather morbid, but she actually does know a fair amount of the theory. I do hope she's allowed back. Professor Firenze certainly knows a lot about Astrology and Astronomy, but not much that would help me."

The two finished their lunch, and Harry helped Luna clean up. "What should we do now?" Harry asked.

"Never ask a Ravenclaw that," Luna said with a smile. "Tell me everything you remember about the O.W.L.s." That kept the pair busy together, until they started to fix dinner. The only surprise had been Hedwig's showing up as soon as Luna had opened a window that afternoon.

That evening, Bill Weasley made his way to the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Although Molly and Arthur had hoped to stay at the Burrow, the attack on Privet Drive had made them decide to move themselves, Ron, and Ginny to Grimmauld Place that afternoon, at least for a few days.

Bill didn't notice any of the small changes in the house as he made his way to the kitchen in the cellar. The kitchen, at least, was fairly cheery. Lupin, Tonks, Moody, Dumbledore, and three other members of the Order were sitting down to dinner along with the Weasleys (including the twins) as Bill came in.

"Any news?" Ron asked.

"Some," Bill hedged.

"Children, come back in half an hour and we'll eat then," Molly commanded.

"No," Ginny stated.

"What! Ginevra Weasley!"

"You can try and keep any other news secret you want, but you can NOT keep news of Harry away from us," Ginny stated firmly. "We have more right to know that than any of you, except perhaps the Headmaster."

"Ginny!" Molly and Arthur scolded.

"Ginny's right, Mum," Ron said, "and you know it." Ron turned to Dumbledore. "You and Mum and everyone kept us and Harry in the dark last year, sir. Did it make things better or worse?"

"Ron!"

"Ronald is correct, I regret to say," Dumbledore said. "Nobody needs to know everything, but they do need to know this."

Molly frowned, but acquiesced. Bill sat down and dished himself some curried chicken. "Let me remind everyone that if the information is spread that I told confidential Gringotts information, I will be lucky if the worst thing that happens is that I'm fired."

Everyone nodded their understanding.

"Alright then, Harry did show up sometime early this morning, before normal hours."

"And they let him in?" Ron asked.

Bill and most of the adults smiled at that. "Of course," Bill said. "That did cost Harry an extra ten Galleons. There are always goblins there, doing book keeping and other things. Likewise, there are often people who want to do a little extra-curricular business and are willing to pay for it."

"Anything else?" Dumbledore asked.

"Harry found out he can get current accounts and a Muggle credit card," Bill said drily. "The goblins were very surprised that Harry's legal wizarding advisor never informed him of his rights or the Potter Trust."

"I take it that would be you," Molly said to Dumbledore with a frown.

"Harry has more than that vault full of gold?" Fred asked, shocked.

"The Potter Trust is one of the larger family fortunes in Magical Europe," Dumbledore said. "Not the largest, by any means, but certainly in the top thirty or so."

"Twenty-first," Bill said. "Remember, most of the family was killed by Grindelwald's people, and Harry is the only survivor. Nobody has spent any of the money in almost fifteen years."

"Wow," Ginny and Fred said.

"Harry also withdrew some money, and converted some to Muggle money, but I've no idea how much," Bill concluded. "Harry did have the invisibility cloak with him, so he could be literally anywhere."

Dumbledore turned on the four youngest Weasleys. "Fire talk with Miss Granger tonight and invite her over tomorrow. I want each of you to suggest where you think Harry might have gone."

"Where are you going, Harry?"

"To bed, why?"

"That's Daddy's room. You're my guest; won't you stay with me?"

"Are you sure?"

Luna smiled. "Yes, and it's not quite time for my potion yet, so I am still sober. Just remember, you can't cast any spells here. I can get away with some, but can I trust you enough not to have to cast the contraceptive spell tonight?"

Harry blushed furiously.

"I'll take that as a yes. Could we do what I did to you this morning, only this time when you're awake?"

Harry was blushing all over, and starting to sweat, but managed to say, "If you want, that would be . . . wonderful."

Voldemort had very bad timing. He tried to enter Harry's mind while the teen's excitement and hormones were at their height. Had Harry lasted much longer than the forty-five seconds he did, Voldemort would have been serious injured.

Voldemort had no idea what had just happened, but vowed to stay out of Harry's head from then on. Then he passed out.

## **Chapter IV**

Tuesday, July 2, 1996

Harry woke up feeling very nice indeed. Then he realized why; Luna had him well in hand.

"May I have some of my special potion?" she asked. Harry blushed and, speechless, merely nodded.

"You look pretty awful this morning," Fred told Ginny. "What's wrong?"

Ginny glared at her brother as they waited for breakfast. "Who knows what's happened to Harry? He could have been captured! He might be dead, or he might be being tortured right now! And even if he hasn't been captured, where could he be? Out in the cold somewhere? I mean, boys can't just wander around the Muggle world without some policeman finding him or someone getting him into trouble. Can they?"

"I don't know, Gin," George admitted. "We're all worried about Harry, too, but try to think about how to help find him."

"You're right," Ginny admitted.

"Have you seen Ron yet?" Molly asked.

The three younger Weasleys all shook their heads. "Ron was sitting up very late last night, trying to think of where Harry might be," Fred said. "If it's possible, he might be even more worried than the rest of us."

"Fred . . . no, George, go make certain Ron is awake and knows breakfast will be soon. Go on, with you!"

Remus Lupin walked into the kitchen and said, "Remind Ron that Hermione will be here from Nine until Eleven. Perhaps that will motivate him as well."

George almost smiled and got up from the table. Seeing how tired and exhausted Lupin looked, George even managed to steer the Marauder to the table and sit him down on his way out.

George carefully and cautiously opened the door to the room where Ron and Harry had slept the year before. He wasn't totally surprised to see Ron sitting in his pajamas on Harry's bed, his head in his hands. It looked like he had slept little, if at all, that night.

"Ron," George called softly.

Ron made a noise.



"Time to get dressed and come down stairs from breakfast." Ron didn't move. "Come on. Hermione will be here in an hour or so."

Ron sighed and reluctantly stood up. "I hope she's thought of something, because I certainly haven't."

"You do realize, I hope, that it doesn't come down to just the two of you," George complained. "We know Harry, too, you know, even if we're not as close to him as you are."

"Sorry," Ron said, taking off his top and searching aimlessly for the nicest Cannons shirt he had.

George sighed in turn and picked the bright orange shirt up and handed it to Ron. "I don't know how you could miss this color."

Ron tried to glare, but his heart wasn't in it. George placed a hand on Ron's shoulder. "Keep your chin up and all that," George said. "If you fall apart, Hermione and Ginny certainly will. And if they do, Mum will. And if you all do, I know I will."

Ron looked at his brother, and was shocked to see the tears in George's eyes.

"Admit it. You love Harry at least as much as you do Fred and me," George said. "I don't mind saying I care for him as much as any of my other brothers."

"Thanks, George."

"Come down as soon as you can. Mum is worried."

The four youngest Weasleys sat in a parlor along with Hermione and Remus Lupin. "First of all, let me remind you where Harry isn't," Remus said in an exhausted voice. He hadn't been able to sleep since Harry had flown off. "He flew to Diagon Alley under his invisibility cloak. He didn't go to the Leaky Cauldron or to the twins'. He didn't fly here, or to the Burrow, or to Hogwarts, Hogsmeade, or the Grangers'. He has plenty of money, wizard and Muggle. That's really all we know."

"What kind of Muggle money did he take? Do we know?" Hermione asked.

"There's more than one kind?" Ron asked.

"Nearly every country has its own kind of money," Hermione told him. "Do we know that he exchanged into British pounds?"

"Not that I know of," Remus admitted. "Why?"

"Harry told me once he could read some French," Hermione said. "He might have decided to flee the country, thinking he might be safer there. I don't think he'd go to Ireland."

"Ireland's not a separate country!" Ron protested. "I mean, the islands are separate, but. . . ."

"Britain and Ireland are under the same Ministry of Magic, but most of Ireland is a separate country from Britain, and has been since the early 1920s," Hermione corrected Ron. "Still, it would be harder to hide there. Unless . . . he wouldn't go to Seamus', would he?"

"I don't think so," Ron said thoughtfully. "His mother wasn't too keen on Harry at the beginning of last year."

"How about Neville or Luna?" Ginny asked.

"I would think Mrs. Longbottom or Mister Lovegood would contact Dumbledore," Remus answered, "or at least they will today, once they read The Daily Prophet."

"How about Dean, then?" Hermione asked, refusing to be diverted by wondering what that paper had to say at the moment.

"Where does Dean live?" Ron asked. "I don't know, why would Harry?"

"Because, no offense, Harry is a bit more observant than you are about these things," Hermione retorted.

"Really?" Ron demanded.

"Ron, what's Dean's favorite football club?"

Ron paused in puzzlement.

"He's only had a poster of them next to his bed every year!" George pointed out.

"Even I know that!" Fred added.

"And he has a hat and shirt that he wears as often as you do your Cannons' stuff," Ginny added.

Hermione threw more fuel on the fire. "And the scarf, although I admit you might not get that one."

Ron glared at them, "All right, I'm not observant about sports I know nothing about. What is it? And why does it matter?"

"It matters, because Harry and I talked to Dean about it once in our First year, and you were there, although apparently not listening," Hermione retorted. "Harry asked Dean why he supported West Ham, if he lived anywhere around there, and Dean said he lived less than a quarter mile from the stadium. I've also heard Harry talk with every boy in our year, and most of the other years and some of the girls for that matter, about their homes and families our first three years, not just you." She nearly teared up. "He so loves hearing about people's families."

Ginny held her hand, while George stood behind her and massaged her shoulders. Hermione took a deep breath and looked at Lupin. "I'm willing to bet Harry has a good idea of where they all live, but I can't see him going anywhere but Dean's."

The twins looked at each other. "We can," Fred said.

"Harry was the same way at Quidditch," George went on. "I'm sure he knows where Oliver and the girls live, too."

"So there's at least five possibilities," Remus mused.

"Could Sirius have told Harry about any hideaways or boltholes?" Hermione asked.

Remus grimaced. "I suppose so, but I hope not, because I don't have a clue where they would be."

"There's a cave near Hogsmeade, where we met Sirius once," Hermione said.

Remus snapped his fingers. "I forgot about that; I'll check there today."

"Could he have gone to the Shrieking Shack?" Ron asked.

"He shouldn't have been able to get in other than by the secret passage, and the wards at Hogwarts would have flared if he had, but I'll check there, too," Remus answered. "So, I should check on Dean first?"

"I would," Hermione answered.

"Err . . . where exactly does West Ham play?" Remus asked.

"Upton Park . . . Green Street, London." Hermione shrugged at the stares. "What can I say? My father is a fan as well. Upton Park is on the District and the Hammersmith-City Lines. Dean lives more towards the Forest Gate train station, although I'm not certain where. Shall I ask Dad for driving directions as well?" She arched her eyebrow.

"No, no! I'm sure I can get the exact address from Dumbledore, and now I have a good idea of where the address will be I can get there. I'll get the others' as well."

"Are you sure that, well, that he's . . . not been captured?" Ginny asked.

"Fairly sure," Remus answered.

"Why?" Ron demanded. "Because the Order's spy, who apparently had no idea that the attack was going to even happen, hasn't found anything out yet?"

"That's a lot of it," Remus admitted as he stood.

"Forgive us if we aren't comforted," Fred said.

"I forgive you, but there's no need to give up hope." He left the room.

Hermione and Ginny both sighed. Hermione looked up. "So, does the paper tell us anything we don't know?"

Luna and Harry had made it out of the bedroom a little before 8:00. The first order of the day was now getting breakfast around, so that Luna could stick to her schedules. She was surprised to see how comfortable Harry was in the kitchen. Of course, between his cooking duties at the Dursleys and helping Mrs. Weasley, Harry had every reason to be comfortable, but Luna had no reason to know that yet.

While Harry cleaned up, Luna went out shopping. Despite her asking, Harry refused to suggest anything that she could pick up, as she should just follow her usual routine.

When Luna therefore came back with her magical shopping bag filled with what would have needed six large bags to Muggles, Harry gave her a suspicious look. Luna shrugged, "I shop big once in a while, and then small in between. Help me put things away, and then you might want to look at the Prophet."

Harry eyed the folded paper warily, but set to work to learn where everything was kept. When he finally looked some ten minutes later, he winced at the headline, which took up almost a third of the front page: ***POTTER DEFEATS DEATH EATERS IN ATTEMPT TO SAVE MUGGLE RELATIVES***. The article acknowledged that Dolohov and Lestrage had died from the encounter, although it didn't say how Harry had killed them. It did state that the Dursleys were killed, and how, but not how the Death Eaters had managed to enter the heavily-warded home. It also did not say that Harry was missing.

"Yes?"

"Excuse me. Mrs. Thomas?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Remus Lupin. I was one of Dean's teachers, and work with his Headmaster during the summer vac. I was wondering if I might speak with Dean for a moment."

Mrs. Thomas' eyes went a bit wide, and she glanced behind her. In a hushed voice, she asked, "You're a wizard?"

"I am."

Mrs. Thomas looked him over, and decided the man looked a bit shabby but presentable. "Come in. You're lucky. Dean works for his father in the afternoons. He's got less than an hour before his father comes home for lunch."

Remus came in and looked around. The Thomas' lived in a somewhat commercial area. The ground floor was a florist's shop, and the other three floors were apartments. The Thomas' had

the entire top floor, and Remus saw that there were as many Thomases as there were Weasleys, although Dean was the oldest by a number of years.

"Professor Lupin!"

"Mister Thomas," Remus said. "May I speak with you in private, please."

"Dean's in trouble!" two little girls sang out.

"All of you! Set the table! Come on!"

Dean rolled his eyes, and took Remus to a back bedroom he shared with two brothers.

"What's happened? Harry, Voldemort, or both?" Dean asked.

Remus put up a privacy ward. "Is that a guess?"

"Please! I may not be as bright as Hermione Granger, but I'm not stupid. What else would bring you here? If we were in direct danger, I would hope you'd want to talk with Mum and Dad."

"Actually, in that situation, assuming time wasn't pressing, I'd still talk to you first, but that isn't why I'm here. Harry's Muggle guardians were killed two nights ago."

"Where's Harry? Is he okay?"

"We don't know. He managed to kill two of the Death Eaters, and then took off on his broom. He made a stop at Gringotts, and then disappeared."

"And you think he might be here?" Dean shook his head. "There wouldn't be room for Harry around here the size he was back when he was eleven."

"Do you know where he is, by any chance?"

"No. I hope I'm not your best guess."

"Actually, you're Hermione and the Weasleys' best guess. I didn't even have one."

"Sorry."

"Would you tell me, if you knew?"

Dean looked very serious. "You're about the only person I might tell, except maybe Hermione."

"Really?"

"Really. I have a lot of respect for almost all of my teachers, Professor, but you're the only one I can say that I've liked. And I know Harry trusts you, and that takes a lot. I don't say much at Hogwarts. I'm Muggle-born and all that, after all. I keep my mouth shut and my eyes open, and I saw clearly that Harry was mistreated by his guardians, and I never saw any of the staff at Hogwarts really help him with anything, other than you."

"Dean! Dumbledore. . . ."

"I don't know exactly what went on behind the scenes, but I do know Dumbledore sent Harry to Snape for help, and it made Harry open to his nightmares."

"Dean. . . ."

"Have you ever seen a friend howling in pain, Professor?" Remus winced at that. "That was Harry, a few times last term. And he was moaning in pain most nights by the end of last term even before the fiasco at the Ministry." Remus looked sick.

"Shall I tell you what it was like right before and after the Ministry? Or after the Third Task? What would you say if I told you some nights, the four of us -- or three of, those last weeks, since Ron was in the Infirmary most of the time -- took turns hugging Harry, so he wouldn't thrash around too much and hurt himself?"

"Why not a restraining charm?"

"Because then he would have been restrained and woken up. When we hugged him, most of the time, he would settle down and sleep after five or ten minutes. Some of the other nights, before the Ministry, the nights his scar burned, then we knew we had to retreat, because he would wake up."

"Harry doesn't know?"

"No, he hasn't got a clue. We had to do it a few times a month all year, but it was every night after the Ministry. Even Seamus helped, even back when he was torn between wanting to follow Harry and following his mum's orders to cut him."

"And you never told anyone?"

"Hermione knew, of course."

"I meant a teacher!"

Dean frowned. "Which teacher should we have told who didn't already know that he suffered from nightmares and didn't sleep? We both know the Headmaster knew. And after what Harry went through our First year, we knew we had to help him and we have ever since."

"And you?"

"Cuddled with a bloke? yes. Care to make anything of it?" Remus wasn't intimidated (it's difficult to intimidate a werewolf, after all), but Dean was tall enough (towering over Lupin) and self-assured enough to be a credible threat to most people.

"Look, Dean, if Harry. . . ."

"No, sir. Let me put it this way. Neville gave me and Seamus a slightly less censored version of what happened at the Ministry than was in the papers. I won't say I wish I had been there with him, but I will say, if fate had thrown me the chance, I would have gone. I don't know where Harry is. If I find out, I'll listen to him, and then decide if I would let Hermione know."

"Why Hermione?"

Dean smiled. "Can I ring **you** up?"

"No," Remus had to admit. "Alright Dean. Thanks for talking with me."

"Professor? Harry really likes and respects you. I know you want to find him, but think seriously about it before you decide to tell anyone else if you do find him."

"I will, Dean. Thanks. Oh, tell your mother that the O.W.L.s will be a little late."

"Right. A flimsy cover story is better than none, huh? I'll tell her an edited version of why you're looking for Harry."

"Really?"

"Works best with my folks, anyway. His guardians were killed, and he ran. Don't worry, I can handle it."

"I'm sure you can," Lupin said, collapsing the privacy ward. "On the off-hand chance you get an owl about the spell, have the Ministry contact me via the Headmaster, if you can't get a hold of Hermione."

"All right."

As Dean worked that afternoon, he thought about Harry, and finally thought to himself, 'Harry might have just run, but he might have gone to Diagon Alley for more than just money. I wonder who all lives there, over the shops?' He decided to keep his ideas to himself.

"No luck, I take it?" Dumbledore asked.

"None good, at any rate. I take it everything else came up a blank as well."

Dumbledore nodded. "Severus is fairly certain Harry has not been captured." He raised his hand, "I know you do not trust Severus. . . ."

"Oh, on this I do. If Voldemort had Harry, Severus would tell us everything we would need to know to rescue him, stand back, and then belittle Harry for needing rescue."

"Remus. . . ."

"I did find something interesting out."

"And what was that?"

"That all Harry's friends trust him a great deal more than they trust you. In fact, most think you've treated Harry rather shabbily, and think whomever kept sending him back to the

Dursleys should, and I quote Oliver Wood, 'be tied up and used as Bludger practice for a few days'."

"Remus. . . ."

"I tend to agree, although I'm sure Severus, who's lurking behind the door, wouldn't."

Snape came into the office, scowling. Seeing the very angry look on Remus' tired face, however, Snape decided for once to address only the Headmaster. "The good news is that the Dark Lord definitely does **not** have Potter. The bad news is that we have six more days to find him, after which he will switch from rewarding whoever finds him to punishing everyone who doesn't."

"It's a shame you didn't get some clue as to what was going to happen," Remus observed.

"I agree," Snape said, managing to hold his temper. "I did learn that this was something Pettigrew was concerned with, which explains why he wasn't present at the Ministry."

"One more score to settle with him, then," Remus growled.

"You already spared him once too often," Snape pointed out.

"If you hadn't interfered, that wouldn't have mattered," Remus snapped back.

"Enough!" Dumbledore ordered.

"I just wish we knew where he was," Remus said.

"Indeed," Snape almost agreed. "Who knows what trouble the boy is getting up to."

Having watched Luna drink her nightly potion, Harry was brushing her long, dark blonde hair as they sat nude on her bed. When they were done, they cuddled under the sheets, and fell peacefully asleep.



## Chapter V

Wednesday, July 3, 1997  
continued

Whatever else Harry and Luna might have been up to that morning, by the time Mr. Lovegood arrived for lunch, everything was well-organized and clean.

"Harry, these might not be your style, but they should be your size. Go try these on." He handed Harry a large stack of Muggle clothes: shirts; slacks; underwear; socks; and a pair of boots.

Harry came back fifteen minutes later, wearing some of his new clothes and full of thanks for Mr. Lovegood, who accepted the thanks but refused any money.

"You're going to need your ready money, and you'll be paying me back in a different way," Lovegood said as they sat down to lunch. "Harry, the more I've dug into this, the more I've decided that you need time away from everyone who's had power over you. Now, there's risk involved, but the attack on your late guardians shows that there's plenty of risk already."

"True," Harry had to admit.

"I take it you're fairly functional in the Muggle world, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, my maternal grandfather married a second time, to a Muggle. They had one daughter, a Squib. She died last year of some Muggle disease." Seeing Harry's look, Lovegood explained, "I forgot. You were raised by Muggles. We get very few terminal diseases, Harry. Most magical-born, even one of somewhat mixed heritage such as yourself, should live to between 165 and 200. Pure Muggle-borns generally live until between 120 and 150. A true half-blood would be somewhere in between. Of course, we do seem to have at least as many accidents as Muggles, just different kinds."

Lovegood shrugged. "No matter. What is important is she never married and that I inherited her little house, which her father had given her. It may seem a bit dated to you; I don't know how fast the Muggle world has been changing lately. Still, we got her all new Muggle appliances in the mid-1980s, so you should feel pretty much at home."

"I'm going there?"

"We're going there," Luna insisted.

"Perhaps," Lovegood told his daughter. He turned to Harry. "Yes, you may go there. It's a fair sized town just outside of Greater London, place called Great Pagford. The house is a few blocks off the High Street. It's actually nicely isolated. To the south is some Muggle motorway. To the west is an old canal, and beyond that is some sort of factory. There's some monstrous parking thingy a few dozen yards to the north, and beyond that is a huge Muggle hospital. There are trees between the house and the road, the canal, and the parking thing."

"What's on the other side?" Harry asked.

"A large Methodist chapel, parking, and medical offices up the street. Now, after that there is yet more parking, and then the High Street. So, you'll be fairly isolated. So far as I know, there aren't any magical families in Pagford, and they certainly wouldn't be going to the hospital and they wouldn't be likely to go to the chapel, unless they're Muggle-born. There is an optometrist on the High street. I suggest you get your self some new glasses, and either cut your hair or wear a hat."

"Yes, sir."

"If you don't use any magic, you both should be safe there, there are lots of wards. Well, I supposed if you can do any wandless magic at all, that would also be safe, but don't use your wands unless it's as a last resort. It will likely be spotted on the property, and certainly would be off. Now, the house is on the floo network in theory, but it only connects to my office. The rest is fire calls only. Understand?"

The pair nodded.

"you know those can be traced, correct?"

"Oh, yes," Harry agreed, remembering the previous year.

"Now, after lunch, I need to get Luna's potion supply. I ordered it through late August, since we're supposed to go to Sweden."

"Daddy!" Luna pleaded.

"What other magical supplies do you need, Potter, for between now and the middle of August?"

"Do you think I can stay hidden that long?" Harry asked.

"Yes, if we can get you out of here by the tenth." Harry and Luna looked puzzled.

"The magic quill that addresses letters to students only works between July eleventh and August thirtieth," Lovegood said. "You can't be traced to the house in Pagford while you're there. My grandfather did some very classified work, and worked in a small hut near where that parking thing is. He insured that anyone on the property can not be traced, and those wards still work. I imagine as soon as the quill becomes operational, that is at one second after midnight the morning of the eleventh, they'll try to use it to find you. You need to have everything in place by the evening of the tenth and then not leave the house for a week or so. Once you're under the wards for a full week, you should stay untraceable if you're not out more than four hours a day, or stray much further than a mile away."

"Won't they get suspicious if they can't find Luna either, when she's supposed to be in Sweden?" Harry asked.

"No. I had arranged with Flitwick months ago to send things to my camp in Sweden, since that's out of range. Is that your owl?"

"Yes, sir."

"She's your familiar?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then she alone can find you. You can only write to me, understand? If you sent her to anyone else, they shouldn't be able to trace her back, but you never know for certain."

"I understand."

"Now, what else might you need?" He turned to Luna. "We'll talk about where you'll be spending July when I come back."

"Yes, Daddy."

It didn't take Luna long to wrap her father around her own wishes. Therefore, at little before 3:00, the three slid out of the tiny fireplace at the cottage in Great Pagford.

It was a very small house. The small fireplace took up almost half of the wall space on the southern side wall of the parlor. This room took up the entire front of the house, and was only 12 x 24 feet. Behind the parlor on the south side was a tiny dining room (9 x 8 feet), a kitchen (12 x 8 feet), and a set of stairs down into the cellar. There was a small back hall, off the cellar entrance, leading to a small screened in back porch and the small hall going back to the parlor, with a large bathroom (9 x 12 feet) and bedroom (15 x 12 feet). There was also an enclosed porch off the north side of the parlor. A larger room (20 x 15) had been added on to the back. This was a study, and had a desk and some book shelves, empty except for some standard reference books.

Harry was pleasantly surprised to see a nice stove, a dishwasher, and a large fridge in the kitchen, and there was even an older microwave and some other appliances. The cellar had a freezer, a washer, and even a dryer. Mr. Lovegood had picked Harry up some weights to train with, and restored them in the cellar, along with some exercise mats.

Most surprising, however, was what had looked like a closet near the front door turned out to have a fold out bed in it instead. "This is your bed," Lovegood reminded Harry sternly. Harry merely nodded his head. Mr. Lovegood then unpacked a large amount of tinned goods, and other groceries.

After Harry and Luna had put all the supplies away, Mr. Lovegood took the pair over to the High Street. Harry saw that the optometrist was still open, and had an exam. He ordered several pairs of glasses, but decided against contacts. Since Harry's were very common prescriptions, he would be able to pick everything up in two days. After picking up some more clothes, Muggle supplies (such as laundry and dishwasher soaps), and some fresh dairy products, the trio went back.

Mr. Lovegood had already made the necessary changes to Harry's school and debit cards. Mr. Lovegood was moderately well-known in the town, and Luna was far from unknown. Harry's cover story was that he was a cousin of Luna's late mother, and the pair of them were getting the house into shape. Since it was badly in need of painting outside, and needed to have the

grass cut and the fruit trees pruned, this was believable. No one could have known that the inside was in much better shape than the slightly run-down outside.

Harry and Luna spent most of the next week (except for two days when it rained) mostly settling in and doing their primary outside chores. Luna scrapped the paint on the outside of the small house. Harry mowed the large lot with the old push mower (it took him a while to get it to work, as Mr. Lovegood had obviously used magic in some way to get it to work). Harry also pruned and cleaned up the many apple and pear trees.

The pair spent every nice morning working outside, and then showered and ate lunch down by the canal. There was still the odd barge going through the canal, especially in connection with the factory across the canal. Still, their side was very pleasant, and the side directly facing them was also grassy and had some trees, although further up was a loading area. After lunch, they would stroll down to the High Street, sometimes making purchases and sometimes just looking. In the late afternoons, Harry would help Luna revise for her O.W.L.s, and just before they went to bed, Harry would spend time reading the books on defense and Occlumency that Mr. Lovegood had gotten him or had loaned him (from his own auror training). Harry had also discovered a cache of books under the extension behind the house. Luna could not see through the charm, but Harry could, and was pleased to find a number of useful books on the Dark Arts (although he was mostly interested in fighting them, he figured it wouldn't hurt to know some of the curses and hexes).

The days it rained, Harry worked out in the cellar, and Luna helped him learn to meditate, which he found helped him with his Occlumency exercises. They also experimented with wandless magic, and found they both rather had something of a knack for it, especially Harry.

Harry also bought a VCR their third day. Luna was fascinated by Muggle ideas of magic, and they would see many of the classics of fantasy and science fiction. They split the household chores, and they found their affection growing by the day, although they slept separately at first, as Mr. Lovegood was not leaving until the morning of July 6.

The morning of July 10, however, they changed their routine. They took a bus over to the next town, Pagleham. Harry knew he had put off making a phone call too long as it was.

Early July was a time of growing stress for the Order of the Phoenix as well as for the Weasleys and Hermione. Tempers were not improved when Minister Fudge made Percy Weasley the Ministry liaison to the Order. The Weasleys had moved back to the Burrow, and had found Percy there waiting for them. Fred and Ginny had both lost their tempers with him quickly and threatened him with physical violence. George had also lost his temper, and actually pulled his wand on his older brother.

The afternoon of that first Saturday, however, it was Percy who was driven to an outburst of temper. Harry and Mr. Lovegood had had a few talks, and out of this came an article and a 'Letter from Harry Potter.' The Quibbler was a weekly, and appeared Saturday afternoons.

Harry's 'letter' gave some details of his life with the Dursleys. While he made it very clear he had nothing against Muggles as such, he did make it clear that the magical authorities and 'others' (he did not complain about Dumbledore by name) had failed him in the name of protecting him.

The rest of Harry's letter was a complaint against the Ministry, against Fudge (Harry told the full story of Sirius, and in the matter of Sirius before and after the incident of the Shrieking Shack, Harry made certain to blame Snape by name as much as he did Fudge), and especially against Umbridge. Harry made certain he mentioned that it was she (without Fudge's knowledge) who had set the dementors on him the previous summer, and he also talked about her punishment quill.

Lovegood had made clear that the letter had arrived by Hedwig. In his accompanying article, Lovegood reminded his readers of the many close connections Fudge had had with people, such as Lucius Malfoy, who had been accused of being Death Eaters 15 years before but had gotten off and who were now shown to have been Death Eaters after all. He also showed how, at each stage of his career after the death of the Potters, Fudge had been at a key place, and at each event, he had made the wrong decision. It had been Fudge who had turned Sirius Black over to Barty Crouch without a thorough investigation. It had been Fudge who had consistently worked to cut the funding for the aurors (including his own position as auror, although he hadn't mentioned that), for Muggle out-reach programs, and for international cooperation, and used the 'savings' to lower tax rates for the wealthiest magical families.

Neither Harry nor Lovegood had called for Fudge's resignation. They had both asked that he seriously consider his policy options.

When Percy read the Weasley family's copy (Mrs. Weasley had subscribed after Harry's first interview), he threw a tantrum that, had the subject been something other than an anti-Harry diatribe, would have impressed his siblings. Molly Weasley had fled the kitchen in tears, and Bill, Fred, George, and Ron had again thrown Percy out of the kitchen, but only after Hermione had slapped his face and Ginny had launched a very accurate kick right to his genitals. Percy met with Order members at Hogwarts or the Ministry after that.

The next morning, a very hurt-looking Dumbledore mentioned to the collected Weasleys that Snape had also thrown a tantrum, and that the staff rather believed that Harry should skip Potions, no matter what his O.W.L. score. "I regret to say," he concluded sadly, "that I must agree. I am very disappointed with Harry."

Ginny stood up at that point, and said, "Yes, an awful shame that people only take so much manipulation, isn't it? An awful shame that Harry wouldn't stay your toy forever!"

"Ginny!" Molly exclaimed, horrified.

"Good day, Headmaster," Ginny snapped, and left the room.

Ron silently stood up and left as well. Fred and George looked at each other. "Headmaster, you can count on us to help out with any of the devices and projects we've been contacted about," Fred said.

"However," George added, "we withdraw our request for formal admission into the Order of the Phoenix." They also stood and started to leave the room.

"Boys!" Molly protested.

"You shouldn't be bothered, Mum," Fred replied.

"You were the primary person trying to keep us out," George agreed. "You are a great and powerful wizard," he went on to Dumbledore, "but you have also said it's better to do what's right than what's easy. Don't think choosing Harry over you is easy."

"And don't think our choice isn't right, either," Fred went on. "You might be the strategist, but Harry is likely to be a field commander. Tell me I'm wrong about that."

Dumbledore hung his head.

"We thought so," George went on. "Make amends with the field commander." The twins left.

"I do apologize for my children," Molly said, nearly in tears from anger and embarrassment.

"I fear they are at least partially correct in their attitudes," Dumbledore replied.

"Are you ever going to tell us why Harry is so important to all this?" Bill asked.

"I had hoped to remove Harry from Privet Drive and have him installed at Grimmauld Place by his birthday," Dumbledore answered. "At that point, we could begin giving him some intensive training, and I would have asked him for permission to share that secret with some of you at least. I would prefer not to say more without his permission."

Talk then went on to other subjects. The four younger Weasleys put away their extendable ears (except for George, who continued monitoring things). "You'll tell Hermione?" Fred asked Ron. Hermione was coming over by floo almost every weekday morning.

Ron nodded his agreement.

Wednesday, July 10, 1997

Hermione Granger tumbled out of her family's fireplace a little before noon. She really disliked traveling via the floo, but she had to admit it was fairly quick. After giving herself a quick brush-down, she made her way towards the kitchen, to make herself a light lunch.

Seeing there were two messages on the machine, she hit the play button, figuring they were some instructions from one of her parents. After a blank message, a very familiar but different voice spoke, in somewhat sheepish and hesitating tones.

"Hi Hermione, it's Harry. First of all, let me say how sorry I am. I'm sure I've caused you and the Weasleys and Remus too much worry, and maybe even pain. After what happened at the Dursleys, I couldn't be sure what the Ministry would try to do to me. If they tried to have my wand broken last year, how could I trust them this summer? I still don't trust them, to tell the truth."

"In fact, I know quite well that I am facing prison, if not Azkaban or someplace similar, then Grimmauld Place or someplace equally depressing. Therefore, since I've found a place to imprison myself, I prefer a prison of my choice to one chosen by Dumbledore or Fudge."

"I'm sure everyone will try to keep searching for me, even though I promise you I'm as safe where I'm hiding as anyplace Dumbledore would stick me. I think what happened at the Dursleys proves that."

"Please use this as my authorization for you and Professor McGonagall to make my schedule. Get some input from Professor Lupin if you need it. If The Quibbler has printed a letter I sent them, then I would think that Potions is out. You know I wanted to be an auror. Well, I know now that I can't trust the Ministry. I would still like to train, but I know you, Lupin, and McGonagall will sort me out and send me wherever it's best for me to go, so just do the best you can."

"Tell the Weasleys and Remus I'm sorry to worry them. I'll contact you, Remus, or a Weasley in August, probably around. . . ." At that point the message was cut off for time.

Hermione stared at the machine for nearly twenty seconds. She replayed it, and then popped the tape so a future call wouldn't tape over it. Then Hermione flooded back to the Burrow.

"Hermione! Is something wrong?" Molly asked, surprised.

"Harry's left a message. Could you please ask Professors Dumbledore, Lupin and if possible Professor McGonagall to meet us at my parents'?"

"What was the message? Why didn't you bring it?"

"It wasn't written. It was a telephone message . . . oh, I can't explain the Muggle technology right now! Please! Then you and Ron and Ginny should come and hear it, too!"

Molly nodded, and she moved towards the fireplace. "Take Ron and Ginny to your house," Molly ordered. "I'll join you there."

The three Weasleys, Dumbledore, Remus, McGonagall, and Moody joined Hermione. Thirty minutes after she had returned to her house, she had replayed the message three times for them.

"Well!" McGonagall fumed.

"Professor. . . ." Hermione started, but McGonagall waved her to be quiet.

"I am not primarily angry at Mister Potter," she said. She rounded on Dumbledore. "I told you the night you left him with those uninspiring, bigoted people that it was a mistake! If Harry is hurt or killed because he ran, it will not just be his fault!"

She turned back to Hermione. "We shall work out a schedule for Mister Potter. Shall I meet with you four days after you receive your scores if we have not located Potter by then?"

"Yes, Professor."

"And you?" she asked Remus.

"Just tell me when," Remus answered.

"Good. Now, it is very likely we shall locate Mister Potter tonight. . . ."

Dumbledore tried to interrupt, "My dear Professor. . . ."

McGonagall stared him down. "As I was saying, I shall try and locate Mister Potter tonight. That is when the magical quill becomes active for this type of work. Normally, we do the N.E.W.T.s and the new First years this week. I shall, of course, start with a letter to Harry tonight. If I am successful, I shall contact you tomorrow." Her glance included Remus and the Weasleys.

Dumbledore made a movement of protest, and McGonagall glared at him. He again stood down.

Hermione looked confused, and looked at Dumbledore. "Yes, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked sadly.

"Why do we have to wait for this quill? Couldn't you send an owl and trace it? Or send your phoenix?"

"Although they can be intercepted, owls cannot be easily traced in that manner," Dumbledore said, in such a manner as to suggest that was all he had to say.

"Tell 'em about Fawkes," Moody growled.

"I regret I have arrangements to make," Dumbledore said instead. "Thank you for informing us of Harry's message." He suddenly disappeared.

"How rude!" Molly said, shocked.

"Aye, I hit 'em in a tender spot," Moody said with chuckle. "He needs to be reminded that when you play with peoples' lives, you can be burnt."

Everyone wanted to ask, but it was Molly who broke first, "Well, don't keep us in suspense!"

"Albus asked the bird to take him to Potter. The bird squawked and refused. Albus demanded, and the bird flew up to his shoulder, crapped on it, and disappeared."

Ron started laughing first, and the others followed.



## **Chapter VI**

Wednesday, July 10, 1996  
A few minutes before midnight

"Isn't it time yet?" Remus asked plaintively. He, Dumbledore, and Moody were standing in McGonagall's office.

"The quill will levitate off the desk when it is time," McGonagall answered. "Be patient and be quiet."

Two minutes later, the quill moved above the desk and hovered. McGonagall placed a stack of envelopes under it and said, "Harry Potter, Sixth year."

The quill hesitated, and then wrote:

***HARRY POTTER***

*Hiding from Albus Dumbledore & Tom Riddle*

Dumbledore snorted in aggravation, in part because he had been listed before Voldemort. "Well, please keep asking at the beginning and end of each session, Professor," he requested, and he left the room, followed by a chuckling Moody. Remus and McGonagall exchanged a wink, and Remus went after the older men.

"Cheer up," Moody was saying, "this means he's in Britain or Ireland." The quill had a limited range, after all.

"Or in nearby parts of Holland, Belgium, or Normandy or Brittany, or even somewhere on a boat in the North Sea, although I allow those are unlikely."

"Headmaster!" Remus called, making the older men stop.

"Yes?"

"Is Severus waiting in your office?"

"He is. Why?"

"Why? Because now is the time to throw Voldemort off Harry's trail."

Dumbledore frowned. "How?"

"Tell him we located Harry, and that Moody and I are going after him and taking him to a secret location."

Dumbledore looked stunned. Finally, he said, "You mean, you want me to lie? Not just to Voldemort, but to Severus?"

"Yes," Remus said simply. "Voldemort will believe Severus if Severus believes."

"The Muggles call it 'disinformation'," Moody offered.

"We are **not** Muggles!" Dumbledore stated.

"No, we are wizards fighting a war," Remus stated.

"We do **not** tell an outright lie!"

"So it's alright to mislead and deceive, but not lie?" Remus asked. "Seems to me you're already swimming deep into gray areas."

"Gray, but not Dark!"

"If Harry suffers because of your scruples, I swear, when all this is over, you'll suffer more," Remus snarled, and stalked away.

"What is happening to us?" Dumbledore asked Moody.

"I don't know what you're doing, but I'm trying to win a war," Moody answered. "You play your cards so tightly that no one can help you. I don't blame the boy from running from you. I'm willing to bet you would have done the thing at his age. I'd like to think I would have."

Dumbledore scowled, but had to say, "Perhaps."

A low pressure front moved across Britain that night, bringing rain for the next three days. Neither Harry nor Luna slept much that night, both fearing that the protections might not be as strong as Mr. Lovegood had promised.

It was chilly that night, and Harry had built a small fire in the fireplace. They sat cuddled together, fully dressed and ready to escape through the floo if they had to.

Harry had liked Luna the previous term. He had thought of her as more than a casual friend, and as fairly attractive, in a rather Bohemian sort of way, even before the battle at the Ministry. By the time he had reached the Dursleys, she had been equal in his thoughts with his closest friends.

When he had fled after the attack, his first goal was Gringotts. No matter if he was to hide in the magical or Muggle world, he knew he would need a fair amount of money. On his way to Gringotts, he had thought of where to go next. Dumbledore would put him away at Grimmauld Place, where he would be reminded of Sirius every day, and have to listen to Mrs. Black and be nice to Kreacher, none of which he wanted. The Weasleys would protect him from the Ministry, if anyone other than Dumbledore could, but they could not protect him from Dumbledore. Remus Lupin might try, but Harry didn't think he would succeed either. Despite her experiences with Snape and Umbridge, Hermione still wanted to go along with authority figures whenever possible, and likely thought Harry would be better off at Grimmauld Place than anywhere else. She, like the Weasleys and Lupin, but likely unlike Dumbledore, would then try to make him feel better about being there.

Harry had thought of going to Dean, but knew Dean was from a large working class family. There wouldn't be room to hide him. Neville would have had the room, but his grandmother

was likely to sniff him out quickly. Besides, once he was in Diagon Alley, it would be easier to stay there than to leave.

That left the twins and Luna. He had gone to Luna's first for at least three reasons. It was closer to Gringotts. Harry preferred hearing about Snorkacks and Nargles to testing Wheezes. Above all, Luna had seemed to appear to him as he flew, her arms raised to embrace him. Somehow, he knew that was where he belonged.

He certainly didn't regret his choice. He finally admitted to himself that night in front of the fireplace that what he had mostly felt for Luna those first two days together had mostly been lust. His feelings had grown deeper in the short time since then. He wouldn't swear he had found his soul mate or anything dramatic like that, but he decided that where he belonged was where he was, with Luna.

Over the next three days, as they weren't found or attacked, the pair set up a small computer Harry had bought. They also carried on with their inside chores, especially studying and working out.

Harry also managed a breakthrough in his Occlumency, in large part because of Luna's meditation coaxing and the fact that he had little else to practice besides the wandless magic.

When the rain clear out, they went back to something similar to their earlier schedule, although Harry did not leave the property for nine days, rather than just the full week. Luna merely told the shopkeepers they had frequented that Harry had caught a bad summer cold when it had rained, but that he was getting along fine. Harry had had to make small talk about his health with the friendly people at the baker's, greengrocer's, butcher's, news agent's, and the DIY and video stores when he finally started making short trips into the town again.

Harry made certain he was off the property less than ninety minutes that first day. After lunch, he and Luna started painting the outside of the small house. Even though they took their time and gave the house and the garage and woodshed each three coats, they were done with everything, even the trim, in five days.

After that, Harry and Luna simply studied and 'played house' for the rest of their time in the town.

Friday, July 19, 1996

"Well, my servant, I take it you finally have something to report?"

"Yes, my lord."

"You have found the girl?"

"Oh, yes, my lord."

Voldemort frowned. "What does that mean?"

"You ordered me not just to find her, my lord, but how she is protected."

Voldemort glared, but gestured for Malfoy to continue.

"Do you wish to know how I collected the information, or just the summery, my lord?"

"The summery will do for now."

"First the Grangers, then, my lord, although I do have some other important information to give you."

"Go on."

"The parents are very well-off dentists. They have a very profitable practice in Norwich, and live outside the town, in a fairly affluent area. All the houses are detached. There are some impressive wards around the area. . . ."

"And how would you know that?" a masked Death Eater sneered. "You don't that the ability to detect one." Few wizards did, including the speaker, but no one mentioned that.

"No, I don't," Julian admitted. "I do, however, have the brains and enough talent to operate the various ward detectors that exist. I have a list of the eighteen wards detected, although of course there may be others."

"Go on."

"The wards would prevent magical eavesdropping, or getting close enough for physical spying. However, they were completely open to Muggle eavesdropping devices."

A different Death Eater muttered something derogatory which Julian either didn't catch or refused to respond to, but which Voldemort did hear. He filed the remark away.

"They have amazingly extensive Muggle security as well, and it seems to be tied into some of the magical alarms. Any breach of the household will have Muggle security and the aurors alerted within seconds. The house is also connected to the floo, but apparently only to one location, the Weasleys."

Voldemort smiled. Sometimes he would not tolerate such a slow build up, but he saw this as Malfoy's method of showing what he was capable of and so went along.

"I did some background work. The father has two shotguns licenced. . . ."

Several Death Eaters sneered at that, and Voldemort decided to intervene a bit. "May I remind all of you that I am the only one in this room capable of creating a shield strong enough to resist such a weapon?" Everyone went silent, and Voldemort gestured for Malfoy to continue.

"Potter apparently managed to leave Granger a recorded message, my lord. Granger replayed it twice while I was listening in." He pulled out a sheet of parchment and handed it to Voldemort.

"Interesting. Tell me, do you know anything about this Grimmauld Place?"

"Yes, my lord. It is the family home of the Black family." Julian paused for effect and said, "It has disappeared."

"Has it?"

"Yes, my lord. Number . . . number . . . well, the number cannot be said in conjunction with the location. All the land in that area is owned by the Black Trust, and there is a number missing, between eleven and thirteen, and in fact, when I went to take a look, it seemed quite natural that there shouldn't even be a number there."

"And no one seems to miss it, I take it?"

"No, my lord."

"A house under the Fidelius. How . . . unsurprising."

"I took the liberty of renting an empty house just in the line of sight of where the house should be, my lord. I have set up Muggle surveillance, which might help us detect any patterns in the area."

"Good work. Is there a back way in?"

"No, my lord. All the houses in the square behind Grimmauld Place are accounted for, and all are also once-nice houses now broken up into flats for average working class Muggles and some students. None were readily available, but I do have two places starting on the First of August, should you desire them."

"Very well." Voldemort could see his followers still trying to articulate the missing address. The trick was to know it without actually saying it, even internally. It would not be visible, but the area would be observable. "Find out more about Grimmauld Place and the Grangers."

"Yes, my lord."

Saturday, July 27, 1996

"Well, Severus?"

"They are still looking, and they have still completely failed," Snape reported. He was glad that he was one of the few Death Eater exempted from finding Potter.

"And how is the Old Man?"

"Aging, my lord." Snape wished that he was lying, instead of merely exaggerating.

"Very well. You may leave. Through the other door."

Snape didn't dare hesitate. He knew Voldemort was getting information from various sources he couldn't identify. Voldemort was keeping them from him, just in case some of the people around Dumbledore, who didn't have the Headmaster's scruples, decided to question him.

"Send in our observer of the Muggle world," Voldemort ordered a few minutes later. Julian Malfoy entered and bowed deeply. "You are early. I was not expecting you."

"I am sorry I could not come even sooner, Master."

"Ah. Bad news, then."

"Yes, Master, on the Granger matter, but not the other."

"What is the bad news?"

"Granger left her parents this morning, and went to the Weasleys to stay for at least three weeks."

"Bad news," Voldemort agreed, "but not totally unexpected. Was that it?"

"It was what she did before she left, Master."

"Which was?"

"She did a blood ceremony."

"She's underage!" a Death Eater protested. He cringed and fell to his knees.

"I suggest you make no more sounds without permission," Voldemort growled. He turned back to Malfoy. "Any details?"

"I wrote down what I heard, Master. She must have made runes with her own blood, and with her parents' as well."

Voldemort examined the paper. "I know of this. She did not need a wand for this, and therefore, it was not detected." The left side of Voldemort's thin mouth twitched as he contained his fury. "If they are this attached, to join their blood in this manner, even Muggles may not be touched. Pity."

"Shall I have them killed, my Lord?" Malfoy asked.

"Don't you understand, idiot?"

"Yes, my Lord. They may not be harmed by magic. I can still have them killed. Why waste your time on Muggles when there are Muggles who are willing to kill each other for little pieces of paper?"

"You want me to work through Muggles?" Voldemort roared.

"Why not, my Lord? They all believe they are safe from everything except you in person -- Dumbledore, his Order, the Ministry, all of them. They forget how bloodthirsty Muggles are for each other. For a thousand Galleons or so, I can have the Muggle dentists killed, and a message left, reminding the enemy that they are not safe from the very Muggles they love, because they can be bought and sold like animals. For half the price I can have them killed, but could not have the message left."

'He says these things about Muggles, but does not totally believe them,' Voldemort thought. 'But he says it not to convince me, but my blinder followers.' "Very well. See to it." He smiled. "If possible, make it . . . dramatic, even if it costs a bit more."

Malfoy bowed low, and exited.

Monday, July 29, 1997

"Do you have the feeling we're being followed?" Luna asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Harry agreed. "I don't think whoever it is is following us into stores. Let's go into Myers." This was a local chemists and general store, which also had a back entrance. "You stay in sight, and I'll circle around."

"Yes, dear."

Harry went out the backdoor, and saw no one was nearby. He quickly disillusioned himself, some of the wandless magic he and Luna had managed to learn over the last two weeks. When Harry came out of the alley, his eyes were drawn to a spot near the large window. People were making a detour, showing that someone was there, under disillusionment and aversion spells.

Harry wasn't sure how he could sense the disillusioned person, but he could, and to his slight surprise, the person had sensed him, straightening up and turning in his direction. Harry waved him over, and the person cautiously made his way around the corner.

"Mad-eye?" Harry asked.

The old ex-auror canceled his own disillusionment. "You're about the only person that's ever been able to detect me like that, boy," he said with a touch of admiration in his voice. "You and Dumbledore."

"And Luna," Harry added.

"Really? So, it is the Lovegood girl. I wasn't sure."

Harry looked Moody over, and decided, "If you put your hat back on, you can pass for a Muggle. Luna will be getting worried."

"Not going to scream or pout or otherwise put up a fuss?" Moody asked.

"Not yet, anyway," Harry said. He walked out of the alley, and Moody, now making a lot more noise, followed.

They collected rolls from the bakery and some sliced ham and some cheese from the butcher, and then made their way to the small park in the center of town. Under an old elm near the war memorial, they sat and had an early lunch, Harry and Luna splitting a lemonade they had bought on the way and Moody taking a swig from his flask.

"How did you find us?" Harry asked.

"Your telephone call," Moody answered. "We had the Muggles trace it, and I've been searching the nearby towns since the eleventh. I must have missed you the first two times I came through."

"So," Luna asked, "what happens now?"

"When were you planning on coming back?"

"Daddy comes back on the fourteenth," Luna answered. "Certainly not before then."

"Where would we be any safer?" Harry asked. "Headquarters was already breeched once -- that elf had to be known to the Black sisters. Even if Tom can't attack it, he might have people spying on the general area."

"She knows about Headquarters?" Moody demanded, gesturing at Luna.

"What it is, not anything about where it is," Harry answered.

"Fair enough, I suppose. And I happen to have just learned the other day that you're right, but Dumbledore reckons we would cause more of a problem looking for those who might be looking for us than it would be worth. We're moving into a new place, but the move isn't totally finished yet. I take it you're staying at that little house near the hospital parking building, the one I can't see into."

Harry merely nodded.

"That's why I came back a few times," Moody said. "It was worth keeping an eye on. Well, it's as good a place as any for a few more days. How did you disillusion yourselves without setting off underage alarms?"

"When you've got nothing to practice but underage or wandless magic. . . ."

"You did that wandlessly? That make you about the sixth person I've known of who can do that." He saw Harry smirk and glanced over at Luna. "You, too? Well, I guess you really should be alright for a few days."

"We're getting supplies for a few days," Harry answered. "It's supposed to rain for the next three or four days anyway."

"Well, I'll stop in on the first, unless something important comes up. Alright?"

"Just you, Mad-Eye," Harry warned. Moody looked into Harry's eyes, and merely nodded his agreement.

Wednesday, July 31, 1996

Harry spent a very pleasant birthday, although they didn't leave the bed very much.



However, over in Norwich, a few minutes before midnight, neighbors around the Granger house called in fire alarms. As they later told investigators, there had been several explosions and then they had heard a truck pull away. The police later decided six 'incendiary devices' had been lobbed through windows, including one right into the Grangers' bedroom, where the Grangers perished. The aurors would later agree that the bombs had not been magical in any sense.

So far as the Muggle authorities went, the crime was never solved. The only evidence they found, besides the remnants of the bombs and the tire tracks, was an envelope. On the single sheet of high quality parchment was a design, that of a skull with a snake.

## **Chapter VII**

Thursday, August 1, 1996

"Hi, Mad-Eye. We were really expecting you for lunch. Come in."

"Thank you, Harry," Moody growled. "That's what I had planned, too."

"What's happened?" Harry asked as he shut the door.

"You haven't seen any news today? Muggle news, I mean?"

"No," Harry answered. "What's happened?"

"Voldemort did something we never, ever thought he would do."

"What would you put past the likes of him?" Luna asked.

"It seems your Miss Granger is a very smart lass."

"Is she alright?" Harry demanded, suddenly worried. Luna gave him a penetrating look.

"Physically, yes," Moody said, refusing the offer of a chair. "Now, let me tell the story. She apparently researched the blood-magic your mother used on you, along with related magic."

Harry nodded. "She's been interested in it since I told her about it at the end of our First year. I know that's an area she's been looking into ever since."

"Well, somehow she got into the restricted area. Know anything about that?"

Harry shrugged. "Lockhart and the fake you were both pretty liberal with passes for her. Some of the other professors might have been, too."

"I see. In any event, she managed to cast a blood ritual which would protect her family from magical attacks. It was based on runes and wandless incantations, rather than wand-magic. Voldemort somehow not only found out about it, but then hired Muggles to burn the place down last night. We added wards to prevent a repeat of what happened to your relatives, but there's really nothing we can do to a Muggle house to prevent Muggles from attacking it. Granger is fine, because she was at the Burrow for a few weeks, but both her parents were killed."

"Poor Hermione," Luna said, tearing up.

"I wish there was something we could do," Harry said.

"Well, she does want to be with you, Potter."

"What?" Harry was shocked and confused at that.

"Well, I gather she and the Weasley boy had been getting . . . friendly."

"True," Harry acknowledged. Ron had been trying, and mostly failing, since the previous Christmas at the least.

"Well, the boy was trying to comfort her, but he must have said something that set her off. She walloped him, and then that spitfire sister of his booted his backside. Granger collapsed crying, and just kept on saying that she wished you were there, and that she needs you."

Harry leveled his gaze on Moody. "Mad-Eye, there are very few people I trust not to mess with my mind, not even for my own good. I'd like to think that you are one of them."

The raw power of the teen's magical aura hit Moody like an arctic wind. Moody's jaw dropped open from the shock, but he shut it quickly. He could tell both how angry Harry was about what Voldemort had done, and how worried he was about Hermione, just from that blast of power. "Considering how much you've been abused in this area, I won't even be offended, Harry. I'm telling you the truth."

"There's no way she can be brought here, is there?" Luna asked.

"I don't see how," Moody said. "Well, I could kidnap her, but there's no way to bring her here without creating a really huge mess."

"Is Daddy going to be in trouble?" Luna asked.

"No," Moody answered. "No one asked him if he knew where Harry was that I know of, and there was never any public announcement that anyone had to turn in the location of either of you. He hid you, and you needed hiding. If you want to go to the Burrow, I can take you both, and then I can go find your father in Sweden and talk with him. If you'd like, I can even take a letter. It's up to you." Moody looked around. "Nice place. I wonder if he would let a friend of mine use it. Muggle-born, would like this place, right down to that computing thingy in the back room."

"A lot of this stuff is ours," Harry pointed out. He looked at Luna. "May we go?"

"Of course we go," she said. She turned to Moody. "We can be ready by nine o'clock. Will you stay for dinner?"

"Aye, lass, and thank you."

The three agreed not to let on where Harry and Luna had stayed. Moody showed them a Muggle newspaper, and that was their cover story. Harry had seen the attack on the Grangers in the paper and contacted Moody because he knew Hermione would need him.

Harry made one other request. At sixteen, he would have a great deal of say in who his magical guardian was over the next year. Moody agreed to the job, after he and Harry had negotiated terms which satisfied them both.

Moody watched the pair pack up, amazed at the strides they, especially Harry, had made in wandless magic. Moody made a portkey, and then the three of them flooded to [The Quibbler](#)

office. They stepped out to in front of the Consular office across the hall, and then Moody activated the portkey (no one was likely to even question a portkey starting off from a Consular office). The trio appeared at the front door of the Burrow. Moody then apparated away, to start his trip to Sweden.

Harry shrugged, and knocked.

"I'll get that!" they heard Mrs. Weasley yell. "You get back to your room, and don't you poke a toe outside of it until I tell you to move!" Harry could identify Ron's grumble, but not what he said.

"Now," Mrs. Weasley demanded, "who's there?"

"May we come in, Mrs. Weasley?" Harry asked.

Molly flung the door open, wand up, and stared. "Harry?" she whispered. "Harry . . . is it really you? And . . . Luna?"

"You cook eggs and omelets with a Muggle non-stick frying pan Bill bought you," Harry said. "You've knitted me a jumper every year for Christmas, and as you can see, I have last year's on. Last summer, when you saw that boggart, you saw me along with the rest of your children. You. . . ."

Molly grabbed Harry into a tight hug. "You're safe," she sobbed.

"Of course I'm safe," Harry murmured in her ear. "I know no one likes to admit it, but unfortunately I've had to improvise for my own safety my entire life, and I can always count on friends to help."

Mrs. Weasley looked over a Luna, a little surprised to realize that, for the first time, Harry was a more than a bit taller than she was. "Your father?"

Luna nodded, and Harry said, "We were very well hidden, you know."

"Well, no one could find you," Molly admitted.

"We would have stayed at least two more weeks, but when I heard what happened to Hermione's parents. . . ."

"You heard?"

"It was in the Muggle papers and the Muggle news," Harry answered.

Molly suddenly realized they were still standing in the front doorway, so she brought them in. "How did you get here?" she asked as she shut the door.

"I knew Remus had transformed early this morning, so I got hold of Mad-Eye. He dropped us off, and he's going to see Mister Lovegood." Harry sighed. "I really wish that no one else had to know, but you're going to tell, aren't you?" Molly looked torn.

"Mrs. Weasley, I know you care for me, but I am at the center of events," Harry said. "Dumbledore cares for me, too, but he has to care more about defeating Voldemort." Molly flinched. "Most of the people at the Ministry aren't like Mister Weasley -- they don't care about anything except for keeping their jobs, especially Fudge."

"Harry?"

Harry, Molly, and Luna looked towards the kitchen, and saw Hermione, red-eyed, standing in the corridor. Harry released Molly and moved towards her. "Hermione! I came as soon as I heard. . . ."

Hermione launched herself into Harry's arms, crying. "I'm so sorry about your parents," Harry whispered as he held his sobbing friend, "and I'm sorry I had to get away from most people for a while."

"You really just came back for me?" Hermione asked through her tears.

"Of course I came for you," Harry said simply. "You're my best friend. You're the sister I should have had." Harry kissed away some of the tears on her cheek. "I love you," he said, his hand against her other cheek. He wiped away another tear with his thumb.

Hermione gawked at this change in her best friend's behavior -- it was very different than any Harry she had known before, but she realized that this was a side of himself that Harry had always kept hidden before, not something foreign -- then hugged Harry tightly again. Only then did she notice who was with him. "Luna?" she whispered. "Are you two . . . more than friends now?"

"Yes," Harry whispered back. "I hope you're okay with that."

Hermione kissed Harry's cheek and went over and hugged Luna. "Is he alright?" Hermione whispered.

"He will be," Luna answered, once she caught her breath.

"I need to configure some beds for Ginny's room," Molly said. "I'll send her down in a few minutes."

Harry went over to Luna and Hermione, who were still comforting each other. "Don't forget to take your potion tonight," Harry reminded Luna. "I think you need to explain it to Hermione and Ginny."

Luna flushed and dropped her arms from around Hermione, but nodded. "It's nothing to be ashamed of," Harry reminded her, "and Hermione has probably heard all about it, any way."

Hermione wanted to ask about it, but they were interrupted by Ginny. "Well! It's about time! If it weren't summer, I'd hex you!"

"Ginny!" Hermione scolded. "He's safe, and we knew he was safe but in hiding. He wasn't even alone, like we were afraid he might have been."

"What? Luna?"

"Hello, Ginny," Luna said quietly.

Molly then came down and sent the three girls up the stairs. When they were gone, Harry told Mrs. Weasley about the potion, and the schedule Luna had to maintain to take it. He also showed her the food they had brought from the fridge and freezer at the house.

"I'd forgotten about that potion," Molly said as she put the food into cold storage. "I knew her mother fairly well, although she was between myself and your mother in age. We'll see to it that she's taken care of here." Her eyes narrowed. "Are you two a couple?"

Harry simply said, "We are."

"I see. Whatever else you think you may get away with, you two are to behave under my roof. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your other things are in Ron's room, including your O.W.L. results. Ron isn't allowed out without my permission, except to the loo." Harry nodded.

"I'll have to alert Albus tonight, just to make sure we have enough security," Molly warned.

"I understand. Mrs. Wealsey. . . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"I know how much you and Mister Weasley care about me. . . ."

"Yes, we do, dear."

"I . . . this is more my home than any place I've ever been, except maybe for Hogwarts, and I care for you, too."

"But?"

"But since I need to have a legal guardian for the next year, and since I doubt the Ministry would allow Lupin. . . ."

"Yes?"

"I think it would be best if Alastor Moody did it."

Molly looked just as hurt as Harry had been afraid she would. "Why?"

"Because if I have a guardian, they need to protect me from Dumbledore in some ways, as well as from the Ministry. I'm afraid of the pressures that they, especially the Ministry, might put on you and your family."

Molly looked torn. It was her job to protect Harry, not his to protect her. Yet she had to admit he was likely right. "Very well, dear, but I expect Arthur, Remus, and myself to have some say."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, go look at your results. It may be the one thing that will take Hermione's mind off of her troubles."

Harry knocked on Ron's door. "Please leave me alone," Ron pled.

"Alright," Harry said, "I'll just go back where I came from. You'll have to explain it to your mum, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, your father, Dumbledore, Moody, Gred and F. . . ."

Ron flung the door open. "Harry!"

"Hi. Your mum said I could stay here."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Sorry, Ron," Harry answered. "Short answer, I stayed with the Lovegoods in Diagon Alley for a few days, and then Luna and I went into hiding."

"You went into hiding with Loo. . . ."

"Luna!" Harry corrected firmly. "Are you going to let me in before Hermione comes and demands to see my O.W.L. scores?"

"Oh, we already know those," Ron said. "What? You said Hermione should make your schedule!"

"True," Harry admitted. "Come on, and let me explain what little I can explain."

The three girls showed up about twenty minutes later. Hermione joined Harry and Luna on Harry's cot while Ginny sat next to Ron. Hermione handed Harry his O.W.L. scores.

*Required Courses and Theory*

<i>Astronomy</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>Charms</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>Defence against the Dark Arts</i>	<i>O+</i>
<i>Herbology</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>History</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>Potions</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Transfiguration</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Theory I (Defence, Herbology, Potions)</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Theory II (Charms, Defence, Transfiguration)</i>	<i>E</i>

*Optional Courses*

<i>Care for Magical Creatures</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Divination</i>	<i>A</i>

*All students are required to take between 5 & 7 courses. At least two must be on the N.E.W.T. level. You are eligible for the following N.E.W.T-level courses: Accounting & Introduction to Magical & Muggle Business Practices; Care for Magical Creatures; Charms; Defence against the Dark Arts; Divination; Preparation for Joining the Ministry; Preparation for Muggle University; Transfiguration.*

*You are eligible for the following vocational classes: Household Charms; Household Potions; Living with Muggles; Magical Traditions. You may also take Introduction to Apparation in the Spring.*

"Let me guess, Care, Charms, Defense, Preparation for the Ministry, and Transfiguration?"

"And the Magical Traditions course. You can drop the Prep course, if you want," Hermione said. "I haven't had a chance to talk with Professors McGonagall or Lupin."

"I apparently have a trust fund," Harry mused. "Maybe I should drop the Ministry course and take the Business one."

Hermione shrugged. "I can't blame you for not wanting to join the Ministry any more. It's a shame more people there aren't like Mister Weasley."

"How about you two?" Harry asked. "How did you two do?"

Hermione had scored O's on all twelve of her O.W.L.s, to her relief and amazement, although to no one else's. Ron had scored eight: no O's, but he had E's in Defense and Care and A's in Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Divination, Herbology, and Theory II. Hermione was unsure which courses she would take, while Ron had opted for the Ministry course, Care, Divination (to his disgust, but Dumbledore had asked him to continue), Defense, Charms, and the 'Living with Muggles' course, as well as Apparation in the spring.

The teens broke up a few minutes later. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were a bit shocked to see how tenderly Harry and Luna kissed goodnight.

"So, you and Loo, err, Luna really are a couple?"

"Absolutely," Harry said firmly.

Harry woke up early the next morning. He ran into Luna as he came out of the bathroom, and they spent three minutes kissing before she had to run in to use the toilet.

Harry came down stairs, and was not really surprised to see Dumbledore and a very tired Remus Lupin sitting with Mr. Weasley at the table while Mrs. Weasley was at the stove. He was less pleased to see Snape lurking in a corner.

"Good morning," Harry said politely.

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I'm pleased to see you well."

"Why wouldn't I be, sir?" Harry asked, even more politely.



"You irresponsible. . . ." Snape started, but halted when Dumbledore raised his hand.

"We were worried about you, Harry," Remus answered.

"I appreciate that, sir," Harry answered. He switched over to looking at Dumbledore. "Just as you have to understand that your plans have caused me nothing but pain."

All the adults were staring at Harry in amazement, except for Snape, who was looking at him with loathing. "You trapped me in an abusive household. . . ." Snape snorted. Harry rounded on him, "Except for the fact that you were beaten more than I was, I was a lot worse off than you were, and you know it! You raped my mind often enough to know that!" Snape flushed, because even he knew both statements were at least partially true.

Harry switched back to Dumbledore. "You sent me back every summer, to be abused and starved, all in the name of 'protecting' me. Well, when Voldemort decided to attack me there, he found a way around it, didn't he? You keep me in the dark as to what I'll have to do, cripple me by trapping me at the Dursleys, and allow him," he pointed at Snape, "to rape my mind and leave me even more defenseless than I was naturally."

Snape and Dumbledore made noises of protest. "Before he got into my mind, I was having bad dreams. After that, I was having nightmares and by the time he was through, Voldemort could enter my mind almost at will."

"Oh, yes," Snape growled, "you have such natural talent!"

"Well," Harry smiled, "you're welcome to try me. Try and figure out where I hid, because that's the only way you'll ever find out! but if you dare try, I WILL defend myself."

Snape didn't hesitate. Molly screamed as he whipped out his wand and cried, "Legilimens!"

And he ran into blankness. Snape was slightly impressed, and went in deeper, searching for a flaw.

At first, he thought he had found one, as he could sense some feelings. As he approached the feelings, he suddenly tried to back off as he felt the hot power of Harry's passions.

He had to stop, because behind him was the cold fury Harry felt for him. Snape suddenly realized that he was surrounded by Harry's emotions, and they were strong. So strong that if he tried to break through them, he might be permanently damaged.

Harry turned away from Snape in less than ten seconds. Snape seemed frozen, staring out blankly.

"Harry!" Dumbledore protested. "Let him go!"

Harry shrugged. "Sorry. He can get out himself by relaxing. The only way I could break it is by using my wand, and that's illegal, isn't it?"

"Harry!"

"Did you happen to know that there is a fairly simple set of exercises to teach Occlumency to those who have a natural affinity for resisting the Imperius Curse?"

"Of course, but. . . ."

"And did Snape, excuse me, Professor Snape, know that?"

"Of course. Why. . . ?"

"And I assume he knew I can block, not just resist, the Imperius Curse with some ease?"

"Of course he knows that, but. . . ."

"Then why didn't **he** ever give me proper instruction? All he ever did was attack my mind! When are any of you ever going to disbelieve the lying crap in The Daily Prophet?"

"We don't believe them, Harry!" Remus protested.

"Well, you all act like you do! I don't lie. I don't exaggerate. Yet none of you treat me as if I have any idea of what's going on around me, or that I can be trusted to say anything. Even Ron and Hermione treat me that way sometimes. Why should I say anything if no one takes me seriously or is willing to help when I do? About the only people who haven't ever treated me like that are Luna, Ginny, and Neville."

The adults, except for Arthur, were making noises of protest. Mr. Weasley was nodding in agreement. Harry turned to Mrs. Weasley. "You've always sent reports to the Headmaster, right?"

"Well . . . yes," Molly admitted.

"I understand," Harry said in a pacifying manner. "So, you told him about the condition I was in after my Second and Fourth years, right?"

She nodded, silently.

"And that you were sending me food all summer before my Fourth year?" She nodded again.

"Did you tell him that the twins told you there were bars on my windows and that I was locked in my room when they rescued me?"

"You mean that was true?" Molly was aghast.

"Yes," Harry said simply. He turned back to Dumbledore. "In any event, Mrs. Figg has a view of that bedroom from the attic of her house. I bet she reported those bars. What did you think? That they were there to keep Death Eaters out?"

Harry stood. "I'm going flying before breakfast, if nobody minds." Harry left, coming back a few minutes later with his broomstick. He nodded to the adults, who were still staring wordlessly. As he passed by Snape, he performed the release spell wandlessly, added something else silently, and walked out the door.

Snape collapsed to the ground. Dumbledore examined him and said, "He is unharmed, but will be in a bad temper when he awakens. I shall take him to Hogwarts. Please tell Harry I shall return after lunch."

After Dumbledore left, Luna and Hermione cautiously came into the kitchen.

Molly sighed. "Why do my own children sleep longer than anyone else?"

## **Chapter VIII**

Less than fifteen minutes after Harry left to fly, Luna and Hermione carried covered trays out to the pasture where the Weasleys flew. Harry quickly spotted them and zoomed down.

The girls silently set down a blanket on the damp grass and laid out breakfast.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked after he'd joined them.

"You were right," Hermione said. "We overheard what you told Dumbledore. I really do apologize for the 'saving people thing' comment I made."

"You were right in one way," Harry replied. "I do have a 'saving people thing,' but more than that, I have to."

"The prophecy," Hermione said. "Those initials were Dumbledore's, weren't they?" Harry nodded. "And so he could tell you? when?"

"Just a few hours after Sirius was killed," Harry answered, his voice ragged. Luna reached over and hugged him, and then she drew Hermione into the hug as well.

"Tell her," Luna whispered.

Harry sighed. "There are some details that I know Dumbledore doesn't want me to talk about, but it boils down to the fact that I'm the one who has the power to kill Voldemort, and if I don't kill him, he'll kill me."

"But you don't have to die to kill him, right?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"No. I could, but it doesn't have to work that way."

"Good." She hugged the pair and then sat back. "It has been just an awful few days." She looked at the pair, tearing up. "Thank you, both of you, for coming back to be with me."

"I hope we can be," Harry said darkly. When the two girls looked at him, he said, "Dumbledore will say it's too dangerous for me to be with you at the funerals."

"Then he's just going to have to provide more protection," Hermione stated. For once, she didn't care what Dumbledore or anyone else wanted. She needed Harry with her, and Harry wanted to be with her.

"Well said," Luna agreed.

As they ate, Harry asked, "How are things between you and Ron?"

Hermione shrugged. "We like each other, but we just fight too much. I don't want to argue all the time. I thought the verbal sparring would develop into, well, like. . . ."

"Like into those old American screwball comedies?" Harry asked.

"Exactly."

Harry ruefully shook his head. "Ron's a lot smarter than his scores, but that's not the type of person he is." Harry doubted many people were like that, outside of movies.

"I know that now. I know I can't change, or change him, either. We decided after dinner last night that we should just stay friends for now."

"I'm sorry," Luna said, and Harry agreed.

Hermione shrugged. The three stayed there, finished breakfast, and just sat for a while. Finally, Luna stood and wandered over towards the woods, examining gnome trails as she went.

"You miss her already, don't you?" Hermione asked as Harry followed Luna walking just inside the woods with his eyes.

"I do," Harry admitted. "Odd, when we just had last night apart."

"Apart?"

Harry shrugged and smiled such a warm smile that Hermione didn't begrudge him, but she did ask, "You're being careful, aren't you?"

"We haven't done anything that we need to be 'careful' about, although we did a lot more than snog. Why? Did you and Ron?"

"I thought about it, and he pushed a little, but I wasn't ready for anything more than light kissing, at least with him," Hermione said. "That might be another reason it didn't work."

"He didn't push too hard, did he?"

"Not too hard, but I just was not ready to commit to that kind of relationship with him, at least not yet." Hermione smiled warmly. "I'm glad we can talk about this."

Harry shrugged. "I don't think I could with anyone other than you and Luna."

"When she's not on about conspiracy theories and odd creatures, she actually makes a lot of sense," Hermione said. "I was surprised last June how easy she is to talk to, and I think we became friends then."

"She is very easy to talk to," Harry agreed, "and I know she thinks of you as a good friend."

"I got a great deal of teasing when I visited Diagon Alley a while ago," Hermione said, "and I'm sure to get more, now."

"Why is that, and why does it seem that it's going to be, at least from your tone of voice, my fault?"

"Because you're turning right sexy this summer, Harry, and I was already getting teased for having 'dumped' you and picked up Ron."

Harry grimaced. "Ron must have hated that."

"He did," Hermione admitted, "and that's another reason I wasn't going to go too far with him. He just wanted to prove he had me." She looked at Harry curiously, "Were you every tempted to ask me out?"

"No, but not because you aren't adorable," Harry said with a smile. "In part, when I discovered girls in that sense, I was obsessed by Cho and you were in the 'friend' category, just like Ginny was in the 'little sister' category. Since then, you and Ron were mostly circling around each other, and I wouldn't try to interfere with that."

"Fair enough. What else?"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Harry shrugged. "I think we work better together as a trio than we would as a couple. You are a little bossy at times, and Ron could tolerate that better than I can. I'm more than a little moody at times, and both Ron and Luna can tolerate that better than you could."

"Am I really that bossy?"

Harry simply looked at Hermione.

Hermione sighed. "I suppose I am. It's a good thing you're dating Luna. Those eyes are very . . . sexy and seductive. Everyone would notice if you didn't wear glasses."

Harry snorted. "I'll only believe it's possible because you said it. I wouldn't believe anyone else."

Hermione just smiled. Harry finally asked, "Would you really have wanted to date me?"

"Yes, I think so. Not last year, because you were too angry then, but. . . ."

"But?"

"I've always been attracted to you and to Ron. Ron just seemed . . . more interested."

"True," Harry admitted. "In some ways, I know Ron thinks I've over-shadowed him, and that it's the one thing that could split us as friends."

"I know. I'm not going to try and split you and Luna, you know."

"I know," Harry said. "I trust you."

"I trust you two, too," Luna said from behind them, startling them both. Luna laughed and drew them into a hug which they both returned. They sat like that until Ginny came out after them just before 9:00. "Professor McGonagall is here," she said quietly. "Professor Lupin should be here soon, too."

Harry stood and helped Luna and Hermione up while Ginny stalked away, a scowl on her face. "What's she angry about?"

"She seems upset with all of us," Luna commented.

"She is, but she's angrier at herself," Hermione said. "She and Dean broke up even before you left the Dursleys. She was making plans for Harry in case her current plans don't work out, and when Ron and I broke things off, she was sure I'd make a grab for Harry. Now you show up, with Harry." She shrugged.

"Were you going to make a play for Harry?" Luna asked.

"As a boy friend? Probably, but I wasn't sure. But unless Harry and Ginny date, I'll probably always be closer to him than she is no matter what, and that does bother her."

"I'm walking right between you two, you know," Harry complained.

Luna put her arm around Harry and drew Hermione's arm around his waist as well. "Ginny has always been somewhat possessive and jealous," Luna said. "She is still a good friend. She'll be smiling by the time we come in, anyway."

"Why would you say that?" Hermione asked.

"Because two owls have just landed on her window sill," she answered. "I'm sure at least one must be from an admirer."

"One is from Neville," Hermione agreed, looking. "He owls at least every other day. I'm not sure about the other."

"Does she owl Neville back?" Luna asked.

"Oh, yes. Every afternoon when she has his grandmother's owl, since she and Dean broke up."

Going up on the back porch, the two girls released their grips on Harry, to his slight disappointment. Luna greeted McGonagall and Lupin, and went on up to talk with Ginny. Harry and Hermione sat down to discuss their futures.

"Shall we start with you, Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked.

"Alright. If the times don't conflict, I'd like seven classes," Hermione said simply. "Charms, Defense, Transfiguration, Arithmancy, Runes, the University Prep, and Magical Traditions."

McGonagall stared at her with surprise, until she said, "But . . . but I thought you were going to take the Medical Prep!"

"I had thought of it, but to take Medicine, I also have to take Potions."

McGonagall simply stared at her even more.

"I put up with his abuse and poor teaching for five years. Please don't take this wrong, Harry," Hermione added, "but there is just one good thing I can say about Umbridge. I love Hagrid as

much as you do, but he and Professors Trelawney and Snape really are the three worst teachers at the school. In fact, they are the only poor teachers at the school. Yes, Professor Snape knows his subject, but so do Hagrid and Trelawney."

"Professor Trelawney," McGonagall managed to say.

"Exactly," Hermione said. "Hagrid is technically a professor, but no one calls him by it. Professor Snape has never really taught me anything. Potions is more than putting formulas on the board and yelling at students when they don't already know the right way to cut or chop or mix the ingredients. I'm not allowed to sit for a N.E.W.T. without taking the class, nor can I take Medicine without taking Potions. Since that was just one option I was thinking about, and since it was more my parents' dream than mine, I shan't be taking those courses."

"I see. Have you decided on your guardianship?"

"I'm hoping I have an answer in a few days."

"You . . . you're not asking the Weasleys?" she asked, surprised.

"As my second choice."

"Hermione," Remus put in and putting the subject back, "don't let Severus' poor attitude keep you from taking the courses."

"I'm not," she answered. "I can only take seven courses, and so I think this is the better alternative." She turned to McGonagall. "I would also like to do the Apparation course this autumn, instead of next spring."

"That should not be a problem," McGonagall said. "You would normally be able to take the test over the winter break."

"Excuse me," Luna said, coming back into the kitchen. "Hermione, this is for you."

Hermione took the note and turned to McGonagall. "Mister Lovegood has agreed to take guardianship of me." She turned to Luna. "How did the reply get here so fast?"

"Mister Moody and Daddy came back from Sweden around midnight," Luna answered. "Mister Moody decided to send a regular post owl immediately along, for some reason."

"Constant vigilance!" Harry and Hermione chorused.

"Oh . . . of course."

"I was not aware you knew Mister Lovegood," McGonagall said, slightly surprised.

"I don't" Hermione admitted. "Still, I need a magical guardian, not one of my second cousins, for just over a month. Luna suggested it last night, and after some thought, I decided he would make a good choice."

"Very well, I shan't question your choice. And you, Mister Potter?"



"Mad-Eye agreed to take me on, since we all know the Ministry wouldn't let Pro, err, Remus here do it, unless they felt they could blackmail him into controlling me."

"True," Remus had to admit.

"I have a letter of intent from Mad-Eye upstairs," Harry added.

"Shall I go ask Ronald for it?" Luna asked. McGonagall and Harry agreed, and Luna went upstairs to get it.

"May I make an observation, Potter?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes, Professor?"

"You seem to have grown up about two years in the six weeks since I've seen you. Part of that is Miss Lovegood, isn't it?"

"I've been looking after her, although I'm sure she'd say she has been looking after me."

"You know about her condition?"

Harry nodded. "So does Hermione, and Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, for that matter."

"Condition?" Remus asked.

"She's a full Seer," McGonagall said.

Remus' first reaction was a sharp intake of breath. Then, "Is she on the potion?"

"Full strength, twice a day, which is the maximum dosage," McGonagall said. "I rather wish she had been sorted into Hufflepuff, or even Gryffindor. She has the brains for Ravenclaw, of course, but that House is only tolerant of the intellectually eccentric."

"Some of her opinions are . . . original," Hermione answered.

"They are. They do not harass her because of those opinions, but because of her eccentricities of habit."

"Why didn't anyone tell them about the potion?" Harry asked.

"Full Seers are feared by some," Remus said. "They cannot directly read your mind, but they can read your emotions. And even when they aren't prophecizing, they often come out with these little observations that really . . . scare some people."

"Like what Professor Trelawney tries to do?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," McGonagall acknowledged, "although in my opinion hers usually come from clever observation and guesswork than from any Sight, and are much more general than what Miss Lovegood's would be."

"Wow."

"Indeed," McGonagall said. "I also feel compelled to add a word of warning. I know of no full Seer who has married in the last century and a half or so, not that there are very many examples to draw upon. If you are still with Miss Lovegood when she starts coming off her the potion, a two year process that will start at some point over the next few months to two years, you must be prepared for difficulties. Her gift will partially take over her life."

"Just like the prophecy has taken over mine," Harry said glumly.

"True," she acknowledged.

"Professor," Harry asked softly, "why not ask me the question the Headmaster wanted you to ask? Or will he wait until this afternoon?"

Remus and Hermione looked puzzled, but McGonagall gave Harry a tight smile. "Very well. How do we wake up Professor Snape?"

"Harry!" Hermione scolded, while Remus looked torn between scolding and laughing.

"You can't wake him up, and I won't until after the funeral," Harry answered. "If he wakes up too soon, he'd have to report my coming out of hiding to Voldemort before the funeral. The funeral is tomorrow morning, right?" He held Hermione's hand to comfort her.

"That is correct," McGonagall said.

"I need to visit a Muggle town this afternoon to get some proper clothes." He turned to Hermione. "Do you?" Hermione nodded.

"So, we, and Luna, need some proper things. If Ron and Ginny do, too, they can come, too, my treat. After the funeral, Luna and I need to go to Diagon Alley. After that, the Headmaster can imprison me wherever he chooses until school starts."

"Potter!"

"That's what it amounts to," Harry insisted. He turned to Hermione. "What do they call it? When they hold someone in those American police shows to protect them?"

"Protective custody?"

"That's it."

"If Harry goes, he mustn't go alone," Hermione stated. "If Luna can't go, then I will. Best of all, all of us should."

"Even Neville, if he can," Harry added.

"Very well. We shall consider that after we finished finalizing your courses, Mister Potter. We thought we should suggest Care, Charms, Defense, Magical Traditions, Preparation for the Ministry, and Transfiguration, as well as the Apparation course in the spring. Professor Snape was strongly resisting allowing you into Potions, in part because of your comments in The Quibbler, and I am even more certain that is out of the question now."

"I thought perhaps I'd go for the Accounting-Business course instead of the Ministry one. I just learned I have a large trust fund to administer."

"So you no longer have a desire to become an auror?"

"I would, in theory, but I can't see myself working for the Ministry, even if the people at the top change." Harry turned to include Remus. "What's this Dark Force Defense League?"

"That's not a job, that's a group," Remus explained. "They are retired aurors and hit-wizards, dark creature hunters, most of the few magical private detectives and security types, a few scholars, people like that."

"Oh," Harry said, disappointed.

"In any event, with this schedule, you could still try for auror training, even if you decide not to take a position," McGonagall stated. "My explanation of the requirements was rather interrupted, if you recall."

"I thought I needed Potions."

"Ideally, yes. Without it, you would need an O N.E.W.T. in Defense plus one in either Charms or Transfiguration, and of course an E in the other N.E.W.T. courses."

"I'm sorry if I'm making the difficult for you," Harry said.

"I just wish I could do more for you," she answered. McGonagall turned to Remus. "Could you call for Molly? Let's see what she thinks of all this shopping."

Remus was back with Molly quickly, and was explaining the idea. McGonagall stood and transfigured her robe into a Muggle dress and jacket. "I'll transfigure Lupin's gear. You go get changed," she said to Harry and Hermione. She turned to Molly. "May your children go?"

Molly nodded wordlessly. Hermione hugged Mrs. Weasley, and Harry did the same.

After they had finished their clothes shopping, Harry convinced McGonagall to let them eat lunch. "Potter, I do hope you haven't stripped your vault," McGonagall hissed as Harry insisted they order anything they wanted off the menu of the up-scale Italian bistro.

Harry was glad Ron was at the other end of the table, arguing with Ginny. "Honestly, Professor? I've barely made a dent after all my trips, and remember I inherit one of the largest trust funds in Europe, some of it next year."

"Very well." She ordered grilled tuna steak and pasta in a light cream sauce and pine nuts.

"Did you talk to the Headmaster before we left?" Harry asked after ordering a large plate of spaghetti with meat balls and mushrooms. He also agreed with Hermione's idea to order two large 'white pizzas' -- garlic and cheese, cut into break stick size, one for Ron and one for the rest of the table.

"Very good, Potter. I did. That will give him time to mull things over. May I ask where you learned what you did?"

"The advanced defense and Occlumency? Access to a library that really made up in quality what it lack in total quantity. We probably went through three hundred books. Plus Luna also has the knack for both Occlumency and wandless magic, and we practiced wandless magic at least two hours a day for over three weeks. We became quite good quite quickly."

"But. . . you kept it hidden?"

"Remember, the Underage detectors are tuned to locations and to wands. Since I wasn't at the expected location. . . ." He shrugged.

"I see. It's a good thing most students have no knack for wandless magic once they hit puberty." She made no other comment, but wondered if Potter might have it in him to become a good animagus. She'd mention it to Albus later.

After the teens returned, Harry and Dumbledore talked on the back porch, seated in some old straight-backed chairs. The others were putting away clothes or otherwise puttering about the house.

"What shall we talk about first, sir?" Harry asked, in a fairly polite tone.

"I fear we must first discuss Sirius' will." Harry stiffened. "Sirius was the last Black."

"I thought Tonks' mother and her two sisters were the last Blacks," Harry said, not wanting to use Narcissa's or Bellatrix' names.

"By birth, so I should have said the last male Black. The estate and fortune were entailed. Do you know the term?"

Harry nodded. "It means everything goes to the oldest legitimate male heir." He frowned. "Malfoy?"

"No, this entail takes no account of women at all. The most that can be done is giving someone a life interest. That is, they may receive an income or use of property during their lifetime, but cannot sell off property or assets. Sirius' mother, for example, had a life interest on Grimmauld Place and much of the Black fortune, other than the cash deposits. With Sirius' death, the entail is broken. Since Sirius couldn't change it, a will he made just before Christmas, 1980, is still valid, as the Ministry has at least agreed he's dead. He did not expect, at that time, to do anything other than marry in the future, but his fiancée was killed the following August. Still, he was fighting in the war, and took no chances. In short, you get one third of the estate, one sixth of the total on your own merits and the other from your father, and Remus get's one sixth."

"And the other half?"

"Andromeda and Nymphadora Tonks each get one sixth."

Harry frowned. "Let me guess. Wormtail."

Dumbledore nodded, "Alas, yes." Then Dumbledore smiled.

"Do you have a plan?" Harry asked.

"Actually, no," Dumbledore admitted. "Remus has a plan. Would you care to hear it?"

"Yes, sir."

Some time later, the conversation turned to other matters. "Professor Snape is going to be quite angry with you," Dumbledore observed.

"Yes, but this way he can't report on my movements until after they're complete. That really is the only reason I did what I did." Harry stopped suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Professor, has Sn . . . has Professor Snape actually reported anything really useful?"

"Harry. . . ."

"No, sir," Harry interrupted politely but firmly. "I'm not questioning his loyalty, I'm questioning his effectiveness. Thinking back on it, he did weaken my defenses, but beside that, did Voldemort really learn about his connection to me last Christmas? I didn't realize it at the time, but the first time my scar burned was when I walked into the great hall to be sorted and saw the back of Quirrell's head, and I know now I was having some dreams he put into my head that year, dreams of coming to Slytherin, dreams about snakes. No, he knew about the connection long before he told Professor Snape about them. What's more, why didn't Voldemort ever punish Professor Snape for interfering that year? Or did he?"

Dumbledore said nothing, but looked concerned.

"I know that you believe he is a master of Legilimency, but is he really a master of Occlumency? There are supposed to be lots of subtle ways to sneak into a person's mind. Even if he's safe from a frontal attack, is he really strong against the subtle ones?"

"And?"

"And, if he's not, perhaps Voldemort has been playing him, instead of being the one played."

"You may be correct. I shall test Severus when you awaken him. Remus, Moody, and Tonks will be accompanying you, Miss Lovegood, and Miss Granger Saturday evening. Arthur and Molly will decide about their two children by tomorrow morning, and Madam Longbottom is considering Neville's request to join you. That is really all I shall tell you until you have arrived."

"Yes, sir."

"You're not going to ask where you're going?"

"Would you tell me?"

"No, I suppose not. I have three different alternatives. The best actually belongs to the Potter Trust. Do I have your permission to use it, if it is the best alternative?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure, maybe I can find something out about my holdings. Sir, why didn't you ever tell me about the trust?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Harry, think about the size of that pile of money in the vault. Would **you** tell any boy much younger than you that he could spend a sixth of that money every year with no worries? What kind of acquaintances would that have earned you? I had planned to have an agent of mine, who knows about finance, sit down with you on your birthday. He still should, before you return to Hogwarts."

Harry thought about that, and realized that they probably wouldn't have been his current friends. "Alright, I won't complain about that one."

"Fair enough. So, buy just a few things for hot weather, and do the same for your friends tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

They sat in silence for a moment, and then Dumbledore said, "I must say, your wandless magic is quite impressive."

"Thank you, sir."

"In fact, I've only known one person of your age whose ability came close to yours."

"Tom Riddle?"

"No, he was not quite on Miss Lovegood's level, and she is far behind you. In actual power, she is certainly above average in her power, but not terribly high, despite her abilities in wandless magic. Power and wandless magic do not always go together, despite a common belief that they do. No, not to make a mystery of it, it was I."

"Really, sir?"

"Oh, yes. Quite a useful gift. I understand you can do disillusionments as well."

"Yes, sir," Harry said proudly.

"For some reason, those few of us who can do those wandlessly also acquire the talent to sense others under a disillusionment or invisibility cloak or spell." Dumbledore chuckled. "I learn to wandlessly disillusion myself the summer before my Seventh year. I was quite surprised to be caught outside the kitchens one night by the Charms professor, who could sense me very easily."

"Moody also saw me," Harry complained.

"Practice, and it will become more and more difficult for him to do so."

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore stood up and smiled.

"I don't know why we couldn't have just worn our House blazers," Ron grumbled the following morning.

"You could have, if you were just going as a casual friend," Harry answered. "Besides, you've outgrown your blazer and best trousers."

"True." Ron looked at Harry. "Are you doing alright?"

"Not really," Harry admitted. "We all know that the Grangers were targeted mostly because Hermione is my friend. Hermione won't blame me for that, even though she could. I just hope she doesn't blame herself too much."

"You're right, she could," Ron admitted.

"So, I won't mention it, because it will upset her, and she won't mention it, because it will upset me. She'll forgive me, if she hasn't already, and now we just have each forgive ourselves, and that's not easy."

"That's true, too. So, let's talk about something more fun before things get horrible. Luna, huh?"

"Yes," Harry said yet again.

"You spent a month with her, huh?"

"Ron, she's not someone just to share a slap-and-tickle with. We're serious. Maybe it will work out in the long run, maybe it won't, but we're serious now. Alright?"

Ron shrugged. "No offense, but I thought I'd be seriously dating before you."

"I did, too. No go with Hermione?"

"No," Ron said sadly. "We would need to learn not to fight before we can date, and I don't think either of us want to put in that much effort."

Harry looked at his watch. "We can't put this off any longer, can we?"

Ron sighed. "No, we can't. I'm just afraid it won't be the last funeral we have to go to."

## **Chapter IX**

Saturday, August 3, 1996

Diagon Alley was its usual busy self when the teens arrived, with escort, shortly before 2:00. After the funeral, none of the friends felt very excited about their visit, of course. Hermione's left side, which had been seriously injured at the Department of Mysteries, had mostly stopped hurting by early July, but the pain was back in full, due to stress. Ron had been scratching some of the scars left over from the brain attack as well.

The emotional pain had of course been there as well. The news of the attack had not reached the magical press, but the Muggle press was there in force. This had not kept most of the Hogwarts staff from attending, although Hagrid and Flitwick had to be under heavy glamors. McGonagall, Sinistra, Vector, Sprout, Pince, and even Madam Hooch attended (the Runes and Muggle professors were out of the country). These six witches managed to unobtrusively keep the Muggle press and photographers well away from Hermione.

Remus, Moody, Tonks, and two additional aurors kept a close eye on the crowd at the church service, as well as on the trip to the cemetery and the grave-side service. The Weasleys, Mister Lovegood, and Hermione's other friends stayed closer. Even Percy was present, although he seemed to be there representing the Ministry more than the Weasley family.

All four of Hermione's closest friends stayed closest (Neville hadn't been able to get his things ready in time to attend), although somehow Luna seemed to have taken the job of chief support. When Ron had asked about it, she had merely said that as much as she liked Hermione, the other three were closer to her, and she could provide more support simply because she wasn't hurting quite as much as the others were. In addition, to Ron's surprise, Fred and George not only behaved themselves, but also provided Hermione some comfort as well.

When the funeral was over, the five friends took their leave of most of the staff and the other Weasleys. Hermione would have liked to have rested, but they still had a lot of shopping to take care of, and with their escort (Moody, Tonks, and the other two aurors, who didn't speak to them), there wasn't much they could do except get on with it. By 4:00, they were finished, although their robes would be picked up later by members of the Order.

As they passed Fortesque's, Moody growled, "Do you think you five can sit in there and not cause some disaster to occur?"

"That would be up to the rest of the universe, not to us," Luna stated. Moody stared at her, shook his head as if to clear it, and sent them in. The two aurors left to patrol the area and Tonks went to find Remus while Moody went off to fetch Neville, who was supposed to meet them after buying a new wand at Ollivander's.

The group all got sundaes, although they ranged in size the Hermione's single scoop of vanilla with strawberries to Ron's six scoops (chocolate, chocolate chocolate chip, double chocolate ripple, chocolate marshmallow, dark chocolate, and chocolate surprise, with milk chocolate, dark chocolate, and fudge syrups over a large warm chocolate brownie with whipped cream on top).



Ginny and Hermione were just trying to convince Ron that he certainly didn't need a second sundae, when they all heard a familiar and annoying drawl, although for once expressed in tones so soft no one other than the five of them could hear it.

"Well, well, well. Look who we have here. Weasel, Weaselette, Loony, Potty, and Muddy."

"Malfoy, go away," Ginny said, putting a firm hold on one of Ron's arms while Hermione held on to the other. Harry looked at Malfoy and recalled a curse out of Curses Your Crazy Uncle Should Have Taught You, one of his favorites of the books he had found the cellar stash.

"Why? I merely wanted to offer Granger her my condolences for joining the soon-to-be-growing list of orphans." He turned to Harry. "Feeling less lonely now?" He looked around. "Where's the orphaned Squib?"

Ginny started to go for her wand, but Luna stopped her.

"You never know when to be quiet, do you, Malfoy?" Harry observed just as softly.

"Well, there's not much you can do about it, can you?" Malfoy hissed. "Don't think any of you scum are going to get off easily once we get a hold of you. If you're lucky, we'll kill you fi. . . ." Malfoy's mouth suddenly was gone.

Malfoy's eyes went wide as he realized what had happened. His hands went to his face and made frantic motions. "Problem, Malfoy?" Harry asked in a kind, but louder, tone. "Would you care to join us for some ice cream? I'm sure Ron would join you with a second helping. . . ." Malfoy ran out of the shop.

"Hey!" a voice yelled from the counter. "You didn't pay for that pink lemonade sherbert!"

"Here," Harry said, standing. "I'll ask him for it when we get to Hogwarts."

"But what do I do with it?" the cashier asked.

"Here, Ron!" Harry said.

"Pink lemonade?" Ron asked with a odd look at the bowl. "After a Chocolate Feast Sundae?"

"Designed for four," Hermione muttered to herself.

"We'll split it," Ginny said. She took a handful of spoons, and they all had a taste of Malfoy's sherbert. Even Hermione had a spoonful, giggling as she swallowed it.

After she did so, Hermione asked, "How did you do that?"

"Me?" Harry asked, with an exaggerated innocent air. "I'm sure some adult used their wand. If it was done wandlessly, why such a low-powered spell couldn't be traced. Of course, with a wand, anyone could have done that at any line-of-sight distance. Wandlessly, it would have to be under ten feet. And with a wand, the specific counter-curse has to be used. Wandlessly, I bet it wears off in an hour."

Harry went quiet as he saw Moody coming into the shop, a snarl on his face and a nervous Neville trailing behind. "Do I have to worry about some underage spell being traced here?"

"Why would any spell have been used here, other than the ever-freeze charms?" Ginny asked in such an innocent tone that Moody was actually thrown for an instant.

"Aye, right," Moody finally said dubiously. "How presumptuous of me. I'm sure someone else in here had reason to hex Malfoy's mouth off."

"Probably," Hermione agreed.

"I thought I saw him," Ron said. "I was surprised he didn't stop by and say hello."

Moody snorted, which made Luna and Ginny giggle. "Well, if you're all finished, let's get going."

The group, now including Remus and Tonks, flooded to The Three Broomsticks, where Hagrid had a large carriage waiting for them. Hagrid wasn't very talkative, mostly because he had a large bruise on his face, which showed that Gawp was still around.

Dumbledore was waiting for them in the entrance hall, as was Madam Pomfrey, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick. "I have your portkey here," Dumbledore said. "We are installing some new anti-portkey wards over parts of the castle, and are testing them as we go. One more portkey will never be noticed, let alone traced. But, before you go, how do we awaken Professor Snape?"

"Yes, Harry," Flitwick said, enthused to the point of bouncing. "We have a three-way bet riding on it! I say it's a Conditioned Sleeping Charm!"

"Nonsense!" McGonagall stated. "Those never last more than twenty-four hours, and generally don't work on anyone over the age of five!" she turned to Harry. "Somehow, you managed to induce a sleeping potion, didn't you?"

"I told you, I would have seen that," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye. "I say Harry used the Russian Sleeping Hex, since that lasts longer than twenty-four hours, although that should have been relatively easy to lift."

"I don't care what he did!" Pomfrey stated. She turned to Harry. "What did you do?"

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said to McGonagall. "Given a free choice, you're right, I would have loved to have slipped him a potion. Poetic justice and all that." He turned to Dumbledore. "I don't know what the Russian Sleeping Hex is, sir. You'll have to teach it to me." He turned to Flitwick. "How could I make a Conditioned Sleeping Charm last longer than twenty-four hours, sir?"

"You shouldn't be able to, my boy, but I have great faith in you."

Harry smiled. "You cast three consecutive Conditioned Sleeping Charms. You can use up to four different conditions for each casting, as long as they're very specific and possible. I simply made the first condition on the second Charm the ending of the first one, thus starting it; and the first condition of the third the ending of the second."

"I never heard of that working before," Flitwick said, puzzled.

"Harry is growing in power, Filius, and was very determined that this work," Dumbledore answered. "I doubt if there are five hundred wizards alive who could have cast consecutive Sleeping Charms, less than a hundred who could have made them work on an adult, and certainly less than two dozen who could have done it all wandlessly."

Harry blushed slightly.

"And the other conditions?" Dumbledore asked.

"The ones on the first charm was that he could not be awakened by you, Madam Pomfrey, or Professor McGonagall. I knew that Professor McGonagall was likely to show up to talk to Hermione and me, so I changed her condition to Professor Flitwick for the second charm."

"So, if any else casts a canceling charm, the second Sleeping Charm will finish, and the third one will kick in?" Pomfrey asked. The first charm should have worn off by then.

"Right."

"And what are the conditions of the final charm, dear boy?" Flitwick asked, bouncing in excitement.

"There's just one more."

"And that is?" Pomfrey asked.

"He has to be kissed. On the lips. By one particular person. Nothing else will work."

"By whom?" McGonagall demanded dangerously.

"By Professor Trelawney."

The group was silent for a full five seconds, before Ron snorted while trying to contain himself. That set off Tonks, which in turn set off Luna and Remus, and then Ginny. Moody and the teachers seemed impressed, while Hermione merely rolled her eyes.

"Yes, well . . . perhaps we shall let Professor Snape rest a while longer," Dumbledore suggested.

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "I suppose that would be best. It will be bad enough when you tell him he fell victim to a charm designed to be used on over-active toddlers with dragon pox!"

"I hadn't realized that," Harry admitted. "Good thing it worked!" He realized now why it was listed under a unit called "Household Hints of Last Resort" in the book he had found it in.

"Yes, well, never mind that," Dumbledore said. "I have sent two house elves ahead to help out. You will be portkeyed back here the morning of the First of September. Mister Weasley, Miss Granger, and Miss Weasley will then go on to act as prefects on the train. . . ."

Harry looked at Ginny. No one had mentioned that she had been named a prefect. She shrugged.

". . . and the three of you will stay here and settle in. Alastor will be the primary Defense teacher, although Remus shall be here to help both Alastor and Hagrid." Dumbledore now directly addressed Harry. "You and Miss Granger may wish to continue the Defense Association. If so, Remus will act as the staff advisor. So. All of you touch this length of hose pipe, please. Oh, and here, Harry. I was afraid I might be wrong about the sleeping hex." He handed Harry a piece of parchment describing the hex.

As soon as they all were touching the hose, Dumbledore activated the portkey, and they were off.

After they left, Flitwick shook his head. "I knew that he had done it as well as having a good idea of how he had done it, but I still have a difficult time wrapping my mind around the fact that he succeeded with that Charm."

"Indeed," McGonagall agreed. "I don't understand. He's never like that in my class. Is he in yours?"

"No," Flitwick agreed.

"Harry doesn't realize it any more than you have," Dumbledore explained. "Harry is trying to match the other students in class."

The other three looked at him, puzzled.

Dumbledore sighed. "The Dursleys conditioned Harry never to stand out. So, while Miss Granger tries to match what you're doing, Harry is trying to match the class. He's both trying to learn, yet fighting his own power and instincts. He limits himself without knowing it."

He turned to Flitwick. "Has Harry ever mastered a charm first?"

"I don't believe so," Flitwick answered. "However, he is usually the second or third. . . ."

"Exactly. And what type of charm has he had the most difficulty with?"

"The Summoning Charms."

"So Harry, who spent ten years having his desires and smothered, has a great deal of trouble with magic that satisfy those needs."

"As a rule," Flitwick pointed out. "There have been exceptions."

"Of course. Harry is not a machine, after all." Dumbledore looked at the space that Harry had just vacated. "If he doesn't learn it this summer, we need to teach him how to access his magic with greater ease and confidence."

"I believe Miss Lovegood may be taking care of that," Flitwick said with a smile as Madam Pomfrey went to check on Snape.

The group (Harry, Luna, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Moody, Tonks, and Lupin) appeared in an entrance hall that appeared small only in comparison to the large space they had just left.

Their immediate sense was not so much of the space but of the bright, almost dazzling light. It was a light that seemed to illuminate the world in ways which light in Britain only did on the rarest of occasions.

"Where are we?" Ron asked, before anyone else could.

"There are many answers to that, Weasley," Moody answered. "If it still appears on any Muggle map, then it's a small island in the Adriatic, barely within the southern territorial waters of Croatia."

He turned to Hermione. "You should know this. When were the European Ministries organized?"

"Between 1648 and 1698, in Muggle terms between the ends of the Thirty Years War and the War of the League of Augsburg, for wizards between the settlement of the Easterling Wars and the Gringotts Compromise after the Great Goblin Rebellion, not to mention three Grand Councils, the first. . . ."

"Very good!" Moody broke in wisely before Hermione to carry on. "Now, what were the Ministries?"

Hermione shrugged. "Basically, they represented the major European nations of the period: Britain, Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands -- although the Spanish Ministry agreed that what was then called the Spanish Netherlands, more-or-less Belgium today, could be administered as part of the Netherlands. Let's see . . . Denmark, which included Norway and Iceland. Sweden, which included Finland. Russia, Poland, and Switzerland. The Austrian and Ottoman Empires. Even though Italy wasn't united, they formed a Wizarding Ministry. Germany, then the Holy Roman Empire, was even less united, but insisted on forming a separate Ministry apart from the Austrians."

"And today?"

"The Ministries are roughly the same, although many of the Continental Ministries allow a great deal of scope for modern Muggle national borders. The Austrian Ministry still controls the old Hapsburg Empire, and a member of a magical branch of the Hapsburgs still holds office as the titular head of state as a magical grand duke."

"We'd give you House points if we could," Remus said warmly.

"How about the Ottomans?" Moody asked.

"That Ministry really only exists in name," Hermione said. "Some of the Muggle-born and Half-Bloods collaborated with the Nazis, and then even more collaborated with the Communists, which resulted in many persecutions of the magical communities, especially in. . . ."

"In where?" Ron asked, wondering what Hermione had just realized and clearly not remembering when this was gone over in History of Magic.

"In Albania," Harry answered, "which isn't terribly far south of here."

"I think it's about a hundred and twenty to a hundred and fifty kilometers south-southeast of us," Moody agreed.

"So?" Ron demanded.

"That's where Voldemort hid out on and off for over ten years," Harry said.

"And most of the wizarding communities were broken by the Communists in the 1960s," Hermione added. "There are areas where no Muggle is safe because of that. Greece has been partially organized separately since the mid-1800s, but Romania and Bulgaria have just finished their reorganizations."

"That's why Charlie could get that job in Romania," Ginny said. "The Romanians had let things go downhill in the Seventies and Eighties."

"The Communist Ministry allowed over-hunting," Hermione said. "It was about the only way to bring in Galleons."

"Anyway, because this island is right on an old boundary line, even though that boundary no longer exists, it means certain sorts of magic can't easily be detected," Remus said. "A great-grand father of Harry's noticed this over a hundred years ago, and bought the island. So, this is also part of the Potter Trust, although it wasn't bought by a Potter."

"Who was it bought by?" Neville asked, before anyone else could.

"Albertine Dumbledore, the middle of the three Dumbledore brothers, now deceased," Moody answered.

"You mean. . . ."

"Yes, you're Albertine's great grandson by his first marriage, Dumbledore's great grand nephew. A connection, although not a very close one," Moody said, "even by the most liberal wizarding standards. Still, after all the wars of this century, he and Aberforth are actually your closest male relatives on the Potter side."

"That explains a fair amount of a lot of things," Harry said. "Still, I'm guessing the magic is the most important thing here."

"It is," Remus agreed. "What Albertine did was create an astral portal to another dimension, another world."

"They really exist?" Hermione said eagerly. "They aren't just arithmetical constructs? Mere theory?"

"Of course they are real," Luna stated. "Where do you think Tolkien got his stories from? That was all real, just not in our dimension."

"What?" Hermione protested.

"That has never been proven," Lupin stated firmly. "Still, Tolkien's world is similar to two of these other worlds. Similar, not the same."

"Tolkien was a wizard?" Hermione asked, dazed.

"Unknown," Remus answered. "The best evidence is that he was a very weak Muggle-born, never invited to Hogwarts. However, remember there was a wizarding war at roughly the same time as the Muggle First World War. We know for certain he mixed with some of the wizards on leave in Paris."

"That doesn't matter," Moody growled.

"True," Remus agreed, "or at least it can wait. The important thing is we can still access one of these worlds from here, and won't be detected."

"Why would we want to?" Ginny asked.

"Good question," Remus answered. "First of all, we can fully train you there. There are no restrictions on underage magic, because everyone there knows about it."

"Does that mean most people there are magical?" Hermione asked.

"No. About ten percent are, a much higher proportion than here," Remus explained. "They form the ruling class. About eighty percent are what we would call Muggles. They form the peasant class, and part of the trades class. Squibs and their families form the merchant class and the rest of the trades class. Technologically, the Muggles and Squibs are living what we might call a late medieval lifestyle. The magical community lives more in a late classical lifestyle."

Hermione cocked her head and asked, "Then what's the difference for the merchants and peasants?"

"The peasantry and merchants in the late Roman period geared their production for towns and cities, even if peasants and other farmers formed about sixty-five percent of the population instead of ninety percent, as in the medieval period. The upper class, the magical class, live on estates that are closer to Roman villas, rather than castles and most of the peasant production is geared for them. There are no cities, and so far as we know, the largest town is about six thousand people."

"Now," Moody broke in, "you each have decisions to make. First of all, you can stay here with me. I won't be going. Second, you may partially go. Your mind is there, you will remember everything that happens, but your actual body stays."

"We should mention that there's a time difference," Remus added. "One day here equals about eleven days there. We'll be there twenty days, which will be two hundred and nineteen days there."

"Right," Moody agreed. "Anyway, with the second option, there will be no physical changes. Third, you can go in a physical sense. The second way, none of the physical changes, the conditioning, will be transferred. The downside to the third method is that if something goes wrong, if you're injured, well, you're injured. In the second state, you can be killed with the Killing Curse or some other swift method, but anything else will merely send you back here early. In the third option, well you're there and whatever happens happens."

The teens thought about that, and finally Ron said, "So, we can be hurt there, but can come back if it's serious and we won't be hurt here, but with the last option, if we're hurt, we're hurt because we're really there?"

"Correct."

"What kind of training will we be doing?" Harry asked.

"Full magical combat training with the second option," Tonks answered. "With the third option, you'll be doing physical combat and conditioning as well."

"Fine," Harry said. "When do we start?"

"We?" Ron asked.

"Me, Remus, and Tonks," Harry answered. "I'm not speaking for the rest of you."

Before anyone could speak up, Remus stated firmly, "We'll leave at noon tomorrow. You have until Nine in the morning to decide."

"Come on," Tonks said. "Let's look around."



## **Chapter X**

After dinner, Dobby showed the teens to their rooms -- taking six of the twelve suites (bedroom, sitting room, bath) that formed the top floor of a separate wing off the main building. There was a parlor that the suites were grouped around, and after getting cleaned up the six teens gathered there in their new light nightwear, dressing gowns, and slippers.

"So," Ginny started off, addressing Harry, "have you decided which option you're going to take?"

Harry shrugged. "Let's be honest. Do I really have much of a choice? This is a real chance to get the jump on Voldemort, and to get the training I'll need to kill him."

"Kill him!" Ginny, Ron, and Neville exclaimed.

"Oh . . . right. I'm not supposed to go into details, but I am supposed to be the one who has a chance to get rid of Voldemort."

Ron and Ginny looked concerned.

"Whoa. . . ." Neville was still trying to understand what that all meant, not knowing how much more concerned he might have been.

"Anyway," Harry went on, "I have to go for the third option. I know you'd all come if I asked, but. . . ."

Ron jumped in, "We didn't come here to be left behind!"

"None of us knew what was going on," Harry tried to argue, but none of his friends would hear that argument, let alone listen to it.

"Look," Ginny finally said, "the only question is do we go there completely."

"Will we do anyone, Harry or ourselves, any service by not going completely?" Luna asked. "There must be risks to training, and this is possibly a disorderly and rough world we're going to, but there shouldn't be that great a risk of death or severe injury."

"I'm with you, Harry, all the way," Hermione said.

"As I am," Luna added.

"I'm always with you, mate," Ron stated firmly.

"You'd be there for me," Neville said.

"And you were there for me," Ginny concluded.

Harry leaned over and rang a small bell, and Dobby popped into the room. "Could you please tell Remus, if he's available, that we're all going tomorrow, and that we're going all in?"

"Yes, Harry Potter," Dobby said. He seemed to be listening, and then said, "It may not be wise to disturb Professor Loopy and Miss Tonks for . . . a few more minutes.

The six teens blushed at that, and then started laughing. "No no no!" Dobby protested. "They are just talking together!" The teens laughed even harder. Remus was obviously still putting up some resistance to Tonks' tentative advances.

Severus Snape realized that he was laying down in a strange bed. A brief review led to a humiliating realization. In front of a number of witnesses, he must have been bested by a schoolboy. Worse, he realized he may have been beaten twice in less than a few minutes. He, Severus Snape, one of the great potion brewers of his generation and a man who played a very dangerous game with the most magically powerful evil wizard of the millennium.

And Harry Potter had bested him.

'If this bed is in that Weasley-hutch, I'll march down and tear a strip of hide off that boy, and I don't care what Dumbledore says! I'll testify at the boy's trial for underage magic!' he thought. He took a deep breath, not to cleanse his mind, but to give his body the oxygen boost it would need to start yelling.

Snape's breath caught as he realized that he was in the Hogwarts Infirmary, rather than at the Weasleys'. He gritted his teeth.

"Good morning, Severus," Dumbledore said cheerfully.

Snape reluctantly opened his eyes to see the serene expression of the Headmaster. "So, is the boy in custody yet?"

"Custody? For what reason? You attacked him, he defended, and without a wand. So, what proof do you have of any underage magic, other than your belief?"

"Without a wand?"

"Come, now, Severus. Surely Voldemort does not allow you to defend yourself with a wand. Come to think of it, does he always use his wand for Legilimency?"

"Of course he doesn't allow me to use my wand to defend myself; I'm merely surprised Potter has reached that point. And, of course, he uses a wand to attack. Everyone does!"

"I don't," Dumbledore stated. "In fact, I don't believe you always do."

"I do in order to access more than surface feelings," Snape argued.

"And didn't Harry read your mind during your lessons?"

"Well. . . ."

"And I am curious. Why did you claim you were fully teaching Harry, when in fact you merely attacked him, time after time, until his defenses were rubbed raw? You neglected all the steps recommended for **any** new student, let alone one such as Harry, with natural defenses against the Imperius."

Snape was in a very uncomfortable position, and not just because his bladder was bursting.

"Yes," Dumbledore said, with absolutely the sternest expression Snape had seen on his face in years, "yes, it's time we had a serious discussion about your role, Severus."

At the late breakfast the next morning, the teens were instructed to show up in the light clothes and sandals provided, and nothing else besides their wands. Luna and Ginny were told they could bring the books they needed to revise for the O.W.L.s, and the four Sixth years also placed books to bring as well (for once, Harry had more than Hermione). They had to leave their clothes and most of their other possessions, so their trunks were mostly empty.

So, shortly before noon, they gathered in the parlor near their suites, ready to leave. None had seen anything exactly like their clothes before. Each had a pair of white cotton underwear, much like boxer shorts with drawstrings, and study leather sandals. The girls were also given a band of cotton cloth, which Winky had shown them how to adjust. They each wore a lightly woven, fitted tunic of mixed linen and cotton, all the same neutral color. The boys' hung just above the knees, the girls' just below. Each had a sheath for their wands. Ginny and Luna wore their long, straight hair in loose braids, while Hermione wore hers more in a loose bun. On Remus' orders, Harry's glasses were in his trunk.

"Are you ready?" Remus asked.

"As ready as we ever will be," Harry retorted.

"Then follow." Remus turned and stalked off. The teens followed him out of a back entrance and through a garden. As they approached a small hill, they found Tonks by an entrance which had been dug into the side, and they went into the ground, and down a set of stairs.

They had probably descended fifty feet under ground when they entered a chamber. Later comparing notes, neither Hermione nor Luna recognized more than a quarter of the magical symbols which adorned the chamber in gold leaf and marble reliefs.

Their trunks were arranged in a circle around a small open flame, and each person sat on their trunk. They all joined hands, except for Remus. Tonks on one side of him and Harry on their other each placed a hand on one of Remus' knees.

They were instructed to close their eyes. Remus poured a small oil-based potion onto the fire, and began a chant in a language none had ever heard.

The chant when on and on, for what later Remus would say was about twelve minutes. After the first few minutes, the teens each thought that their heads were spinning, and during the last minute or two, the ambient light seemed to be growing brighter.

Finally, Remus stopped the chant, and said in a relieved voice, "We're here."

To their shock, he was right.

'Here' was a large, intact stone circle.

It must have been thirty yards in diameter, the stones over fifteen feet in height and nearly six feet wide. It was a bright, almost cloudless day.

"Greeting to you, Lord Travelers," a voice called out. "May we approach?"

"One moment," Remus called back, standing. "Stay seated," he hissed. "Now listen to me very carefully. We are guests on this world. You will keep you opinions of their social and political structure and customs to your selves. Doing anything else will endanger our mission. Understood?"

The teens grumbled their agreement.

"Hermione?" Remus asked.

"I can guess what you mean, and I won't be baited, but I will do my best," she answered.

"Very well. Now, all stand and get behind me. Trust that I know what I'm doing, and don't volunteer to do anything for anyone unless I ask for it or unless only we can hear it."

None looked happy at that, but they did as they were told.

"Who addresses us?" Remus demanded.

"I am Hogar, a reeve of Lord Dumbledore," the man said. "I have wagons just outside the sacred space, if your lordships would consent to leaving the sacred circle and bringing your luggage. . . ."

"Where is Lord Dumbledore's steward?" Remus demanded in a stern tone. "Why isn't he here to guide us?"

"I don't know, lord," the reeve answered with a hint of fear. "He said to tell you he was delayed, to take your luggage, and to provide you with the magic brooms and directions."

"I see," Remus said, obviously displeased. "Very well. Go to the wagons." He turned to Harry. "Harry, grab your glasses."

"Right," Harry answered. "Shall I take care of the trunks?" he asked softly.

"We don't want any of us to be mistaken for a servant on this world," Remus pointed out.

"Since I won't be using my wand, they won't know who's doing it," Harry replied, putting on his glasses and securing his trunk.

"Alright. There's a chance that this is a test, or even an ambush. I go first, followed by the trunks. Then Harry and Luna, Ron and Ginny, Neville and Hermione, then Tonks. Everyone, on alert and wands out. Harry, carry yours in your left hand."

"Right."

Once outside the circle, they could see they were in a land of forested, rolling hills. The circle was atop a small knoll, and the area was clearcut in roughly a circle, a little less than half a mile in diameter at the widest part. A wide paved road was about fifty yards to the east of the circle, running roughly north and south. Two wagons, each yoked to two pair of oxen, were just finishing turning around to the south.

Remus led them to the wagons at a fair pace. The eight trunks easily stacked into just one of the wagons, and Harry secured them against movement with a simple charm. Hogar carried a stack of somewhat ragged-looking broomsticks over to them. Ron just managed not to comment on their appearance.

"Such directions as I already have," Remus said to the reeve coldly, "is that the town is about two miles to the south. The turnoff to the Dumbledore estate is a little more than two-thirds of the way there."

"Yes, lord," the reeve answered. "It is the third of three roads that turn east before town. It is the first estate on the road."

"Very well. Carry on. We shall of course arrive before you. Or do we need to protect you on your way as well?"

"No, my lord," the reeve answered. "There have been no green wizards nearby in over a decade, and no dark wizards in about a hundred and sixty years."

"Carry on, then," Remus said dismissively while Tonks distributed the brooms.

The reeve looked at them, bowed, and went to get the ox-drivers started. Remus led the group back about twenty feet.

"I don't like this," Remus said. "The steward should have been with him."

"And would the steward would have been a wizard or a squib?" Hermione asked.

"A moderately-powered wizard without an important family, or a low-powered relative."

"Dumbledore?" Harry asked.

"Descendants of the middle brother," Remus said simply. "He found a home here, and so these are some very distant relations of yours. By their time line, he died more than five hundred years ago, although it was about fifty for us. James and Sirius came here three times, the summers before our Sixth and Seventh years, and again after we left Hogwarts. I was with them twice and Lily was with them that last time -- thank goodness Peter couldn't come any of the summers. Anyway, by their time line, that first visit was over two hundred years ago. I know the Headmaster looks in at least twice a year on his relatives, and arranged all this."

"I wonder if these brooms are as bad as they look," Ron said, looking at his.

"Shall I give some of them a quick test run?" Harry asked.

"Well, do yours at least," Remus said, setting his down. "Everyone step back and keep a close eye on Harry. Be ready to grab him if something goes wrong."

Harry also set his down. "Up!" he commanded. The broom did as it was commanded. Harry mounted it and took off. Harry did a quick series of turns, and came back in less than two minutes.

"It's no racing broom, that's for sure," Harry said. "If they're all like this, they should be safe." He handed his to Hermione.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"Unless you want me to spend half an hour testing everyone's, shouldn't we be going?" Harry asked.

"I suppose," Remus said.

Harry turned to Hermione. "No offense, but you and Neville are the least experienced flyers, so I thought you'd want the one I tested."

"Thanks, Harry."

Harry turned to Neville, who shook his head. "Unless we're going to be flying high, I can do this. I was actually practicing all July on an old Comet."

"Then let's mount up," Remus said. "Local custom says we either fly over the road, or over the verge to the right. We won't hurry until we're out of sight of the wagons."

They flew in a different order they had come out of the circle. Remus flew first, followed by Hermione and Ginny (with Ginny on the outside), Neville and Ron, Luna and Harry, and Tonks. Remus, Tonks, Ginny, Ron, and Harry could easily fly with one hand on the broom handle and with their wands in the other, and Luna could in an emergency.

They flew fairly slowly, only about 12 mph after they got away from the wagons, which was probably about two-thirds the top speed of these brooms in any event. They said nothing, and the flight took about twenty minutes.

Neville, Remus, and Hermione saw that it was around noon in the mid-to-late spring. The woods looked like a mix of northern Europe and eastern North America. The first turnoff of the wide paved road was to a slightly more narrow but equally well-paved road. The next one east as well as one of the two they passed to the west were to dirt lanes, while the other one west was to a very unkempt-looking set of ruts.

The turn to the Dumbledore estate was a well-kept graveled road. Only a hundred yards up the road, they ran into fields on both sides of the road, where grains were growing, and soon they came to a turn-off to the south. The turn-off was also well-graveled, and Remus, flying

highest, saw the quantity of gravel lessened about fifty yards further down the road, and then turned into a paved drive.

On either side of the lane to the Dumbledore villa were vineyards, showing that they were in slightly warmer climes than England, as Neville identified these as wine grapes. Remus had them put their wands away before proceeding.

The villa quickly came into view. Like most true ancient country villas, this one looked inward, rather than out. It was a large building, three tall floors high, with thick walls and no windows on the ground floor, and narrow ones on the upper floors.

"I thought they didn't live in castles," Harry said. Although not as high as the few medieval castles he had seen, this covered more ground than most.

"It's not really a castle, as you'll see from the inside," Remus answered as he landed. "However, they are built for defense to a degree."

"From those green wizards, whatever they are?" Ron asked.

"Oh, no," Remus answered with a smile. "Those are more thieves and highwaymen, criminals if you will. They tend to attack travelers in more isolated areas than this."

"It's well-warded, too," Harry said, looking over the villa and the territory.

"It is," Remus agreed, "but how can you tell?"

"It's weird. It's never happened before, but I can almost sense them," Harry said frowning.

"You'll learn what that means during our time here," Remus said, "or at least I hope we will."

"Who are you?" a stern voice challenged. A man was now standing in front of the very sturdy-looking front door. Except for being tall and having reddish hair, Harry didn't think this man looked anything like Dumbledore.

"Lord Dumbledore?" Remus asked.

"I am Alton of House Dumbledore," the man answered. "Who are you?"

"I am Remus, and this is Dora, and our students Harry, Luna, Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Ginny. I was told by Albus Dumbledore that we were expected and would be welcome."

"Where is Mordag?"

"Is that your steward?" Alton nodded, and Remus answered, "Hogar, your reeve, told us he was unable to meet us, and that we should come on ahead of the carts."

Alton frowned. He looked at them, and seemed to linger on Harry for a moment. "Carts? How many carts were there?"

"Two."

Alton said, "Wait here." He opened and went through the door. In less than five minutes, he and five other wizards appeared, along with three witches.

"You can probably guess what has happened. We shall go rescue your things. We will need the broomsticks."

"Shall any of us come with you?" Remus offered.

Alton hesitated. "No, thank you."

The six wizards and two of the witches took off, leaving them with the youngest of the three witches. "I am Alicia," the young woman said. She was sturdily built, and looked to be in her early twenties. "I am married to Astor, great great-grandson of the current Lord Dumbledore. I regret that you have been given such a poor welcome to our world." She snapped her fingers, and two younger women, in their late teens, appeared. "These are Rora and Lita, who will be your servants while you stay with us."

She turned to the serving maids. "Take them to the baths. They shall be given refreshments when they meet with his lordship."

Alicia led the eight into a strange new world for all of them, even Remus.



## **Chapter XI**

Alicia guided the group through the villa, until they reached a pair of doors. The maid Rora, who had been exchanging glances with Ron, led the boys through one door, while Lita led Tonks and the girls through the other. Remus dismissed the maid after she showed them into a stone room with benches, much to both Ron and Rora's disappointment.

"Now, just in case you don't understand the immediate set-up," Remus instructed them, "we strip, and I do a quick cleaning charm on the clothes. We sit in a hot room, like a sauna if you're familiar with those." None of the three boys really were, although Harry had a very rough idea.

"We sweat. We get clean. Then we soak in a hot pool and then take a quick dip in a cold one. Now, some of the serving maids will be coming on to you, perhaps strongly. If they do, in one sense it's up to you. If one doesn't, you are not, under any circumstances, to so much as flirt. Understand?"

"Sure," Ron said, "but why? I don't mean why would some come on strong and others won't. I mean, why not flirt and see if one was interested?"

"Some will come on strong because we're wizards, right?" Harry asked.

"Right," Remus answered. "The servants are serfs or slaves. If they bear a magical child, they will be freed. The ones who don't come on to you either aren't interested or more likely already have a magical protector."

"Ah," Ron said.

"Do I need to go over contraceptive charms?" Remus demanded.

Ron blushed, while Harry said, "That shouldn't be necessary, should it, Ron?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you ever want a chance with Hermione. . . ."

"Leave Hermione out of this!" Ron said firmly. "Besides, if it frees someone, how can she complain?"

Harry invaded Ron's personal space. "Just imagine how Ginny would feel if someone did that to her, and how you would respond. That's how I feel about Hermione."

Ron was about to remind his friend that despite Harry's recent growth spurt Ron was almost seven inches taller and at least a stone heavier when he looked into Harry's eyes. He remembered that a fight with Harry might not be a physical one. Ron knew that if Harry could duel Voldemort, he should avoid dueling with Harry.

"And if I've given up on Hermione?"

Harry stepped away, "As long as you make that clear to her first, then just listen to Remus." Harry wasn't about to harass Ron on this.

"Are you prepared to pay for the upkeep of a child, Ron? There's not a lot of charity here," Remus pointed out. "Would you want a child of yours put at that sort of disadvantage? The last time I was here, the going price was a minimum of twelve hundred Galleons. And, if it's not magical, your son would be a field hand, while a girl at best might be taken as a concubine."

"Alright, alright," Ron said, surrendering, at least for the moment.

Remus paused. "I suppose I should say that James left a daughter, a witch, after his first trip here, and that Sirius left five children, four of them magical, over his three trips."

The boys were too embarrassed to pursue the idea any further.

Just after Neville finished stripping and they started toward the hot room, he said, "Err, we are going to be alone for this, right?"

"Well, they obviously could have made changes since the last time I was here, but yes, there should be separate facilities for male and female. There shouldn't be any maids, unless we request them. What other questions do you have?"

"Will you transform here?" Harry asked.

"No," Remus said as they sat in the sauna. "They have werewolves here, but the moon is different. I'll feel miserable, but I won't actually change. I would really prefer that you not mention that I am a werewolf back home." The three boys nodded.

"What do we call this place?" Ron asked.

"All the linked worlds call themselves 'Earth', if that's what you mean. There are nine separate continental areas, the smallest a bit larger than Greenland, the largest about the size of South America. We're right in the middle of one of the more northern continents, called 'Dyrnaid.' The area centered on that magical circle -- there isn't another for more than a hundred and fifty miles in any direction -- is called 'Ruchak,' as are the circle and the town."

"What type of government does it have?" Harry inquired.

Remus shrugged. "That's rather difficult to say. Most of it is rather informal. The towns have an elected Council, and each family is internally quite independent. There are various religious solidities, and those cross the planet. Still, there is no formal government as such, although some of the religious groups keep a general eye on things. One seems to be an informal enforcement group."

"Is that one reason why you didn't stay here, despite the fact you won't change?" Neville asked.

"No, not really." Remus shrugged. "James suggested I stay several times. I said I would consider it after Voldemort was defeated. Well, maybe I will, after he's really destroyed."

Remus showed them how to oil up and then wipe the perspiration and oil of their bodies with stirgils. Remus was pleased to see that hot showers had been added in the warm room, and they took turns taking showers and settling into the hot tub. They went and took a quick dip

into the cold pool, and then went back to the first room. Rora and three other women were waiting for them, all nude. Rora was both the youngest and most attractive.

The embarrassed boys laid down on thick towels already placed on the benches, and the women massaged their upper arms, backs, and legs (Rora made certain she was massaging Ron). The serving maids then gave them manicures and pedicures, and finally anointed them with scented oil.

All four of the wizards enjoyed the process to some degree, although Harry and Neville were both slightly embarrassed by the entire process, and also noted that as Remus chatted with them and the maids, how ignorant and limited the serving maids were. Both realized that it was a limitation brought on by their servile condition.

Ron just enjoyed himself, and wished there was a way to have the same service at home.

Rora showed them to a formal room, Harry thought mostly to keep Ron enticed with her nude body. Alone, Remus said, "Come here. Sometime after the women join us, we will likely have an audience with the current Lord Dumbledore and some of his family. They'll tell us about the trunks after they introduce themselves, so don't ask. Now, there are a number of ways to introduce ourselves. Dumble . . . Albus and I worked out several possible introductions for each of you. Here." He handed them index cards he had kept in his outfit.

At that point, two of the other serving maids who had been massaging them (now dressed) came in with wine, water, and fruit juices, and then left silently. Tonks and the girls were escorted in less than five minutes later. The serving maids then brought in bread, fruit, cheeses, boiled eggs, carrot and celery sticks, and olives.

"Lunch is fairly light here," Remus said, helping himself. "We're likely to be meeting the Dumbledores after we're finished, so eat up." They all started eating, and talked about the day's events, and debating how to announce themselves, which created some heated discussions.

Remus was right. Three serving maids showed up after all of them, other than Ron, were finished eating. They had hot towels, and wiped each visitor's face and hands. Remus made Ron stop eating so that the rest of the villa's inhabitants could get on with things.

As soon as the serving maids left, taking what little food was left with them, to Ron's disappointment, six people (one of them Astor Dumbledore) came into the room. Remus stood and set down his goblet down. The other seven followed his lead.

One was obviously Lord Dumbledore, and he spoke first. "I am Alexander, Lord Dumbledore. I welcome you all to my home, the center of the House of Dumbledore. This is my great grandson and heir, Alton, and his eldest son, Astor, and their wives, Marcia and Alicia."

He turned to a woman swathed in multicolored robes. "This is the Sibyl for this land."

The woman moved to Remus and looked into his eyes, and then moved in turn to each visitor's. When she was finished, Remus stated, "I am Remus, son of House Lupin and a friend of long standing to House Dumbledore. I stand as tutor to these charges."

"I am Nymphadora, better known as Dora, daughter of House Tonks and friend to House Dumbledore. I stand as tutor to these charges."

"I am Harry, Head of House Potter and relative of House Dumbledore, currently under the protection and guardianship of House Moody. I stand as a student of Albus, head of House Dumbledore on my world, and Remus and Dora. These are my friends and companions in many quests."

"I am Ronald, better known as Ron, son of House Weasley and distant relation to House Dumbledore. I stand as a student of Albus, head of House Dumbledore on my world, and Remus and Dora, and friend and companion to Harry."

"I am Hermione, new to the magical world, under the guardianship of House Lovegood and the protection of House Potter. I stand as a student of Albus, head of House Dumbledore on my world, and Remus and Dora, and friend, companion, and advisor to Harry."

"I am Ginevra, better known as Ginny, daughter of House Weasley and distant relation to House Dumbledore. I stand as a student of Albus, head of House Dumbledore on my world, and Remus and Dora, and friend and companion to Harry."

"I am Luna, daughter of House Lovegood. I stand as a student of Albus, head of House Dumbledore on my world, and Remus and Dora, and companion as well as friend of Harry."

"I am Neville, titular Head of House Longbottom. I stand as a student of Albus, head of House Dumbledore on my world, and Remus and Dora, and friend and companion to Harry."

"I welcome you all," Alexander stated formally. He relaxed slightly. "You should know that we recovered your trunks. Who loaded them onto the wagon?"

"I did, sir," Harry answered. Remus leaned over and whispered a correction in his ear.

"You put a charm on them, correct?"

"Yes, my lord, to keep them from rattling and knocking against each other."

"I see. Well, it was fortunate that you put such a strong one on them. The thieves were trying to figure out how to remove them when my people caught up with them." He smiled. "Of course, once they get here, you'll have to remove the charm."

Harry frowned. "I don't understand. The magic held them on, so they couldn't be shifted by accident, but they should be easily moved by hand."

"Ah . . . everyone tried to do it by magic," Astor said. "The servants will try to move them by hand."

"You may all be seated," Alexander said, moving to sit himself. "You are owed an explanation for this mishap."

"This world actually has relatively little contact with yours. As far as I know, I am the only Head of House in anything like regular contact with your world in all Dyrnaid. None of the

few I am aware of in other parts of the world are in any more contact than I. So, advances in your world are not always communicated to ours."

"My potion," Luna whispered, stricken.

"Yes, child. Oh, do not be concerned. It is certainly not your fault. Albus was surprised no one had mentioned it before, and immediately gave us the formula. Now, it just so happens that one family here in Ruchak has a young daughter coming into power. We offered to sell them the potion, nearly at cost, but they were concerned that the potion has never been tested here. And, while the potion was prepared according to the formula, and looks correct, they decided that they wished some of your supply, to compare to what we sold them."

"They couldn't ask?" Harry inquired.

"They chose not to. The Markons do not have a good reputation, and oft prefer to take twisted paths. They suborned our now ex-steward. Well, I wish them the luck of him. They claim to be returning our true reeve and peasants, and if they are unharmed, we shall return theirs. Would you like us to pursue this matter further?"

"Not on our account," Remus answered. "Obviously, we would not presume to advise you on how to deal with the matter."

"I see." His glance included the others. "No comment?"

"Would it be wrong of me to offer one of the vials I brought with me?" Luna asked tentatively. She normally would not have thought twice about offering a vial of the potion. Although time-consuming to make, it was not particularly expensive back home, as it was made in large batches from mostly inexpensive ingredients, and taken in very small quantities. However, a month spent with Harry had taught her a bit of caution.

"Not right away, in any event," Alexander stated. "We don't want to appear weak."

"However, it would be a kindness to the girl," the Sibyl stated. "There are horrors involved on the way to developing the full Gift."

"Let us test one of the vials against what we produced," Alton suggested. "If the tests work as we predict, and a Markon then comes and apologizes to us and to our guests, perhaps we can consider it."

"Perhaps," Alexander agreed. "Astor, will you show our guests the grounds, and then the villa? We shall have decided on rooms by then."

After the octet had left, Alexander turned to the Sibyl. "Have you opinions on our guests?"

"Of course," she answered. "That is the main reason you asked me to be here, after all. Actually, they are much more interesting than I had anticipated. I had thought only this so-called Boy-Who-Lived and perhaps the young Seer would be at all interesting."

"And?"

"Both adults are hiding secrets about themselves they feared I might see. They, and the Boy, have recently lost someone close to them. Remus is a scholar and a fairly powerful wizard, and a man who hides his passions, often even from himself. He is attracted to the woman, but does not acknowledge it even to himself. The woman is very attracted to him, but is uncertain what to do about it. She is nearly Remus' equal in power, and she is very skilled if raw and awkward. Remus loves the boy, and would be dangerous to cross. He would be a formidable warrior no matter what, but if his passions are aroused, he would be calmly deadly."

"The redhead, Ronald, is certainly above average in power, but probably the weakest in the group. He has a warrior's heart, and a mind capable of strategic and tactical insight. He has never developed it, and does not wish to work hard to do so. He is here only out of friendship. Other than that, I only sensed his lust after one of the maids, which was very strong."

"Typical for his age," Alton said.

"I have the feeling that the redheads come from a poor family, but that is not certain. His sister has had strong feelings for the Boy, but she has moved them towards the third boy, Neville. She also feels under an obligation to Harry."

Alton snickered, "That name."

"We shall discuss that later," Alexander said.

"Neville is besotted by Ginevra. He is certainly powerful, but his powers feel checked. We shall have to talk with Remus about that. Ginevra is nearly as powerful as Neville, but knows how to use it."

"Luna is in love with Harry and is very attracted to the girl Hermione. Luna is a true, full Seer. Her other powers are strong, although she is actually only more powerful than Ron in this group. I should add that Hermione has not a trace of the Gift, while Ginevra and Neville only have a touch of it. Harry and especially Ronald have stronger Gifts, but neither is really strong enough to be really trainable."

"The mundane-born girl, Hermione. . . ." the Sibyl shook her head. "Remus is a true scholar, Luna and Harry are brilliant and Ron should be if he had any discipline, while the other two are well above average. Hermione, however, has the most brilliant mind I have encountered, except perhaps for Albus."

"Indeed? Most impressive," Alexander agreed.

"She is. I am not certain if she or Neville would be the second most powerful in this group. She has a great command over her power, and all eight of these visitors would be dangerous if cornered. If they were fighting for each other, I would say that seven of them would be quite formidable."

"Seven?"

She shuddered. "If Harry's full, adult powers were aroused, only the gods could withstand his fury."

"That Albus already told me. I am glad to have his opinion reenforced."

"Hermione has also suffered even more intense and recent grief than the others, which masks many of her feelings for the others. I believe she has had strong feelings for Ronald, and has very strong feelings for Harry, Ginevra, and Luna, but I cannot tell what those feelings are."

"Her parents were murdered just a few days ago by their time line, which account for the problems you are having in reading her. Harry's mundane relatives were murdered about a month ago. His last guardian, who was Remus' close friend and Dora's close relative, was murdered less than two months ago."

"Then we must make certain they heal," Marcia stated.

"Agreed," the Sibyl said, before going on, "Harry was very hard to read, other than his power. He is the most powerful wizard I have ever encountered, nearly equal to Albus already, long before he has reached his full powers. Like his friend Neville, he has odd checks on his magic. If he can overcome then, he will outshine most wizards in history."

"And?"

"And . . . very little else. I could read that grief he has in common with Remus and Dora. I know he cares for the others, and that he has been physically intimate with Luna and is almost as in love with her as she is with him. He loves Hermione in a similar, although less sexual way, and loves the others as true friends do. His mental shields are most impressive, although he really has none on his emotions. I was not about to press a young wizard of his power."

"I suppose I should go assign them rooms," Marcia said.

"I shall help," the Sibyl said. None one looking at them would know that they had actually been fraternal twins, although, as the Sibyl, one had technically renounced all family ties.

The octet found the portions of the estate they toured very impressive. The villa itself covered a great amount of ground, perhaps three hundred yards by a hundred, built around a courtyard and two peristyle gardens. The second peristyle and the building around it had been added since Remus' first visit.

The group was led to a stretch of rooms on the third floor which overlooked the first peristyle. Each room was therefore off a veranda of sorts. They were pleasantly surprised to find that each large room had a modern-built in toilet, sink, and small shower built into a small room in the back. (Hermione had sniffed and said it reminded her of an American motel room, except for the small fireplaces. Hermione then had to explain the reference to Ron and Neville.)

Ron's room was first. Harry and Luna next had rooms and were joined to a sitting room in between them (just another bedroom, but with doors leading to their bedrooms). Hermione's room was next. Tonks and Remus were next, with the same arrangement as Harry and Luna. Ginny's room was next, and Neville's last. The bedroom next to Neville's was a maid's room, and there would be a maid on duty at all time, if they should ring for one.

Astor reminded them before leaving that it was now past mid-afternoon, and that dinner would be at dusk. Proper clothes had been provided for dinner.

Remus gathered them into his and Tonks' sitting room. He gave them a fifteen minute crash course in dinner manners (or at least the dinner manners of two centuries before), and sent them off to take short naps. He wanted everyone to be sharp for dinner.

Just before they broke up, Hermione asked, "By the way, what day is it here?"

"They don't bother with days of the week. They have a three-hundred and sixty-six day calender, with a leap year every five years. Their months match ours, although they still call July and August Quinctilis and Sextilis. Today is actually the First of May, and we need to leave early in the morning of the Fifth of December." Remus looked at them. "What is it?"

"I think . . . we've just realized we're really here for seven months," Hermione said.

"I guess we'll have lots of time to finish our summer homework and revisions," Ginny said to Luna.

"Oh . . . Harry helped me finish those right before his birthday," Luna said absently.

Hermione beamed, and Ron shook his head in sorrow.



## **Chapter XII**

May 1, Day 1  
continued

Hermione, who had a general idea of the differences, was somewhat pleased that dinner was more medieval than Roman, that is sitting up rather than lying down to eat.

The dining room was large. While not on the scale of the great hall of Hogwarts, it was serving forty that night and could easily seat a hundred and twenty. There were twenty at the head table, while the octet occupied a separate table set at a right angle to the head table. Twelve lesser guests occupied a similar table. Astor had mentioned that most were leaving after that evening, and that the total number would be well under twenty the next day and around a dozen after that.

The serving maids learned quickly. After serving each of the guests at their table, they clustered the platters near Ron, who went through at least two servings of everything he particularly liked.

Although Remus disapproved, Tonks encouraged everyone to follow Ron's example. "After all," she concluded, "we're going to be training hard."

"I don't even know what all this is," Harry commented.

"Well," Ron joked, "I know most of it's good."

"They keep what in our world was a Roman custom," Remus commented. "Each dinner starts off with eggs. . . ."

"Do you know what are in these?" Ron asked, reaching for another.

"Only you would still eat an appetizer when the rest of us are on our fourth course," Hermione scolded.

"It's alright," Remus said. "The fact that the rest of us are eating properly, especially Ginny, means that either Ron is unnaturally hungry or a boor, not that we're barbarians."

Ron scowled, but didn't reach for any of the three remaining eggs again.

"Anyway, they took large boiled, hollowed goose eggs; minced chives, mustard, hot sausage, a bit of sweet pickle, and the yolk together; stuffed the mix back in along with a boiled quail egg for the center; and replaced the ends. They were quite good, but Ron! Five?"

"They are good!" Ron protested.

"You could have had more salad," Hermione pointed out. "After all, the maids probably only get left-overs."

"The salad is too bitter, there're no tomatoes, and there's just oil and vinegar to dress it," he complained as he picked through his second helping of the fourth course, a small six vegetable pie with some pork in it.

"They don't have potatoes, tomatoes, or maize, at least in this part of the world," Remus pointed out.

"Except for pickles, Ron mostly just eats things which are overly sweet, salty, or just plain hot," Ginny teased.

"Well, the bread is great, even if there isn't any butter, and the soup wasn't bad," Ron said.

"Again, dip the bread in a little oil if you think it needs it. The soup was quite good, chicken and a little skimmed goose stock, and plain noodles," Remus agreed.

"I didn't know you were such a gourmet," Tonks teased. "You never took me anyplace other than pubs or fish-and-chips!"

"I took you to the best pub in London for shepherd's pie," Remus stated. "I tried to warn you off the steak-and-kidney." He turned to Harry. "I was poor most of the time after I left school, but not totally broke. Your father had arranged for me to have a place rent free, at least until you're seventeen. I had a nice herb garden, and learned to make things taste good, even if there wasn't much of it."

Remus next looked down towards Neville, reminding him, "Remember, this is just an ordinary red wine. The custom here is to water it three parts water to one wine."

"Right," Neville agreed.

"Ah," Ron said with a real smile. Four roasted lambs and two roasted sheep were being carried in, along with platters of roasted parsnips, carrots, and turnips. Ron grabbed another small loaf of bread and waited for the meat.

"The last course is of course the sweet," Remus reminded them, "and apples are always one choice. When that comes in, don't take any other food, just finish what you have."

"Alright," Ron complained. He smiled as he was served the foreleg of one of the lambs.

Rora flirted with Ron as the group went to their bedchambers. Ron was caught by both Harry's and Hermione's eye, blushed, and went to bed alone.

May 2, Day 2

Astor met with the group as they were eating breakfast in the study between Remus and Tonks' rooms. "We do have one minor problem," Astor said after he had greeted the group and had a seat.

"And what's that?" Remus asked.

"Harry's name."

"What's wrong with my name?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"Nothing, in your culture, I'm sure," Astor said in a placating voice. "However, here, as you may not have noticed yet, however they might be spelled all male names end in a consonant sound, all women's end in a vowel. Now, while there is no woman named 'Harry' that I have ever heard of, it still sounds like a girl's name. It may cause some difficulties outside of this villa."

"Great," Harry groused.

"Is it short for anything?"

"'Henry', which doesn't help," Remus said.

"It could also stand for 'Harold'," Tonks suggested.

"I don't think so," Harry replied.

"We could call you Hank," Ginny teased. Harry gave her an evil look.

"Your middle name is James," Hermione suggested tentatively.

"No!" Harry and Remus both answered.

"Horace? Harcourt? Harrison? Harthecnut?" Ron teased.

"I swear, I'll hurt you," Harry retorted. "How about we call you 'Ronnie', so I don't stand out?"

Ron held his hands up in surrender. "No thanks."

"Is the fact that I'm from, well, where I'm from a major secret?" Harry asked.

"No, but your name could cause challenges later on. We'd rather avoid that."

"Challenges?" Neville asked, before anyone else could.

Astor shrugged. "You're going to be here a long time. You are not confined to the villa and the immediate estate. A duel may not be fought for no reason, but not to be willing to stand up to an insult may easily escalate any meeting into a problem. From June through the winter solstice there could be a fair number of males looking for chances of glory."

"Oh . . . great." Harry paused. "Are you sure I can't just be Harry, at least to my friends?"

"A feminine nickname is acceptable, as long as you refuse to answer to it from anyone who is not a close friend."

"Okay," Harry grumbled, "Harold it is."

"Now that that is settled," Astor went on, "here's the program for the next two weeks. Remus said that you had a physical conditioning program?"

"Just walking and light weight training," Harry answered.

"Fine. I run every morning before breakfast. Magical power is one thing, but dueling is also physically exhausting, and fighting even more so. Any of you are welcome to join me. After breakfast until it's time for Luna's potion will be devoted to dueling. Your two tutors, my father, and I will be working with you the next two weeks. By then, Father and Lord Alexander will have a good idea of your strengths and weaknesses, and we'll move on from there."

"From then until after lunch is free time. I know you are still formal students, so you may wish to take that time for your school studies. Our magical schools only have five years as a rule, but everyone will understand the concept of continuing on. A few do here as well, as preliminaries to some magical apprenticeships. After lunch, we may have formal studies arranged for you as well after the two weeks. For now, we will teach you apparation."

The teens looked surprised.

"Apparation is easier here," Remus said. "No Muggles to worry about, if you mess up and apparate next to somebody's cooking stove. Apologize, ask for a location, and try again."

"Then it's to the baths, and a civilized dinner," Astor said with a smile. "So, shall we see where you are in your dueling abilities?"

"Well," Alexander asked Alton and Astor at lunch, "how bad are they?"

"What makes you believe they are poor duelers?" the Sibyl asked.

"They have had no direct instruction in this," Alexander said simply. "They may know some of the spells, but that is different than actual dueling."

"True," Alton agreed. "I was fully prepared to find we had to start from scratch, despite their experiences."

"You won't have to?"

"No, my lord," Alton answered. He considered for a moment, and went on. "It is true, they have little sense of formal dueling, and we will work on that. We will, however, spend as much time in magical combat, which is of course very different than stylized dueling."

"I take it, unlike those who go through our training, they are more prepared for combat than dueling?"

"Exactly, my lord."

"Well, evaluate them primarily as fighters, if you wish."

"All have talent," Alton acknowledged. "Let me work my way up. Neville has a lot of potential, but is currently by far the worst one-on-one fighter and an even worse duelist. Give him the job of protecting someone, however, and he is a terrier going after a rat. He knows how to fight, he just does not quite believe it."

"Hermione is talented and knowledgeable, but she over-thinks. Even someone as smart as she is needs time to think some things through, which is not good in an all-out fight. She needs to react, not think. I believe she will always be mediocre in one-on-one combat or dueling, but could learn to contribute a lot in a group fight."

"Ron has the potential to be an excellent fighter. He may be the best one-on-one fighter right now, other than Harold. Ron's problem is that he takes too many chances. One-on-one, they may work out, but he is too unpredictable. No one could rely on him for cover in a real fight."

"A natural point man?"

"Exactly, but of course, in real combat. . . ."

"Those often people end up dead. Go on."

"Luna is quite competent. She, and to some degree Neville and Hermione, lack a true competitive nature, especially in this area. I was therefore surprised to see how efficient Luna is during combat. Harold has helped give them some basic training. His assessment is that both Hermione's and Luna's minds work at a faster speed than the vast majority of people. When it comes to practicing for combat, where Hermione spends lots of time considering the theory behind the spell, Luna tends to play with the spells, looking for variations. At first I thought her mediocre, but a whispered suggestion from Harold changed her demeanor and she was quite ruthless. It will never be her nature, but she can get the job done when needs be."

"Ginny has that competitive drive more than any of the others. I would also judge that in actual combat, she would be the most merciless."

"Go on."

"Harold . . . he was amazing to watch."

"That good?"

"That good and that lucky, my lord! He seems to know by instinct where an attack is coming from. He is a natural, with the best reflexes I have ever seen. Dora, who is quite capable, was amazed, as were we. And the boy is powerful! Astor made a mistake with him. . . ."

"I teased him about a hex he tried to use on me," Astor said. "It was a simple sleeping spell that he said Albus had given him just before they left. I pointed out that he could never use it in a duel because it is so easily blocked. In the next round, an open fight, he let go a barrage, stingers and stunners, but also this sleeping hex. They were coming so fast, I could only defend. He must have sent over a hundred and fifty hexes in less than two minutes. He weakened my shields with the barrage of the first two, and then burst my shield with the sleeping hex, which should have been impossible." Astor shook his head. "He needs a lot of work learning a larger range of spells, especially shields. He needs a lot more confidence. And then he could terrorize his enemies."

"I don't think Harry, excuse me, Harold, will ever be the type to go out and terrorize his enemies," the Sibyl said.

"No," Alton agreed. "No, I doubt he would set off to terrorize anyone, unless he was under truly extreme emotional stress. However, when he is finished training here, he will bring terror to those who seek to kill him and to injure his friends."

Hermione made certain that the maids serving Ron at the baths that afternoon supplied him with a fair amount of fruit. That would take the edge of his appetite at dinner (she hoped).

"Are you sure that was a good idea?" Tonks asked as the four young women sat in their hot room.

"Why?"

"Because that maid with the soft eyes and big tits has her eyes on Ron, or don't you understand that aspect of this culture?" Ginny asked.

"What aspect is that?"

Tonks sighed. "She's a slave, or at least unfree. If Ron sleeps with her, she is under his protection while he's here. She moves into his room and just serves him. If he gets her pregnant, and she has a magical child, she's freed, and Ron is stuck with the bill."

"What bill?" Ginny asked.

"The bill for raising and educating the child," Tonks answered. "Remus said it was a minimum of twelve hundred Galleons when he was last here."

"You mean Remus. . . ." Hermione started.

"NO!" Tonks calmed down and said, "No, but James left one child, and Sirius five."

Hermione tried to shrug it off. "Why tell me? We're not dating."

"And?" Luna prodded.

"And if he sleeps with her, we probably never will even date casually," Hermione acknowledged. "Still, that is up to Ron."

"Does Harry know?" Ginny asked. "About his half-sister, I mean."

"It was over two hundred years ago by their time-line," Tonks reminded her.

"He knows," Luna said. "His half-sister died some eighty years ago. All his nieces and nephews are dead as well. None of their descendants live in Ruchak, and neither do any of Sirius'."

"Oh. . . ."

"Alton told Harry that one of their descendants -- some of them have intermarried -- might come help train him, but that it's uncertain."

"He didn't say anything," Hermione said, almost pouting.

"He wasn't really certain what to make of all this, or how to feel," Luna pointed out.

Hermione frowned. "I hope Ron doesn't take that as a license to, well. . . ."

"He idealized Sirius almost as much as Harry," Ginny agreed. She looked at Luna, who was looking pensive. "What?"

"How would Ron pay for the child?" Luna asked in a tentative voice. She knew that money was a sore topic for all the Weasley children.

"He couldn't," Ginny admitted. 1200 Galleons were worth less in their world than this one, but Ron wouldn't have access to that much cash, and neither would the Weasley family, assuming they could be appealed to through the time difference.

"It would be a debt of honor," Tonks said softly. Hermione wasn't totally certain of all the implications of what that meant, but saw the others took the idea very seriously indeed.

"Harry would have to loan him the money," Hermione said. "It would almost kill Ron to have to ask, but that would be the only way."

"Let's hope Ron can keep it in his pants, or at least under his tunic," Ginny stated.

Hermione decided she had to inform Ron, for his own good, what they had discussed.

That night, Hermione knocked softly on Harry's door. When there was no answer, she tried his sitting room, and then Luna's room. Hermione knew that it was not quite time for Luna's potion.

"Come in, Hermione" Luna called after a few seconds.

"I won't ask how you knew it was. . . ."

"Come on in," Luna said.

"And shut the door," Harry added.

Hermione did both, blushing as she did so. Luna was seated on her bed, nude. Harry was at least in his undershorts, and was sitting behind Luna, brushing her hair. Hermione was not sure if she was more embarrassed by their state of undress or her own nightgown, summer dressing gown, and her favorite fuzzy pink slippers -- warm wear for the weather that night.

"Don't be embarrassed, either of you," Luna commanded.

"I'm not," Harry said.

Luna patted the bed next to her. "What's wrong?" she asked. Hermione had obviously been crying.

Hermione sat on the bed. "I was just talking with Ron."

"About Rora?" Harry asked, going back to brush Luna's hair.

Hermione nodded. "He . . . he yelled at me," Hermione said with a snuffle. "He said . . . he said that the only difference between me now and myself when we met was that I have . . . that I have bigger tits and smaller teeth, but that I'm always looking for the dirt on his nose, and not for what he's doing right."

"Ronald wants someone who will admire him," Luna said simply while Harry glowered about the insults. "Rora admires him, and thinks he can give her what she wants."

"Freedom," Hermione said simply.

"Not as such," Luna said. "Freedom is abstract. If she were to be 'set free' tonight, what would she do? She can't get a job, you know. I asked Remus, and he said that even the Squib and Muggle merchants and crafts people prefer owning slaves to hiring those few free people looking for work. No, she wants an easier life, with some security. If she has a magical child, she only works for that child, and if her lover isn't around, she will have an easier time finding another magical lover after having a magical child. That child will have to support her once it reaches seventeen. Remember, even if she doesn't have a child, her duties will be cut while she's serving Ron."

"It's not right," Hermione said, tears in her eyes.

"Perhaps not, but trying to stop Ronald will just injure your friendship with him," Luna pointed out.

"I guess, if he prefers sleeping with her to waiting for us, I can't do anything other than accept it," Hermione said sadly. She sighed. "I knew it was over a week ago, but it's still hard to acknowledge it."

"But he can't sleep with that girl!" Harry protested.

"He shouldn't, but why can't he?" Hermione demanded. "You aren't going to try and stop him, are you?"

"No, but he knows he can't afford to sponsor a child here," Harry pointed out.

"I know," Hermione said. "He pointed that out, with a fair amount of, well, I'd have to call it poison in his voice."

Harry thought hard. Hermione was about to say something, but Luna placed a finger on Hermione's lips and shook her head.



Finally, Harry said, "Here's what I'm going to do."

Fifteen minutes later, there was a sharp knock on Ron's door. For a moment, hope flared in Ron's libido, then he realized that Rora wouldn't knock like that, and Hermione was unlikely to, either. "Come in?" he said warily.

Ron swallowed nervously when Harry marched into the room. Harry had changed in the time since the school year had ended. Gone was the bitter and angry Harry of their Fifth year. Gone too was the shy, sometimes tentative Harry of their first four years. This Harry was confident. Not arrogant, not superior, but a Harry who had learned much about himself, and his place in the world.

It was slightly intimidating. The Harry who had trained that morning was a Harry who could have protected the group against most of the Death Eaters the previous June. The Harry who was walking into Ron's room might have had a shot at defeating them.

"Harry?" Ron asked, a tiny bit scared.

"You hurt Hermione," Harry said, obviously holding back his anger. "I think I understand at least some of what you're going through, and I know she can be bossy and tries to run our lives, but did you have to deliberately hurt her?"

"I lost my temper," Ron admitted. "You know, as much as I like her, and as attractive as I find her, she just . . . grates at times."

"You like Hermione," Harry said. "The problem is, she was in love with you."

Ron face-faulted.

"And yes, past tense," Harry growled. "She has been dealing with that for a few weeks. Here." He held out a piece of paper.

"What's that?"

"A Gringotts check. I'm giving each of you twelve thousand Galleons. It's all from the money Sirius left me, so don't worry, I'm not being left short. I was going to wait until we got back, but I understand these are negotiable with the goblins here. I'm not going to comment on anything you do, if you decide to do anything, with Rora. But don't throw it in Hermione's face, Ron. I care for you both, but don't hurt her again."

"I'll do my best. Harry, you don't have to. . . ."

"I know I don't, but you're my friend. Just remember, though, if you hurt her badly again, I'll make certain you never have children."

Ron swallowed nervously.

Harry came back into Luna's room, where Luna was laying on the bed, still naked but now giggling.

"She won't stop," Hermione said in a worried tone.

"The potion does that to her when she's really tired. She also tends. . . "

"Harry-berry!" Luna exclaimed. She tried to jump off the bed and fell into his arms instead.

"She tends to be rather affectionate," Harry said as Luna started nuzzling Harry's chest through his dressing-gown.

"I guess I'd better. . . ."

Luna released Harry and embraced Hermione in a bear hug that she couldn't escape, ". . . stay with us tonight!" Luna declared. "You're sad, and you need to be with people who love you." She pulled at Hermione's open dressing gown and nightgown, and then licked Hermione's bare shoulder. "We both love you, you know."

"Luna!" Hermione gasped.

"You taste yummy, Hermie!"

"She'll fall asleep in ten or fifteen minutes or so," Harry said. "Come on."

"You can't mean. . . ."

Harry shrugged. "Unless you'll feel very uncomfortable." He embraced the shocked Hermione and the cooing, giggling Luna, who had a very firm grip around Hermione and was now nibbling on Hermione's shoulder and neck.

Harry waved the lights off. Harry and Hermione steered Luna to the bed, and Harry stripped off his dressing gown and shorts.

"Harry. . . ."

"Hermione," Luna asked, "aren't you hot in all that?"

"Just be comfortable and lie down," Harry said. "We'll keep Luna between us. She'll snuggle and snooze pretty soon. She's really exhausted."

Hermione stripped off everything but her light nightgown and slipped into the huge bed next to Luna. Luna snuggled between them, and they quickly settled down.

Hermione was almost asleep when she heard a slurping sound, and felt Luna's head bobbing.

"Luna!" Hermione hissed slightly, greatly embarrassed.

"Merlin, you're huge tonight!" Luna enthused.

"That's my elbow, sweetheart," Harry said gently. "Go to sleep."

And they all did.

## **Chapter XIII**

May 3, Day 3

Hermione woke up feeling warm and secure. When she realized that the feelings were because she and Luna were snuggled very intimately together, Hermione's eyes went wide and she started to maneuver her way out of the entanglement.

"You don't have to be quite so gentle," Harry said softly, coming out of the small bathroom, dressed to run. "She's usually a pretty deep sleeper."

Hermione blushed and moved her hand off of Luna's arse.

"If you're shy, you might want to pull your nightgown, too," Harry teased.

Hermione blushed more, and pulled it down over her bare hips.

"Hermione, you don't have to be shy," Harry said, "and neither Luna nor I are jealous people. As long as you don't try to split us apart, we can all be as close as you want."

Hermione made some inarticulate noises. Harry leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Sorry, didn't mean to embarrass you, or necessarily mean THAT close. See you at breakfast."

Hermione watched Harry leave.

"You look confused," Luna said, making Hermione jump.

"You're awake!"

"Obviously."

"What just happened?"

"None of you realize how important you are to Harry," Luna said.

"What does that mean?"

"Do you know what the power is that Harry will use to destroy Voldemort, in some form or other?"

"No, not really," Hermione admitted.

"It's love, at least in part. Harry has the ability to use love to power his magic. He's a powerful wizard without that, of course. He destroyed two powerful wizards which a curse that should have just severely injured them, and that wasn't done by love. Yet when he realized he really loved me in mid-July, his power jumped, and because there was little else to channel it into, he became more adept at wandless magic than anyone I have ever heard of."

"Yet who has loved Harry before I did this summer? Not in the abstract, and not from afar. Dumbledore might think he would qualify, but he would not as his love is marred from his using Harry. Remus should qualify, but holds back, because that is how he deals with his curse." Luna paused a moment. "He might get better, now that he and Tonks are moving

towards each other. Mrs. Weasley just overwhelms him. Ginny scared him a little two years ago, because he wasn't ready for romantic love any more than she really was back then. So, who hugged him and fussed at him and who looked out for him? Who cared for him before I did? Who believed in him, before I did?"

"I did," Hermione said softly. "I . . . I do."

Luna nodded. "He loves you. He loves me. Right now, he loves us differently. It's up to you, if you want that to change that at all."

"Luna, I try very hard to be tolerant of your ideas. . . ."

"Hermione, tell me. While true polyamory is almost unknown outside of literature, is polygamy?"

"No. . . ."

"In fact, would you say that, at one time, it was even common?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

"It is unknown, even today?"

"Well, it is in Britain," Hermione pointed out.

"Well, it's not legal in your old world, but it is probably unofficially practiced even in Muggle Britain. It is far from common in wizarding culture, and many even look down on it, but it is not unknown." Luna shrugged. "At least it's legal in magical Britain, under certain circumstances, if that makes any difference to you."

"But how could any woman with any self-respect. . . ."

"Look into your heart, Hermione. We have lots of time here to decide our paths when we go home; nothing has to be decided this month, let alone today." Luna smiled. "And tell me, are two women in love uncommon in the Muggle world?"

"No, of course not. There's nothing wrong with being gay, but. . . ."

"Why would anyone not a dark wizard think there was anything wrong with someone being happy and care free?" Luna asked with a frown.

"Sorry. That's a Muggle euphemism for homosexuality."

"Oh. So it is accepted in the Muggle world, then?"

"That depends on whom you're talking to. I'd say it's more grudgingly tolerated overall, but there are many people who have very strong feelings against it. Is it different in the magical world?" Hermione had never really inquired into the sexual mores of the magical world.

"Well, some people do joke that that's where hag's come from," Luna admitted, "but aside from that, it's very tolerated, especially amongst witches. There are several powerful

sisterhoods where all the members are at least bisexual. Purely homosexual wizards are frowned upon, since they do not perpetuate families, but bisexual ones are moderately tolerated." Luna looked at Hermione. "I know you're attracted to Harry. I think you're also attracted to me."

"I . . . I don't know right now. And you're not suggesting a relationship between the two of us, you're suggesting a three-way relationship between us and Harry."

"True," Luna admitted, "or at least our having a relationship at the same time Harry and I are in a relationship, with you and Harry being very close, if not, as he said, **that** close. Just think about the possibilities, possibilities that you might enjoy, without fear of censure. Now come on. Let's get dressed and do our hair, so that we may tease Ronald."

"He's going to be touchy about the money," Hermione warned. "He'll know that we know."

Luna smiled. "Yes he will, won't he? We won't have to say a word."

"No Tonks this morning?" Ginny asked Remus. She knew Ron was likely asleep, but Luna and Hermione had just come in.

"She's off running with Har . . . Harold, Astor, and some others," Remus said, eyeing some of the maids serving breakfast. He wanted to keep formal in front of them.

When the last maid left, Hermione asked, "I'm curious, aren't there any house elves here? I mean, I don't like to see anyone in this position, but why would they use people if there are magical elves?"

"There aren't many house elves in this world, not nearly enough to go around. I would expect in a villa like this, and this would be low-average in size, that there might be as few as two or as many as six. They aren't quite enslaved here. They have some rights, and work more on a Hogwarts schedule than, say, a Lucius Malfoy-ordained schedule. Muggles, or as they would say, mundanes, are much more common." Remus shrugged. "In many ways, this is almost a perfect Pure-Blood world. There are very strong taboos against mixed-marriages. They aren't quite illegal for marriages with Squibs or free individuals, but it's close. Half-bloods and Muggle-born are accepted, but unless there is a father who can pay or a sponsor, they don't have an easy time financially."

"How about socially?" Hermione asked.

"That depends in large part of the father or sponsor, and even more on their power," Remus said.

"Why do you keep saying 'the father'?" Ginny asked.

"Because if a witch slept with a mundane, or even a Squib, she had better be powerful enough to protect him," Remus said. "He'd likely be killed."

Remus turned on the grumbling Hermione. "Think back on medieval history. If a lady and a peasant had had sex, what would her ladyship's family have had done to him?"

"Nothing good," Hermione admitted, "and she'd probably be married off in a minute, if they could find anyone, or sent off to a convent."

"No world, no society, is perfect," Remus reminded them. "We're here to study. If you think you're morally superior, then act that way and lead by example."

"Ah. . . ." Luna said, pouring a glass of peach juice, "the most difficult way to influence people."

"Exactly," Remus agreed.

Ron came stumbling in a few minutes later, and looked at them blurrily. "No Harry?" he managed to say.

"He's out running," Hermione said.

Ron walked over to the buffet-style breakfast. "I like breakfasts here," he managed to say. He spooned a large spoonful of oatmeal and another of porridge into a large bowl, adding cream and honey, and then he peeled and diced a dried apple into the resulting mix. He also took four fried eggs, two slices of ham, and a small loaf of bread, which he cut, making two thick sandwiches. With that and a tall glass of milk, Ron sat. "They never invented sandwiches here?"

"Peasants rarely tend towards finger foods in any culture," Remus said drily. "Sandwiches are rather declassé for the wizards, and so the merchant classes aren't likely to make them, either."

"Oh," Ron said. He thought for a moment, shrugged, sloshed some mustard on his bread and then bit into a sandwich.

"That's what I admire about you, Ronald," Luna said approvingly.

"What's that?" they suspected Ron asked, since his mouth was full.

"You do what you think is right."

Ron swallowed. "It's just a sandwich."

"Is that all it is? You refuse to change just to please social norms, because you feel you're doing what you think you should do. It can be a dangerous principle, but in this case, I admire it. Everyone should follow that example."

Ron stared at Luna, and at the blushing Hermione, and decided not to pursue things any further.

A few minutes later, Harry and Tonks came in, still rather sweaty from their run, but cooled down enough to eat. Harry jerked his thumb towards Ron and said to Remus. "I thought you told us Mon, err, two days ago that eating sandwiches were bad manners."

"Wha?" Ron mumbled through the first bit of his second sandwich.

"You remember, in the sauna, err, hot room, when he was giving us the lecture on all the cultural dos and don'ts."

"Really?"

"That was before Ron decided to make sandwiches a statement of personal liberty," Remus teased. When Ron tried to protest, Remus added, "Seriously Ron, if you want to eat a sandwich for breakfast with us, go right ahead. Just not at meals with other people. Alright?"

"Alright," Ron agreed.

"In that case. . . ." Harry said, and proceeded to make himself a sandwich as well, "we'll have to get some sharp cheeses for breakfast tomorrow."

#### A Brief Interlude Back in London

"Mummy," seven-year-old Joyce Thomas said, "there's a man at the door asking for you or Dean."

"Is it that same man that came by last month?"

"No, Mummy."

"Well, go get Dean, and I'll see who it is."

"Yes, Mummy."

Dean was just coming into the front parlor as his mother opened the door. He heard her say, "Raphael?" and then he saw her fall to the floor.

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"And how did our young warriors do today?" Alexander asked.

"As you would expect them to perform, my lord," Alton answered. "There was no real change from yesterday. After all, they were really trying then. Today merely enforced that."

"I see. So, yesterday really was an accurate assessment for all of them?"

"Yes, my lord."

"How did they do with their first practical attempts at apparation, then?"

"Well, none of them splinched," Alton allowed.

"That's encouraging, I suppose," Alexander acknowledged.



"Hermione of course had the theory completely down before we even started today," Alton went on. "Luna wasn't far behind. All of them understood the principles by the time we started the practical lesson today."

"An intelligent group," Marcia suggested.

"True," Alton agreed. "I think the problem Hermione and Harold have is that the idea is still somewhat new to them. They've seen it done, they know it can be done, but can't quite accept it."

"I beg your pardon?" Marcia questioned.

"Remember, the magical world is hidden in their realm," Alton said. "Neither Harold nor Hermione knew of magic until they were nearly eleven. Whereas any peasant child would see us apparating around, the idea is alien to these two."

"The poor things," Marcia said, shaking her head.

"Anyway, remember that except for Hermione, they also weren't expecting to learn this for another year or so. Ginny and Luna are just barely old enough to be taught even here."

"But are they teachable?" Alexander asked.

"Yes, but it might take the full two weeks to get them truly proficient."

"Well, that was why Albus suggested we work them every day," Alexander said with a shrug. In his experience, his distant uncle was rarely more than marginally off in his assessments.

"I had hoped for better," Alton merely said.

"No matter." Alexander turned to Astor. "I take it the peasant exchange went off with no problems?"

"Yes, my lord. Dalton made the exchange, and said that Julius and Lucius were behind the attempt. Both have left the area, although young Telia was left under Dalton's care."

"It's good that the darker Markons have left. Did Dalton mention when they might be expected back?"

"After the Equinox, but before the Winter Solstice. Lucius is expected to lead the Outer Celebration, after all. The younger ones will likely be here for the summer."

"True," Alexander agreed. "Very well, you may inform Dalton that the potions matched, and that we may arrange -- note, **may** arrange -- for a meeting between young Telia and Luna, along with the Sibyl sometime before the Summer Solstice."

"Yes, my lord."

Alexander frowned. "The travelers leave on December Fifth, correct?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Suggest to Dalton that I would not care to run into his cousins before December . . . Eleventh."

"Yes, my lord."

"Did Dalton mention where Lord Markon is?" Alton asked.

"He is on their estates in Gusar," Astor replied.

"Most of those are on the coast, not just near it, aren't they?" Alexander mused. "I wonder if he's there looking into that outbreak of piracy . . . or if he's behind it."

"You can never tell with the Markons," Alton agreed. "Young Dalton is about the only decent one high in the family these days." He turned to his son. "I know you two have been friends since you started school together, but just remember, he might disagree with much that his family does, but he will never betray them."

"I know, but his family, well, except for Lucius, and Julius whenever he's with Lucius, aren't evil."

"True, but the old lord is nearly a hundred and eighty," Alexander pointed out. "It is up in the air if Dalton's grandfather Gerard will be the heir, or if Lucius or Julius will be named. If it is either of those two, Dalton will be a very compromised situation."

"I understand, my lord."

That night, Neville poked his head out his door into the veranda. He looked up and down, and seeing no one, quietly shut his door and tapped very lightly on Ginny's door.

Ginny opened the door quickly, pulled Neville in, and shut the door.

"Ginny, are you sure. . . ."

"Yes," Ginny stated with total conviction, "I am very certain I know what I want, where I want it, and who I want it with. Are you?"

Neville replied, in a quavering voice, "Yes. . . ."

"My, that sounds loving and romantic," Ginny sniped.

Neville winced. "Sorry. I just wanted to make certain. . . ."

"I **said** I was certain," Ginny hissed.

Neville looked terrified for a moment, and then said, "Are you nervous, Ginny?"

Ginny scowled, but then admitted, "Alright, yes, I'm nervous."

"So am I," Neville admitted in a soft, gentle voice, "but I don't have any doubts." He held out his hands, and Ginny took them. They moved into a tight hug. "So, if you're really sure, let's go to bed."

Ginny moved back and punched Neville in the shoulder.

"Ow!"

"I said I'm sure enough! Now, get in that bed!"

"Yes, dear," Neville said, rubbing his shoulder. Ginny hit hard.

Hermione came out of the shower in her bedroom, drying her face on one of the large towels and just wearing her dressing gown. She liked the sauna, but felt cleaner after a quick shower with soap and lots of hot water than after the slow ritual of the modified Roman bath.

Moving towards the bed, Hermione draped the towel on the door handle to the bathroom, and jumped slightly when she saw Luna sitting on her bed.

"Hi!" Luna said.

"What . . . what are you doing here?" Hermione asked, noticing that Luna was only wearing her light dressing gown and slippers.

"Waiting for you."

Hermione closed her eyes and counted to ten. "Why were you waiting for me?"

"To see if you wanted to join us again tonight."

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to come between you and Harry. . . ."

"Well, if you mean that literally, we can sleep with whomever you would prefer in the middle."

"You know that's not what I mean!" Luna started to speak, but Hermione interrupted her. "Have you already taken your potion?"

Luna pouted. "This is why I don't want people knowing about the damn potion. No, I haven't. I will take it in about fifteen minutes, when it's time to. I am perfectly sober."

"I'm sorry."

"Hermione, we often disagree about how to look at the world. We can let that come between us, let it drive us apart, or we can try to be friends, even you intimate friend."

"I do want to be your friend," Hermione said. Luna looked at her, and Hermione admitted, "Your intimate friend."

"Good. Now, you are still hurting from the loss of your parents. You want to bury yourself in research and study, because that's how you deal with emotional pain."

"I'm. . . ."

"You're still hurting," Luna said firmly. "It's easy to see; the pain is written across your every expression. Your parents were brutally murdered because of what you are, because of your friendship and support of Harry, and because you prove that a Muggle-born can be better at magic than every Pure Blood in your year, and just about any other year, for that matter."

"I know, but I don't want to talk about it."

"Then just listen for once. You're suffering, and neither Harry nor I want you to suffer alone. We care for you, and want to be with you. This isn't about sex. . . ."

"It's not?"

"Certainly not. Well, not yet, if ever. Hermione, Harry and I have done many sexual things, but I'm still a virgin, and will likely remain so, at least for now."

"Really?"

"Really. You don't have to worry about Harry, first of all because we both know it would be totally out of character for him to try and seduce anyone, let alone force himself on anyone, and second, because we just finished half an hour of passionate oral sex before I came over here."

"I don't want to know that!"

"Sorry. Anyway, we want to hold you. We want to comfort you. And we want to be held and comforted by you."

Hermione said nothing, she just stood, chewing her lower lip.

"We love you." Luna stood and held out her hand.

Hermione sighed, reached out, and took it. Together, they left the room.

Twenty minutes later, Luna snuggled warmly in the middle, the three friends were all asleep.

After tossing and turning for a few hours, mostly thinking of buxom Rora, Ron got out of bed and took a very cold shower.

Back in London, earlier that day

Since the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Dean never went anywhere without his wand. He whipped the wand out of his forearm holster and leapt to his mother's aid as he heard his sister scream.

He found a tall, muscular, well-dressed black man with a shaven head staring at his mother. He didn't seem threatening, but his eyes took in Dean's stance and his wand.

The man raised his hands. "Dean Thomas?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Kingsley Shacklebolt. I'm an auror. May I come in?"

## **Chapter XIV**

"What happened?"

"You fainted, Mum," Dean said.

Mrs. Thomas was laying on the large sofa. She looked over at saw the large man sitting on the matching chair. "I'm sorry. You looked like Raphael."

"You mean your first husband; Dean's father?"

She nodded.

"What was Raphael's last name?"

"His full name was James Raphael Bond, but he didn't go by James because of those silly books and movies." She paused and then added, "But you probably have no idea what I'm talking about."

"Actually, I do. My older brother loved Muggle spy movies." He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Well, this just got more complicated."

"What did?"

"Right. First, let me tell you why I came here. Has your son told you anything about what has happened in the magical world these last two years?"

"Nothing special, but I want to know why you look so much like my first husband."

"My older brother's name was Raphael James Shackbolt. Like myself, he was an auror, one of the enforcement officers in the magical world. In 1976, the wizarding world was in the middle of a war. My brother became a liaison officer with the Muggle police and MI units. I take it you're Tilly?"

"That was his nickname for me," Mrs. Thomas agreed.

"He would never tell anyone your name, or where you lived," Shackbolt said. "I think he told you he was an MI investigator, working on Irish terrorism."

Mrs. Thomas nodded her head.

"I don't understand," Dean said. "I thought my father was killed in an IRA bombing."

"That's what I was told," Mrs. Thomas said.

"Raphael was killed in a Death Eater attack, in June, 1981. He had told us to leave word with his MI contacts, and they got in touch with your mother."

Dean snorted.

"What is it, dear?"

"I never really minded being Muggle-born," Dean said. "Compared with growing up black, it's not even half as bad. Still, it's odd to change from Muggle-born to half-blood." He grinned. "To the people that care about such things, I'm just a little behind Harry, and equal to old Voldie himself."

"What do you mean?" Shacklebolt asked, now as confused as Dean's mother was.

"Well, Harry's still considered a half-blood, even though his mother was a Muggle-born witch. Harry told us that Voldemort had a Pure-Blood mother and a Muggle father."

Shacklebolt was shocked. "Are you sure?"

Dean shrugged. "Harry ought to know, and I know he told the Headmaster. Ginny and Hermione backed him up. Beyond that. . . ." He shrugged again.

Shacklebolt told himself he would have to speak to Dumbledore. "We'll have to come back to this. Dean is known as a Muggle-born student, and a good friend of Harry Potter. Some nasty people, who dislike Muggles and their magical children, are after Harry. So, Dean, tell me what you know, then I'll make some suggestions as to what you and your family might like to do, just to be on the safe side."

#### May 15, Day 15

Hermione Granger sat on a padded bench in her bedroom in her light nightgown, brushing her hair. The previous two weeks had been very odd.

While she thought of herself as capable, even after all her adventures Hermione still had not thought of herself as a warrior. After the last two weeks of training, she was beginning to understand that she was going to be a warrior no matter her philosophies or preferences.

By the standards of this world, she was currently nothing exceptional in the dueling and combat department. She was, however, above average, as were Neville and Luna. Ron was nearly exceptional in dueling, although at best average in combat, while Ginny was exceptional in both. Harry was clearly exceptional in dueling, and at times actually scary when it came to combat.

After the first day, Ron had taken to apparation much like Harry had to flying, with Luna and Ginny only slightly behind him. It had taken Hermione, Neville, and Harry a bit longer to catch on, but they finally had.

Most odd, of course, were Hermione's relationships with Harry and Luna. In front of the others, she and Harry maintained a slightly less platonic version of their usual close friendship (Harry had always been fairly unphysical before this summer, but now often kissed Luna in public, and hugged or held hands with both Luna and Hermione).

Even odder, she spent every night with both Harry and Luna. This was actually very non-sexual, even if Luna was always nude, and by now so were she and Harry. Hermione now knew that Harry and Luna were becoming very sexually active, but she had never witnessed any of this, or had been offered or asked for inclusion, although there was a great deal of non-

sexual touching, massaging, and kissing. Her exact feelings for Luna and Harry, the nature of her relationship them or their feelings for her, were a complete mystery to her, and she suspected with them as well.

She decided she just did not care. She was as happy as she could be, considering what had happened those few days before they had left. She was loved and cared for, stroked and massaged, hugged and kissed. It was enough for now.

As she came out of her room, she paused and looked into the alien sky. While this was a more magical world than her own, and one with its own powerful traditions, it was not one she could really approve of. She was rather glad that, after that first feast, she had had only a few of the native wizards and witches to interact with, just the Dumbledores and the Sibyl. The others were keeping to themselves.

Hermione then saw Rora slipping nude into Ron's room. The serving girl only had one nightgown, and that was too heavy for the warm late spring evenings. Ron had told the maid that if they got along well, he would try and get her pregnant before he left, and she had gone along with it. Ron had had to swallow his pride and would use Harry's money, should he succeed.

Harry had of course understood.

Hermione was not sure of her exact feelings about this arrangement, either, other than she did not like it. Still, she accepted that it was not really her concern to regulate Ron's life as he conformed to some local customs she did not approve of.

It did of course mean that, as far as she was concerned, there was absolutely no chance of her and Ron ever having a meaningful relationship beyond their friendship, but she did not care about that any more either.

She tried to the door to Luna's room and found it unlocked. As usual, Harry was brushing Luna's hair. Hermione smiled, shut the door, and went to join them.

## May 16, Day 16

The next morning, after breakfast, Astor sent the runners off to clean up and had all of them dress in what passed for slightly up-scale casual wear for the magical upper class.

It was already warm, and would be approaching hot by the late afternoon. Tonks and the girls therefore wore belted, shaped, brightly colored cotton dresses that came to just below their knees. Remus and the boys were dressed in matching shirts and what could best be described as kilts.

Astor was joined by his wife, Alicia. "Today, we're going to apparate over to Ruchak," he said. "Dora and Alicia will go first, Remus and I will go last. Take your time and concentrate on the coordinates we taught you. Follow our lead, and there should be no trouble. If there is, you can always apparate back here. Are we all ready? Right. Let's go."



Hermione opened her eyes and took three steps out of the way, as she had been taught. It should be impossible to apparate on top of (or mixed in with) another person, but it was always best to practice safety.

Ruchak was a nice-sized town of about 3,600 people, most of them non-magical, and a few dozen goblins who ran the bank and some other services. The main apparation point was the inner, open square of the town market. The area was marked off by marble columns. Outside the columns, vendors set up stalls every morning, weather permitting. From the market, there was a river immediately to the east, and streets radiated outward in the other directions.

"Where would you like to go after a visit to the bank?" Astor asked.

"To a bookstore," Hermione said before anyone else could speak up.

"Oh," Remus said, embarrassed, "we never told you, did we? We can understand, and read, the primary language here while we're here, but we'd have to learn as a foreign language when we get home."

Seeing the disappointed look on her face, Astor told Hermione, "Don't worry. We have a very substantial library. You can read through any of them. Anything you copy by hand, or any notes you take, will be in your language when you return."

"Are we limited to one wand here?" Harry asked.

"I had wondered about that," Alicia said. "You're only allowed to own one wand at a time in your land?"

"Those under seventeen are limited to one wand, and anyone else has to apply for a special permit," Remus said.

Harry looked as disappointed as Hermione had a few minutes before.

"Broom shop?" Ron asked.

"Remember, yours are many times better," Astor admitted.

Remus cleared his throat. "As I said, we are limited to one **wand**. The law is very specific."

"Ah," Astor said. "I believe I understand. Come along. The magical shops are this way."

"I don't understand," Neville said, before Harry, Ron, or Ginny could.

"Wands are not the only objects used to focus magic," Luna said. "They are supposed to work best for the types of magic we usually do, though."

"What else can be used?" Ginny asked.

"Generally, any combination of a wood and part of a magical animal could be used," Hermione answered.

"Some jewels may also be used as an additional focus," Luna went on, "but not as a substitute for the wood or animal part." She frowned. "I seem to remember reading that antler and ivory were sometimes used instead of wood or even the core."

"It's hard to believe that would work," Hermione said, before adding, "but I suppose they could be used."

"I never heard of using antler or ivory, either, but we can ask. Making a basic wand is easy, by the way. Before we leave, I'll teach you the combining spells," Remus said. "There is almost never a reason not to have at least a rudimentary wand, unless you're someplace where you can't find some sort of stick."

"What about the magical animal?" Ron asked.

"That's even easier than the stick," Tonks said. The teens looked puzzled.

"Think about it," Remus said with a smile.

"I don't get it, either," Alicia admitted.

"I get it!" Luna said.

"What?" Hermione asked. Luna reached over and wrapped a bushy lock around one of her fingers.

"Oh, of course," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"What?" Ron asked.

"We're magical animals," Harry answered. "We can use some of our own hair."

"Exactly," Remus said. "It makes for a pretty weak wand, but the combining spell creates the wand, and you don't need a wand to do it. Even the weakest wand made this way can cast light and start a fire. Not good in a combat situation, of course, but if you're ever stranded some place without a wand and can't apparate for some reason, it can help you survive."

Harry looked puzzled, but then remembered that most people could not do much wandless magic.

Astor led them into the wand shop.

A middle-aged, thick-set wizard came out to greet them. "Good morning, Astor, Alicia. These are your guests?"

"Yes, these are Harold, Ronald, Neville, Luna, Hermione, and Ginevra, and their tutors, Remus and Dora. This is Mikos."

"And did you play out your little scenario?"

Astor shrugged. "It almost certainly wasn't necessary, but we did."

"What scenario?" Harry asked.

"We, well mostly my lord and Albus, wanted you to visit here but not to be known as having arranged the visit," Astor said. "The visit is supposed to be less likely to be reported back to your home, although I think it is a far-fetched scenario."

"Why?" Harry asked simply but forcefully.

"You have one very obvious weakness when it comes to combat, Harold," Astor said simply.

"And that is?"

"Those things," Mikos said, pointing on Harry's glasses. "It is one thing to need them for reading, especially when a person is over a hundred. It is another to need them to fight. Even though I understand your vision is not horrible, your effectiveness would be off should they be lost or damaged in a combat situation."

Harry's eyes narrowed in displeasure. Hermione spoke up before Harry (or anyone else) could. "And what can you do about it? I've never even seen a reference to anything that did more than a temporary fix, and those all end up making the eyes weaker in the long run."

"Well. . . ."

"The wand core treatment!" Luna said.

"The what?" Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville asked. Ron knew better than to get into this.

"Use of the same wand core, magically joined with the eyes, is supposed to cure visual problems."

"Luna, if that were true, why isn't it well-known?" Hermione asked.

"It has to be from the same source, not just the same type," Luna said, and then frowned. "I'm sure there were other things as well."

"There are other conditions, but essentially Luna is correct," Mikos said. "First, most magical cores won't work, only healing ones. Unicorn horn, which is not a very good wand core, as opposed to the hair, and phoenix feather are the two most common. Second, it has to be matched with your regular wand core, one that you have used for at least four years. Phoenix feather is not a common wand-core match, at least here, and few phoenixes live with wizards in any world. It is rare to know exactly which phoenix any feather came from. Third, the treatment does not use the tail feather, which are the easiest feathers to gather, but the first down of a reborn chick. If any of those conditions are not met, the treatment can cause blindness. Finally, you must continue to use a wand made with that same phoenix's feather for thirty days. If it is broken and cannot be replaced in a day or less, then the treatment must be reversed and can never be retried."

"So you see, the treatment is real, but can rarely be used," Remus said.

"Shelka!" Mikos called out, and soon a younger woman came to the front of the shop. "Please see to Astor and his guests." He turned to Astor. "You have the down?"

Astor pointed to Remus, who handed over a vial with the reddish down in it. "You will all please stay here and look around. Harold, if you desire this treatment, come along."

Harry frowned mightily, but followed.

The group looked at the more unusual focus devices. "Too bad Moody didn't come," Ron said, as they looked at a collection of canes some fifteen minutes after Harry had left.

"I'm not certain," Tonks said, "but I wouldn't be surprised if some of his canes aren't similar to these, at least these two with the wands in the detachable handles."

"I suppose those wouldn't make the legal list back home, would they?" Luna asked. "Daddy would like this one."

"Like a wand, these are best matched to the wizard," Shelka pointed out.

"Pooh."

Before they could move over to look at hair-slides and similar devices, the shop was filled with phoenix song.

"Is that supposed to happen?" Hermione wondered. No one had an answer.

The phoenix song continued for over five minutes. A few minutes later, Mikos came into the main showroom, shaking his head in wonderment. "The phoenix whose feathers we were using, his name is Fawkes?"

"Yes, it is," Remus agreed.

"He showed up, sang through the delicate parts of the procedure, dropped a healing tear on each of Harold's eyes, and disappeared. I have never heard of such a thing."

"You should never underestimate the power of love," Luna said simply. "How long until Harold joins us?"

"About an hour. His eyes need to rest. He is napping at the moment."

"I see." Luna walked over to the tray of hair slides. "My wand is mistletoe and unicorn tail hair. Are any of these likely to work for me?"

While the group gathered around Luna and Shelka, Mikos picked up one of the canes and went into the workshop area.

By the time Harry came down to the main showroom seventy-five minutes later, the girls had each picked out a hair decoration which included a small wand core that responded to them, and the entire group had had their wands examined and tested.

The change in Harry's appearance was somewhat startling. None, except for Luna to some degree, were used to seeing Harry both wide awake and without his glasses. Before, attention was drawn first to the amazingly messy hair or, if it was showing, the scar. Now what drew everyone's attention were Harry's eyes.

"I never noticed how large your eyes were before," Hermione admitted.

"I never realized that they were **that** beautiful," Ginny gasped. Both she and Harry flushed.

"I hadn't either," Tonks admitted.

A smiling Mikos put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Here, try this." He handed Harry the pewter-handled cane.

Harry took it and frowned. "What do I do with it?"

Mikos showed him how to draw the wand-insert. "Your friend Fawkes left a tail feather. I added it to the cane. Give us some light."

"Lumos," Harry whispered. The show room lit up. Harry and the others smiled.

"Lord Dumbledore will be able to give you some pointers in using the cane as a weapon." He put out his hand. "It was a pleasure serving you."

"Thank you for everything."

Outside the shop, Ron asked, "So does the world look any different?"

"Why would it?" Hermione asked.

"Actually, things look a lot sharper now," Harry said. "I needed to get new glasses, and Mikos said my eyes would be far above average now."

"Can't wait to see you chasing down a Snitch, then," Ron said cheerfully. They had done very little flying, Ron, Ginny, and Harry's only real complaint of their stay so far.

"Sorry, we don't play full Quidditch," Astor said. "Our version doesn't use this Snitch. We usually play until twenty goals are scored. We can come see some of the games. Nothing is very organized, but there are pick-up games all July and August."

"Too bad we can't have our own. . . ." Ron looked at Harry.

"We couldn't use our brooms, Ron," Harry pointed out. "It wouldn't be fair."

"I suppose not. . . ."

"Ron, I hate to rain on your parade. . . ." Hermione started.

"No, Ron's right." Harry turned to Neville. "I bet you and I would make a decent pair of beaters."

"Harry, I wasn't very good. . . ." Neville started.

"Right," Ginny said. "Past tense. Your flying has really improved."

"Well, I could try," Neville allowed.

"I could try playing chaser," Luna said, a bit doubtfully.

"Great!" Ron said. He turned to Hermione.

"No," she said flatly.

"But. . . ."

"No."

Ron pouted.

"Can I play?" Tonks asked.

Ron smiled. "Cool."

## **Chapter XV**

### Back in London

"Well, what brings my expert back here so unexpectedly?" Voldemort asked, a cruel caress in his voice.

"I have come to report an interesting development, Master," Julian said.

Only Voldemort could feel the fear in his voice. He thought a moment and asked, "Has Number Twelve. . . . Yes, Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place as reappeared."

"Yes, Master."

"And in addition to that?"

"I was left a note, Master, by Dumbledore himself."

"Really? And how do you explain this?"

"Master?"

"How do you know it was Dumbledore? If you saw him, why didn't he capture you?"

"He left a written message, Master, but he also left a verbal one on the Muggle equipment."

"Ah. The verbal message was?"

Julian flushed in fear.

"Say it!" Voldemort ordered.

Julian swallowed nervously. "I see I need not have written the note I left. I must admit I am quite surprised that any of you would have any knowledge of Muggle surveillance and recording equipment, let alone equipment this current. In any event, we have left Number Twelve. I would not try to enter it without its new proper owner. Under the conditions of Sirius Black's old will, Peter Pettigrew inherits one sixth of the Black estate. If he does not care for the portion the other heirs have left him, or wishes to challenge the valuation, he has until the First of September to lodge a protest. Good morning'."

"Which means?"

"As best I can tell, exactly what he said, Master. Sirius Black made a will shortly after the Potter boy was born. The will was officially read on the morning of the First of August. Pettigrew's share is publically listed as Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place and contents."

"I see. Did you bring this letter?"

"No, Master."

"Why not?"

"I wasn't sure if there might have been a tracking charm or something else which you might not wish near you, Master."

"So, you at least continue to think. Was this all the Old Man left?"

"There was a magical key, Master, presumably to the front door."

"Which you also left?"

"Yes, Master, until you command otherwise."

"Very wise, my little thinker." Voldemort turned to one of the Death Eaters. "Bring Wormtail."

The Death Eater bowed and left.

"I am certain the Old Man valued everything he wanted to leave in that house at its highest reasonable value, and everything else at its lowest, but did not actually cheat. It is possible, of course, that he also left some traps. He may also have some secret surveillance, just to see who is foolish enough to show up."

Voldemort thought, and decided that it wasn't worth sending anyone but Wormtail. If he did not stumble onto any traps, then perhaps Julian and then Severus could inspect the place. 'No,' he thought, looking around, and saw that Pettigrew wasn't present yet, 'that could work, but I have a better idea.' "Wormtail!"

#### May 17, Day 17

"Good morning," Alton told the octet after their breakfast. "I know we, and your two tutors here, have said this before, but we are most impressed at the speed of your progress. It's not as fast as it could possibly have been, but it has certainly been much faster than anyone really expected it to be."

The teens were not sure how to take that, but they all decided to take it as a compliment.

"So, for the next two weeks, we shall two hours of dueling and combat practice in the mornings, mostly combat. Our magical schools let out on the last day of May. For two weeks in early June, the older students and their slightly older peers compete in mock combat. Since they do so in teams of six, we have decided you may train for that, if you wish."

They all looked at least slightly interested in that, even Luna and Hermione.

"After lunch, you'll be getting an hour of practice in various mental disciplines, and then you'll have two hours to practice flying." Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Yes, Hermione, you need to practice as well, although at a different level. You never know when you might have to fly, and it's best to keep in practice."



That night, despite extra time in the sauna, Hermione and Neville were both walking stiffly towards their rooms after dinner. "The cushioning charms here aren't quite as good as the ones back home, are they?" Ron asked.

"Why aren't you sore?" Hermione demanded.

"I think because we're all more used to flying," Harry said.

"Luna doesn't fly like you lot, and none of you have flown much since we got here!"

"We have more than you have," Luna said simply, "and I imagine I shall be on the tender side in the morning."

"Hope you feel better by tomorrow afternoon," Ron said with a smile before ducking into his room to prepare for that night's romp with the maid. Hermione frowned at the closed door, and by the time she turned around, she saw Ginny helping Neville into her room.

"Good night," Harry said, kissing Luna on the lips and Hermione on her cheek. He went into his room as well.

Hermione looked puzzled. "I seem to be missing something."

"Grab your night things and change into your slippers," Luna said. "Alicia said we could use the hot room tonight."

"For what?"

"How are your upper arms?"

"Not too bad, especially compared to my thighs and backside."

"Well, we shall sit in the hot room and then you shall massage my flying muscles, and I shall massage yours."

"Really?"

Luna knew an argument that would convince Hermione. "It's either that, or making some of the maids work into the night."

"Alright. Let's go."

May 18, Day 18

Harry woke up early, as usual. Unusually, he was alone in his bed. He did his early morning stretches, and took the opportunity preen a little in front of the mirror.

This was normally very out of character for Harry Potter. He had been very shy until that summer. Living with Luna for a month had taught him not to be shy around himself or her. Two weeks of group saunas and sharing a bedroom with both Luna and Hermione had taken

care of nearly all of the remaining shyness. Add in his now-perfect eyesight and nearly two months of hard exercise, and Harry was curious.

Harry was still short. Ten years and four additional summers of under-feeding had had their effect there. Harry was now perhaps a shade under five foot eight. He had been thin, at times almost emaciated, with relatively long legs and arms, his entire life. He had regained all of his lost weight by the time he had gone to the Burrow, and now, for the first time in his life, admired some actually defined muscles in his legs, arms, and chest.

'Well,' he thought, 'I'm never going to be a muscle-man, but no more 'ickle Harry' either.' He slipped on his running clothes, and then peeked into Luna's bedroom on his way out. Luna's bed hadn't been slept in, which meant she had spent the night with Hermione. Harry smiled ruefully. Luna was determined to have her way with both Hermione and himself, and he acknowledged that he was far too besotted by her, and by Hermione to a lesser degree, to even try and put up a fight. If Harry had learned one thing that summer, it was that no matter how odd Luna's ideas were, they usually worked out.

"Good morning," Luna said simply about half an hour later.

Hermione froze under the sheet.

"There's no reason to be shy," Luna said.

"But we . . . we. . . ."

"Yes, we did. Several times, in fact. No reason to be shy or ashamed about that, at least with me, or with Harry."

"Harry!"

"There is no reason to be worried," Luna said, hugging the suddenly shy and frightened Hermione. "For now, we shall just go back to the usual sleeping arrangements. Instead of Harry and my self getting together before you come to sleep with us, you and Harry will just switch off for now."

"But. . . ."

"I really don't think you're ready to go as far with Harry, or with Harry and myself, as we went last night. . . ."

"No! Oh no, I am NOT ready for that. . . ."

"But you are interested."

Hermione squeaked a soft affirmative.

"Then there's no problem, is there?" Luna kissed Hermione firmly and passionately, which, after a moment, Hermione returned. "We need to dress for breakfast."

Luna left to get dressed a few minutes later, leaving a very confused if satiated Hermione laying on the bed. "What have I let myself in for?" Hermione asked herself.

The rest of the two weeks went very much as planned. The Dumbledores, Remus, and Tonks mostly drilled the sextet as a combat unit. Ron was still in some ways the most unpredictable and erratic. In mock combat, at least, it was good to have something of a berserker out front. Beyond that, they tested out various combinations. For mock combat, they and their trainers took some time and decided that a multi-tier approach worked best: for the moment, Ron would be in front; Harry and Neville acted as a second rank; Luna and Hermione would supply cover as the back rank. Ginny would stand between Harry and Neville and Hermione and Luna, acting as she thought best.

In an actual, life-or-death situation, there seemed to be a better choice: Harry and Ginny in the first rank, with Ron positioned behind them ready to charge out as needed. Depending on the situation, the three in the back rank ready to provide cover in whatever direction it was most called for. The group also practiced various defensive combinations, and here the best arrangement seemed to place Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Ginny in a square (with Ginny taking on the most fire and Hermione the least), with Ron and Harry providing firepower from the center.

Still, they practiced any combination any of the group or their trainers could think of, since there of course was no way of predicting what might actually happen in a firefight. This also allowed each of the six to have some idea of how everyone in the group was most likely to react in any given situation.

This was, of course, the main reason why the sextet was being encouraged to attend the mock combat contests in June. There was no doubt in Albus Dumbledore's mind that Harry would have to face Voldemort. For Harry to win, he would need his friends around him to help pare down the odds against him. Many others -- the other Weasleys, Moody, Remus, Tonks, Dumbledore -- also hoped that they would be with Harry and his group when that time came.

There was no way of knowing what that situation might be like. Based on the previous five years, however, there was a good chance that Harry's closest friends would be with him. Dumbledore also had hopes that many of the Hogwarts students outside Harry's immediate circle would rally to him, as they had the year before to form the DA.

That, of course, remained to be seen.

If the DA did reform, Harry would not only be in a better position to lead it, but he would have five able lieutenants to assist in the training and, if necessary, to lead the students into combat.

There had been no real open battles in the First War against Voldemort. The Death Eaters had overwhelmed targets and had used terrorist tactics to attack larger groups. Should the war continue for some time, Dumbledore wanted as many students as possible to really be prepared, unlike during the first war. And, should Voldemort be foolish enough to attack the school, Dumbledore wanted an overwhelming response to be prepared.

Harry wanted that as well.

### Back in London

'Of all the disgusting, stupid, things I've ever had to do,' Peter Pettigrew thought to himself, 'this **has** to rank somewhere near the top.' He felt his left wrist twinge, and knew that there were many worse things he had done. Still, this night had to be in the top five percent somewhere.

He was rather thankful that Grimmauld Place was dark. He hoped that the Master was right, and that Dumbledore and his Order would not expect Peter to show up so soon after being notified of his 'inheritance.'

Peter decided to just get the task over with. If this was a trap, then it would be over even more quickly. He went up the front stairs, and pressed the magical key to the lock. The door swung open. Peter scurried in, and he jumped when the door slammed behind him.

"Who is there!" a nasty voice demanded, making Peter jump again. "Who is there, I say! What kind of scum are you? Muggle-lover? Mudblood? Half-breed? Some disgusting dark creature?"

Peter lit his wand, and saw it was a painting. "Mrs. Black?"

"**YOU!** What are **YOU** doing here! Kreacher! Kreacher!"

"Mistress is calling? What does Mistress. . . . Who are you?"

"This is the vile beast that led our idiot son into that trap! Just when we got through with that other scum, **YOU** show up! Why are you here?"

"I have been informed by the executors your Sirius' will that I have inherited. . . ."

"**NO!** This is **MY** home!"

Peter had proven many times over the previous sixteen years that he had little of the courage that a Gryffindor should have. Still, this was a painting. "Portraits may not inherit property."

"He speaks the truth, Mistress. Kreacher . . . Kreacher is his, now."

Peter looked at the deformed elderly elf, and sneered. "That's right. You're the elf who betrayed Sirius to the Master."

"So, you **DO** directly serve the Dark Lord!"

"I do," Peter admitted. He turned back on Kreacher. "So, what traps did the last occupants leave?"

"Kreacher knows of none. Kreacher was told to give the new master this letter, but Kreacher does not remember who told him." The filthy elf held out a thick, grimy envelope.

Peter hesitated, but opened it.

*Dear Peter:*

*I hope you do not mind my addressing you so familiarly. You stand, for at least fourth time in your life, at a major crossroads. The first time, you chose to follow Voldemort instead of your friends. No doubt, you lied to yourself at first, saying that what you were doing wouldn't hurt anyone. The second, you betrayed James, Lily, and Harry, and by extension, Sirius. Did you tell yourself that James and Lily would be strong enough to stand up to your Master?*

*They were, although they died for their stand.*

*When Harry spared your life, you ran straight to your Master. You brought the monster back to life, knowing that sooner or later he would kill you.*

*Now, you can abandon your Master.*

*There are no new real traps here, although some of the traps and evils left over from the House of Black remain, and I regret that there is quite a mess left over from the hippogriff Sirius kept in a bedroom. The only trick is that if you touch your wand to this parchment and say portus, this will bring you, and only you, to me.*

*I cannot ask you to become a spy, although we could use you. We both know that is unlikely to work. I cannot offer forgiveness. What I offer you is a way out. I do this only to deprive the enemy of a servant in an easy way. You will not be hurt. You will certainly not be killed.*

*If you decide to stay with your Master, never lie to yourself again. You are with Voldemort because you wish to be.*

*It is up to you to decide.*

*Albus Dumbledore.*

Peter walked around the front corridor for some time. He had a headache. Finally, he lit a lamp and sat on the stairs to think.

He had often wondered over the previous sixteen years how he had found himself in this situation. In the end, he had usually decided that it had been the Sorting Hat's fault. He had not really belonged in Gryffindor. If he hadn't been sorted into Gryffindor, he never would have been friends with James, Sirius, or Remus. If he had never been friends with them, he never would have become directly involved with the fight against his Master. If he had never fought the Master, he might have been ignored by the Master, and never forced to betray James and Lily. Then he would not have had to cut off a finger, live for a rat for some dozen years, and then cut his own hand off.

Yes. It was the Sorting Hat's fault, but that did not help him one bit with his new problem.

He did not like serving the Dark Lord. He was certainly near the bottom of the pecking order. No one, not even Lucius Malfoy the previous spring, dared command or abuse him (other than the Master, of course), but none feared him. He had power over no one. On those rare occasions, when a little booty or a Muggle woman was handed out, he had been given nothing. That near-squib Julian Malfoy was treated better than he was, a full-fledged wizard.

There was nothing binding him to the Master except his own fear.

So it basically came down to a simple question for Peter. Was Voldemort likely to win? If so, then he would be better off where he was. Peter remembered with a shudder what had happened when the Master had caught up with Igor Karkaroff the previous month. That episode had lasted on-and-off for several days, and when the Master was finished, there had not been enough left of the former Death Eater to make it worth leaving the remains out to be found as a warning.

If Voldemort was likely to lose, this was also likely to be his last chance to escape being executed, or locked into the depths of some prison. He was still likely to be sent to a prison of some sort, but nothing as bad as he would get in the future, if he lived so long.

Peter made his decision.

## **Chapter XVI**

"You have returned more quickly than I had anticipated."

Peter bowed low. "The Old Man left me a message, Master. I did not wish to linger, and be thought a traitor."

"What was the message?"

"He wished me to go to him and surrender. He would hide me away, and deprive you of my services."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "You were not tempted?"

"I was, Master," Wormtail confessed, falling to his knees. He knew there was a good chance he would be punished, but also knew it would be far worse if he tried to hide his temptation and was found out. "Not because I feel you could possibly fail, but only because your service is so hard, Master."

"Is it?" Voldemort snarled.

"Master, I have sacrificed more for you than most. I serve your needs every day. I could never ask more from you, Master, but because I serve you as you need, the others. . . ." He stopped at the evil look his Master was giving him. "So, that was why I was tempted, just for a moment, Master."

"How was this message delivered?"

"In a sealed letter, left with a rather senile house elf."

"And did you bring it?"

"No, Master, just in case there was a trap there."

"I see you have learned from your association with Malfoy," Voldemort taunted.

"You find him valuable, my Lord," Wormtail said, bowing low.

"Tell me everything you saw there before you left."

June 8, Day 39

"There are a lot more people here than I thought there would be," Hermione said. 'Here' was a moderately large wooden amphitheater, set above a stone base. Hermione guessed it held 7,500 or so spectators, and could probably hold at least 1,500 more. The early afternoon sun cast few shadows, and the actual arena looked almost surreal in the bright ultra-clarity.

"Nearly all of the magical community around Ruchak are here, and there are a fair number of the merchant community as well," Astor explained. "There are also quite a few visitors. It

never hurts to scout the future competition. The other communities will also host these events over the coming weeks, and they will want to know how their teams stack up. There are adult competitions between the communities in the winter, and some of the competitors here will graduate to the adult teams in a few years."

"Is that why the villa has filled up?" Ginny asked.

"Exactly." A dozen guests, with twice as many servants, had shown up over the previous two days. The eight visitors were mostly staying away from the other guests, except for dinner in the great hall. "Most will be here through the ceremonies on the Solstice, although most will move on to other hosts tonight."

"When do we start the matches?" Ron asked.

"Soon," Astor said. "Are you ready, Harold?"

"For what?"

"To meet at the center, with the other captains."

"I still think Ron or Hermione should be captain," Harry said sullenly.

"No," Astor said yet again, patiently. "You are the center, the heart, so you must captain the team. Hermione or Luna may be your second, should that be needed in a later round."

A wizard in bright canary yellow robes strode to the center of the arena floor. "Teams to the edge! Sponsors and captains, to the center!" The group entered the area, and then Harry and Astor moved towards the man in yellow.

"It looks like there are ten teams this year," Astor said. "That's a good number, sometimes there have been as few as seven. Of course, the Golors will not be happy."

"Who are they?"

"Another family," Astor said with a slight shrug. "They sponsored last year's winning team. If there had been an odd number of teams, they would have gotten a bye in the first round."

Each sponsor swore an oath that each team member was between 14 and 18, and then they withdrew to boast about their teams, and to make challenges which would likely result in many side bets.

Harry tossed a slip of paper with his team name into an urn that reminded him uncomfortably of the Goblet of Fire when his turn came along. The urn smoked a bit after the last slip was entered, and then spat five smoldering balls at the umpire. Harry gave a sigh when it was announced that the first match would be Team Dumbledore against Team Golor.

The basic rules were simple. The grassy arena floor was divided roughly into thirds. Each team defended an area and could only operate in their home area and the neutral ground



between the home areas until three of the opposition team members were unconscious, declared disabled by an official, or had surrendered. After the opposition was reduced to three or less, that team could be attacked from anywhere on the arena. The fighters could transfigure or charm anything they wanted to in the arena, but could not fly on broomsticks, or transfigure, charm, or summons anything from outside the arena area.

The Golors were all wizards, and all six reminded Harry a lot of Viktor Krum -- tough, compact, and scowling. They quickly took up their positions, four of them kneeling right behind the line marking their 'territory,' the other two standing perhaps ten feet behind them. These two would cast shields that would protect the front line while allowing their spells to get through.

Harry studied them for a moment and whispered to Ron as they took their places. Harry gave the others a series of hand signals.

The head official moved out of the way (there were five field officials and ten judges) and then shot off sparks, signaling the start of the match.

The Golor sent off a salvo of six stunners, one heading towards Neville, two towards Harry, and three towards Ron. Ron easily rolled out of the way and came up firing his own stunner at one of the kneeling wizards even before the Golor could see what effect their salvo had. Neville also shot off a stunner at the same wizard Ron had targeted, while Luna's shield defended Neville. Ginny and Hermione had also shot at that same wizard. Two of the four spells smashed the shield one of the standing wizards had tried to erect, while the other two stunned the wizard.

Harry, meanwhile, cast a much more complex shielding spell with his wandless left hand, which allowed him to actually capture the stunners and redirect them back towards the Golors while he cast a stunner of his own.

The redirected stunners had lost part of their power by the time they returned, and they were easily deflected. Harry's stunner smashed the shield of the standing Golor on his left, and had enough power to knock him down, although he was back up in less than five seconds.

By then, Ron had been moving to the forward right, firing stunners. Ginny and Luna were moving to the right as well, although more defensively, protecting Ron and themselves. They would soon be in a position to fire down the line of the Golors.

Neville had taken out the Golor that Harry had knocked down, and taken a stunner and a minor hex, which had broken his shield. He retreated back towards Hermione.

Harry was taking on the Golor captain and the team's junior member, who had nothing stronger than a stunner. The crowd was cheering loudly on that side of the amphitheater, because Harry was returning hexes as fast as his two opponents together (although that was in part because the youngest Golor had to physically dodge Harry's hexes). No one had seen Harry cast 'Serpensortia' and send the resulting moderately large but non-poisonous snake off.

So, in just over a minute, Team Dumbledore had knocked out two of the Golors and had an even fight going with Harry against two opponents and had a four against two advantage developing on the other side of the field. The Golors' opening salvo, which obviously usually worked better than it had that day, had been their best move.

Neville and Ginny were hit with minor hexes, which forced them to fall back and only defend. This brought Hermione and Luna forwards. By now, the stunners had been mostly replaced by the reductor curse, meaning there could be serious injury if there was an unshielded hit.

Ron was lucky, all his physical dodges worked, because he managed not to be predictable, but he was now too off-balance to get a coordinated shot off with Ginny. Hermione was too busy shielding herself, Ginny, and Neville to be in on the attack.

At that point, the youngest Golor screamed, as the snake had bit him high on the left calf and was not letting go. Harry, who had been holding back, finally sent off one reductor curse, which blew the Golor captain's shield apart and knocked him on his backside. Harry had him and the snake-bit junior stunned quickly thereafter.

Meanwhile, Ron and Ginny's now-coordinated fire had silenced the remaining two Golors. As silence reigned, the officials came over to make certain the Golors were down. Harry recalled the snake, and then vanished it with an official's approval.

Harry and Luna were unharmed, while Hermione and especially Ron were unharmed but nearly winded. Neville's left arm was numb, while Ginny's left leg was shaking, both easily taken care of.

The entire fight had last just a little over five minutes, less than half the usual time for one of these mock combats. The team received moderate applause as they left the field.

"Not too happy about us, are they?" Ron observed.

"Well, none of them know us," Ginny pointed out.

The Golors were still being taken care of on the field as the sextet sat under the bleachers and drank some cold butter beer. Remus walked up to them, and turned first to Ron. "Ron, do you feel you gave that fight everything you had?"

Ron considered. "I didn't do as well as I should have. I moved out from under my cover too soon."

"But in terms of your effort?"

"I think I did okay at best. I would have done better, but I really did outrun my cover."

"I see. Neville?"

"Yes, I believe the best I could," Neville said in a hesitating voice. Remus seemed upset, and Neville hoped it wasn't at him.

"How about you, Harry?"

"No, of course I wasn't," Harry answered.

"Why not?"

"Because Ron and Neville were too nervous. They need to understand they **can** do this, with or without me. I could have ended things a bit sooner, and if this were real combat, I would have. But it's not life or death, it's a competition and we'd like to win. Remus, I think Ron, Ginny, and I know more about pacing ourselves in a competition than you do."

"Fair enough," Remus allowed, "just as you realize what you were doing. Let's go watch the next match."

None of the other combats lasted less than nine minutes, the longest was seventeen. The five winning teams of course advanced automatically. The judges would announce in two days which losing team would be allowed to even out the team numbers. The next group of combats would be in four days.

The Dumbledores were the only winning team which had made it through without losing any members. All the others had lost at least two, while one (involved in the longest combat) had lost four. Thinking of possible strategies would keep everyone at Villa Dumbledore talking over the next few days.

That evening, Hermione approached Luna in the women's sauna after Ginny left. "Luna?"

"Yes?"

"Would you mind . . . do you think Harry would mind. . . ?"

"If you joined us early tonight?"

Hermione was blushing, but she nodded and said, "Yes, may I join the two of you early tonight?"

Luna thought a moment, and said, "Actually, wasn't it our turn to be together early?"

"That doesn't matter," Hermione said, unable at that moment to remember whose 'turn' it might be, and not really caring.

"You're right, of course," Luna said. She held out her hand. "Come along. Harry is very good at brushing hair, and other, even more enjoyable things."

June 12, Day 43

As the highest scoring team from the first round, Team Dumbledore got their assignment first, but would fight last. They were facing Team Valaden. They had won in fifteen minutes, and had used a position of two attackers and four defenders.

"The crowd seems louder today," Ginny said before the first match started.

"There is a lot of betting going on," Astor observed. "There aren't many things in this world that draw a crowd. The combats and Quidditch games are the only things that do so during the summer, other than the religious festivals. You can't sit back, gossip, and just have fun during a solemn ceremony, you know."

"True," Ginny agreed.

They watched the other combats. These each lasted just a shade over twenty minutes. Neville asked about that. Astor pointed out that the amount of combat time should increase, since the teams left were stronger, and of course each team now had some idea of how to prepare for the others.

Only one of the combats made it to close-cursing combat, the first time that had happened in the tournament. As Ron pointed out, that was something of a disappointment, since that was actually the type of fighting they would likely have to engage in if they ever face Death Eaters.

When the Dumbledores started to line up the same way they had four days before, the Valadens lined up with their four wizards in the front row and the two witches behind.

'You'd think they stick with a stronger defense after we handled that salvo so well,' Harry thought to himself. He was able to get Ron's attention and call a new formation before the match started.

Ginny moved up to Harry's place while Ron stepped back a few feet. Harry, meanwhile, had moved to the extreme left of their defense line, reaching it just as the sparks signalled the start of the combat.

Harry's movement drew the fire of four of the Valadens. Harry's shields easily held, but this put the Valadens at a real disadvantage to the rest of the Dumbledore team. As soon as the Valadens' attention was back to defending themselves from the rapid fire of four the Dumbledores, Harry waved at Hermione. He sent a powerful jet of blue hex fire arcing over the Valaden's positions, while Hermione sent a jet of red hex fire. The two met about sixty feet in the air and thirty feet behind the Valaden defenders (just short of the seats) and swirled around each other. Hermione quickly dropped out and went back to defending Ginny, Ron, and Neville,

Meanwhile, the hex fire had blended together into swirling black clouds. Harry put more power into the formation, while wandlessly blocking the stray curses that still came his way.

Then the funnel cloud formed.

Several people in the crowd screamed loudly enough to be heard by the Valaden defenders. One glanced back, blinked, and then she ran as the small tornado started to chase her.

Within seconds, the rest of the Valadens were drawn into trying to banish the whirlwind, which had swept up their other back defender. This of course opened them to attacks from the

rest of the Dumbledores. As the last Valaden fell, Harry cut the tornado, and then floated the very dizzy and nauseous witch who had been caught up in the wind down to the ground.

The entire battle had lasted just over six minutes.

The crowd sat in silence for a moment, and then broke into applause. Not as enthusiastic applause as the other two winning teams had gathered, but closer to that level than the polite applause they had collected four days before.

"Where the **hell** did that come from?" Tonks demanded as the sextet exited the arena.

"I've never seen anything like it," Astor admitted.

"Really? I found it in a book in your family's library," Hermione said with a smirk.

"That's what happens when you let us practice alone," Ginny said with a smirk of her own. "We have lots of stuff ready that are even more impressive."

Remus and Astor smiled, having noticed that Ginny had pitched her voice so that several of the remaining teams heard her.

#### Back in London

"You must scour this house, and find any traces of those who were here," Voldemort stated to Malfoy and Pettigrew. "That portrait and the elf must know more than they have said, but they are fragile. They would break easily."

The two bowed low.

"Take all the time you need. If you need to pull anyone in, do so. If you can not get any useful information from them, by the way, kill the elf and destroy the painting. In fact, destroy every other portrait you find after you question it." Voldemort glared at the cowering Mrs. Black and then disappeared.

"You look uncomfortable," Malfoy said to Pettigrew.

Peter scowled. "I am. There must have been some better way to hide the house."

"Perhaps, but if I remember the theory correctly, if a place has been put under Fidelius once, it's easier to do so the second time. And just think, he trusted you enough to be the Secret Keeper."

Pettigrew turned on Malfoy. "He did it so he wouldn't have to be bothered, and because he knew it would seem like a reward while it actually tortures me."

"Why would it torture you?"

Pettigrew stared at Malfoy for a few moments, and decided he was telling the truth. He didn't know.

"I was the Potters' Secret Keeper. I was the one that led the Master to them." He looked into some inner distance. "I agreed to serve the Master in part because I was weak, and in part because I was sure he would win. I was in Dumbledore's Order, sifting information. It seemed so hopeless in late 1980. So, I was captured, and agreed to send information. I tried to limit the information to minor information, but he squeezed me." He sighed. "I couldn't go back. I'm damned, and I deserve to be damned."

"Really? I'd have thought that if you really believed in an afterlife of any sort, especially one with eternal punishments, you would have sought redemption," Malfoy said.

"You don't think you're damned?"

"Of course not," Malfoy replied. "We have one life, and this is it. We make the most of what we can, and then we die. There are no higher truths, and even if there are, it doesn't matter because we'll never learn them."

"But. . . ."

"But nothing," Malfoy nearly spat. "If you think about it, even if there is some sort of afterlife, it is meaningless. Live for a million years, live for a billion years, and life would still have no meaning. It would just be longer. So, if you want to torture your self about a life of punishment now and an eternity of punishment later, go ahead. It makes no difference to me. I am in no hurry to cut **this** life off prematurely. I want at least a hundred to a hundred and fifty more years before having to wonder who's right." He turned around. "Come along."

"Where?"

"To the library. Let's see what the old lady had on hand to draw from."

Pettigrew sighed. "Right."

As they passed the portrait, Mrs. Black sniffed, "I thought you sort would be better than the others, but you all lack respect."

"You claim you can't remember the others," Pettigrew pointed out.

"Nonsense! I remember them all perfectly! I am just unable to articulate what I remember, since they used this same foul charm you have! If you took the Fidelius off, I could not recount that your Master had been here."

Malfoy halted and looked at the portrait. "Let's see what we can discover about the time right before the first Fidelius was placed, shall we?"

"But that didn't work when the. . . ."

"He was in a hurry," Malfoy broken in. "He was curious if he could access the information easily. It can't be done that easily. By asking the questions that were asked earlier, she couldn't answer because all the information was tied to the information under the Fidelius. Let's see what she knows if we approach it from the other end of the time-line."

## **Chapter XVII**

June 16, Day 47

For the previous three days, arguments had raged in the magical town and villas of Ruchak on how the finals of the teen combat tournament should be held. The Dumbledore team had been so dominant in the first two rounds that there was no question that they were the favorites. The Vitelmans had barely made it through the first round (taking the longest time and taking the most hits of any winning team), but had had a decent second round. The Markons had done well in each round, but nothing spectacular.

The three teams would meet in a round-robin over three days. The question being debated was if the Markon-Vitelman match should go first or last. In the late morning of the 16th, it was announced that the Markon-Vitelman match would be that day. Whichever team lost would face the Dumbledores the next day, while the winner would face the Dumbledores in two days.

Obviously, if one team scored two wins, they would win the tournament. If the teams somehow ended up 1-1, whichever team had been awarded the most points by the judges would win. If there was still a tie, then the over-all scoring leaders would win (ie a curse that hit an opponent counted as a plus, a curse that hit your team counted as a minus). That would almost mean the Dumbledores would win, considering their two spectacular wins.

The Vitelmans had a very straight-forward offense and very little defense. In short, they fought much like Team Golor, the Dumbledores' first opponents, had. In fact, most of the crowd still thought the Golors ran that type of offense better than the Vitelmans, and many had come to the opening of the Tournament hoping to see the Golors and the Vitelmans matched against each other at some point. While some in the crowd appreciated technique, nearly all of the non-magical crowd and a fair portion of the magical one really liked the 'Stand-Upright-And-Blast-Em' approach to combat.

The Markons were the youngest team participating that year, and operated the most mobile offense. They were amazing good at dodging hexes, but were slightly weak in their shielding.

As far as Team Dumbledore was concerned, the fight that morning did not show them anything new from either team. The combat took just over twelve minutes to play out, with the early advantage of the Vitelmans' opening offense slowly counteracted by the active defense of the Markons. In the end, when the last Vitelman fell, there were just two Markons left standing. The crowd adjourned to their luncheons a little before noon.

"Luna has been awfully quiet all afternoon," Remus remarked to Harry late that afternoon.

"She a little worried about how that potion may affect her tomorrow," Harry said. "You're really not supposed to vary the time that you take it by very much. She's brought her dose back to Ten o'clock, but that's about as much as she can do without throwing all our meals off."

"I had wondered," Lupin said, "but I didn't want to bring it up."

"Why not?"

"Because Luna is still very defensive about the potion, and because you and Hermione have both become so fiercely protective of her."

Harry shrugged. He couldn't deny it. "It won't be a problem tomorrow."

Remus looked at Harry, who wasn't giving anything away. "Is that all you have to say about the situation?"

"I'm very happy with it."

"It'?"

Harry frowned, and Remus had the feeling that had almost anyone else been questioning Harry, that person would have been in trouble. "I am very happy with my relationship with Luna and Hermione. They are happy with their relationship to each other and with me." Harry stared deep into Remus' eyes, daring him to question further.

"Your and Ron's plan should work," Remus finally admitted.

Harry smiled. "It's more Ron's than mine."

Remus sighed. "What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"I just worry that news of this will get back to our world. That whirlwind will be talked about."

Harry winced slightly. "Yes, well, we didn't think of that aspect. We just knew that its practical use in a fight is likely pretty limited and Hermione really wanted to try it." It needed to be used outside, on at least a moderately humid day when it was not too cold.

"You may not have noticed, our first day, that when they mentioned the last time there were problems was the time here when Voldemort was last active."

"But that man said it was a hundred and sixty. . . . oh, right. The time differential."

"Exactly. There are some wizards with quite amazing power on this world, and they managed to destroy Voldemort's supporters in this world, by our time line, a few weeks before he was disembodied in our world. One of the group that destroyed them was actually present today -- you might have seen the wizard in the purple, red, and blue robe. That doesn't mean Voldemort's people might not come back, looking for you." Seeing Harry's expression, Remus added, "No reason to beat your self up. No one said you were in complete hiding. If so, we could have gone to some other family, changed our names, and not allowed you to enter combat or Quidditch. You have to remember, Harry, you are much more to me than the potential savior of the wizarding world back home."

"Thanks, Remus. I know I mean more than that to you and the others here."



"No one else?"

Harry thought about that. "Dean and maybe Seamus, Moody, and the Weasleys. I'm not sure about anyone else. I don't think even Dumbledore can sort out the two."

"You may be correct," Remus agreed. "Still, I thought I had three great friends, four with your mother, and three of them actually were. I don't think any of the people you named would betray you like Peter did us."

"I couldn't see Seamus going Dark," Harry said, "but I think he's the most likely to fall away. And most of the time Dean is so quiet, I never know what he's thinking, but those rare times I've really needed him, there he was."

"I talked with Dean in July, right after you went missing," Remus said. "I'd say he's the quiet, loner type, who doesn't make fast decisions, and never goes back on them. He's a real friend."

"I'll remember that," Harry said.

June 17, Day 48

The Vitelmans looked confused as the Dumbledores took to the field. This time, Ron was moving to the far right of the field by himself. Off to the center-left, the other five Dumbledores set up with Neville and Hermione in the front, with Luna and Harry behind them and Ginny in the rear. This contradicted everything that the Vitelmans expected from the Dumbledores, and the crowd made noises of confusion as well.

The Vitelmans were still arguing about how to meet this unexpected configuration when the sparks went up, starting the combat, which is of course why Ron had thought it might work.

Ron instantly attacked with all that he could fire, and Harry did the same. Neville and Hermione protected the core of the group and Harry, while Luna and Ginny tried to shoot down any hexes that might head towards Ron. Two Vitelmans went down quickly, although this time Ron followed the two down, being caught by a temporary blinding curse.

Ginny now moved out in front of Hermione and Neville and started her own barrage of hexes, which three of the four remaining Vitelmans returned. The fourth was concentrating on blocking Harry's barrage.

At that point, a hex was deflected off Hermione's shields and struck Luna in the face. Harry flinched at the sound of Luna's scream, and looked. Fortunately, his shields were far too strong to be breached by any other teen's hex.

Harry turned to face the four remaining Vitelmans, and then, very deliberately, he started a quick, angry march towards the nearest one.

The Vitelman witch shot off a series of hexes, which Harry flicked away with the barest movement of his wand -- something few had ever seen done before. As she turned to fully confront Harry, the Vitelman witch went down to a curse from Neville that she had not seen coming.

Harry kept coming towards the remaining the Vitelman wizards. One saw him coming and stumbled as he partially turned. Harry signaled the Dumbledores to stop attacking, and kept coming.

Two of the Vitelmans were firing at Harry, and then all three. Harry still did not raise a shield. He just kept flicking the curses away from him no matter how many were shot at him.

"Don't hurt them, Harry!" Hermione called out.

Harry smiled.

It was a very chilling smile. Harry planted himself fifteen feet away from the nearest Vitelman and casually raised his shield wandlessly with his left hand. He glared at them and twirled his wand. "Do we do this the hard way?"

The Vitelmans glared and started to attack again, all their concentration on Harry. Instead of attacking, Harry signaled the others with a nod, and they dropped the Vitelmans from the side.

Harry rushed over to Luna, who was clutching her eyes. Harry quickly took the hex off and Hermione added a healing charm before any of the officials could do so.

"Sorry, Harry," Luna said, "I didn't duck fast enough."

"That's alright."

"How's Ron?"

"The officials and a healer were seeing to him," Harry said, "he was already sitting up. Now sit still for the healer."

"You're going to have a minor headache the rest of the day," the witch said, after running her tests. "You really should rest and have cold compresses to prevent irritation, but you're really fine."

"How was Ron?" Harry asked.

"He's going to be a bit dizzy for a few hours," the healer said standing. "He will be very hungry for a few hours after the dizziness ends. Try to get him to eat."

"We'll do our best," Hermione said, kneeling beside Luna.

### Back at Hogwarts

Severus Snape paced the dungeon, agitated and angry. In a sense, he was trying to run away from himself; he was trying to run away from the truth.

Snape paused, and nearly rammed his fist into a wall. He managed to stop himself, but he realized that if he didn't unclench his teeth, there was a real chance he might actually crack at least one of them.

He had to face the possibility that the Dark Lord had played him at least since he had been reembodied nearly fourteen months before, that he had been discovered as a spy, most likely, at some point in the 1991-1992 academic year.

Then why had he not been killed when he first met with the newly-risen Dark Lord in July of 1995? After all, despite his vaunted beliefs in his own power of Occlumency, the Dark Lord might have wormed his way in quietly.

Snape was not totally convinced it had happened. The Dark Lord was always searching his followers' surface thoughts. He could pick up the emotions, and the lies and lies of omission, of his followers with ease, yet he had never seemed to have done so with Snape. Snape was certain he was successful in blocking those.

He was equally certain that he could withstand a full Legilimency attack, even from the Dark Lord, and that he had done so on several occasions. Yet over the past few days, Dumbledore had penetrated his mind in subtle ways that Snape had been unable to even detect, let alone deflect. Had Voldemort?

Could that have been a game the Dark Lord had allowed Snape to play? It seemed slightly out of character, if only because of the long duration of the game. Or could the Dark Lord have detected mental reservations in Snape when he took the Dark Mark that even Snape had been unaware of for several months thereafter?

Dumbledore's arguments had been persuasive, if not conclusive. The tests had also reminded Snape that he had suffered relatively few full Legilimency attacks. Was that, as he had thought, because he was so successful in fooling the Dark Lord, or was it because the Dark Lord was attacking him more subtly?

To make matters worse, that damned boy was right. Looking back, he had picked up nothing of real value from the Dark Lord or when in the Dark Lord's presence. Everything of any value he had learned in the last fourteen months he had learned from the Death Eaters, and little of it was of first-class importance. Potter had discovered more important (and accurate) information in two or three dreams than Snape had learned over his entire career as a spy.

There was only one way to know for certain. Snape would have to attend to the next summons from the Dark Lord. If he was tortured and killed, then he had indeed been a dupe. If he was not . . . then he might still be a dupe.

Snape nearly punched a wall again, but he managed to refrain.

Snape was not afraid to die per se. Death by slow (very slow) torture, under these circumstances, made even him pause, however. Yet what was the alternative to obeying that next summons? If he did not obey a full summons, the Dark Mark would burn into his nervous system until he answered it. He was not sure how much pain that would entail, as sooner or later, every one of the few who had tried to leave the Dark Lord's 'service' (so far as Snape knew, anyway) had given into the pain and come for their slow death. Even Karkaroff had seemed to welcome the torture at first, as opposed to the burning of the summoning. Snape thought he had a topical potion which would deaden most of the pain, but he was not certain it would work.

After seeing part of Karkaroff's torture, Snape knew he would cut off his left arm rather than die in that manner, if his death by torture was certain.

This brought him back to his dilemma. He was not certain.

He had sworn an oath to himself stronger than he had ever imagined himself capable of. Dumbledore was certain he was compromised, and that he would never return from his next meeting, unless it fit into Voldemort's plans. Snape himself was nearly as certain.

But, he decided as Dumbledore joined him, not quite certain enough.

"Ah, Severus. I have just confirmed some news."

"And that is?"

"Headquarters has been put under the Fidelius. No information can come out, even from our Headmaster's portrait, and, if you try to think of the actual address, you will find yourself unable to do so."

Snape thought for a moment, and had to agree, but went on, "With luck, I may be going back."

"I cannot allow that, Severus."

"Why not? You put those memory charms on the elf and portraits yourself."

"And if anyone is able to break those charms, it will be Voldemort. Remember, the information is not destroyed, it is blocked and other information overlaid."

"You don't think that the Dark Lord will show up there, do you?" Snape asked, shocked by the very idea.

"Before the information was cut off, Voldemort himself showed up and performed the Fidelius." He held his hand up. "I will not tell you how I learned this. Pettigrew is the Secret Keeper. I have also learned who has been advising Voldemort recently, which agrees with some information which I got concerning the Dursleys."

"And who is that?"

"Julian Malfoy."

Snape frowned. "I don't know the name."

"He is a cousin, a second cousin I believe, of young Draco. I believe he just missed overlapping with you. He is a very brilliant young man, and unfortunately for him, his magical powers are very weak. He barely made it through the practical portions of his Fifth year curriculum. I would say he has the power of an average Third year."

Snape winced.

"Do not allow that to influence you too much," Dumbledore warned. "He has a very subtle and brilliant intellect. The theory and practical potions of his grades were easily equal to the highest in Hogwarts' recent history. It turns out he works for a rather large Muggle investment company known as the MHC which had escaped everybody's notice, including mine and the Order's."

Snape shrugged. Few purely Muggle companies would have any meaning for him.

"The Marvolo Holding Company."

Snape's eye went wide. "You mean . . . the Dark Lord. . . ."

"Owns a very powerful and wealthy Muggle corporation, yes. A number of magical families did the same in the mid-nineteenth century, including the Malfoys and Blacks on the more snobbish side, as did the Potters, Bones, Macmillans, Browns and many other families as well. I grant you, most of those operate in both worlds, but the Marvolo seems to operate almost totally in the Muggle world, which is how we missed it." He saw that Severus looked both interested and confused, and so went on.

"The company has moved into just one area of contact with the magical world since Malfoy has joined. Tell me, Severus, do you know what blood diamonds are?"

"No, I don't," Snape admitted.

"In short, they are diamonds mined under duress in disputed parts of the Muggle world, mostly Africa I understand. I admit, I have just recently come across the term as well. Some are even produced by Muggle slaves controlled by Muggle military and terrorist groups, and a few may be produced by Muggles under enchantments. Nearly all Muggle governments have at least token laws against the import and sale of such diamonds."

"Ah," Snape said, "and I take it magical governments do not?"

"Exactly. I understand our world buys about a tenth of the illegal diamonds. In addition, while there is a market for these illegal diamonds in both the magical and Muggle world, most diamonds are what Muggles call 'industrial' diamonds, too flawed or too small for use in jewelry."

"But diamond dust is very important in magical manufacturing and many potions," Snape said, understanding the point.

"And there you have it. Our world takes at least a third of the illegal industrial diamonds as diamond dust. The Marvolo Holding Company probably controls half of the illegal trade in diamond dust around the world, and diverts those to the magical world through various contacts with. . . ?"

Snape nodded, and said, "The Malfoys and other such trusts."

"And there you have the brilliance and value of young Malfoy until recently."

"Recently?"

"You may not have been aware of what Harry's uncle did for a living. He was first a salesman and then director of a company that made industrial drills. Malfoy made contact with Dursley for some of the specialized drills needed by the illegal diamond mines."

"And, since no wizard that weak would be allowed to take the Dark Mark, he gained access to Privet Drive at their invitation."

"Correct. I have also learned through other agents that one Julian Commodore. . . ."

"Ah," Snape interrupted, "he's Commodus' son? I had wondered what happened to him."

"He is. Malfoy uses the name Commodore in the Muggle world. He rented a great deal of Muggle surveillance equipment, and kept a close eye on the Burrow, the Grangers, and Grimmauld Place."

"How did he do that?"

"I don't know exactly," Dumbledore admitted. "Still, if you wished to you could go to Grimmauld Place, even though you can not exactly place where Headquarters used to be."

"True, but few other people could do it."

"That's true as well. Could your name have been mentioned in any context at the Burrow or the Grangers? Yes, it's very possible. We only discovered the equipment near the Burrow and over-looking Grimmauld Place after the deaths of the Grangers."

Snape's face fell.

"In addition, we have no way of knowing how well my memory work affected Mrs. Black's portrait. It's possible something might have leaked there. No, Severus, there is no way you can be allowed to meet Voldemort again. The question is, what we should do next?"

## **Chapter XVIII**

June 18, Day 49

"I really wish you'd cheer up a little," Harry said yet again. "You were there to draw fire. You drew the fire. This is just a game, it's not real combat."

"I know," Ron agreed. "Still, it sort of hit me last night."

"What did?"

"That if this were a real combat situation -- and yes, I know, we'd have a wider range of magic to work with, but we'd also have to defend against it, too -- I would have been dead." He looked at Harry with a bit of despair in his eyes. "I don't want to be dead, Harry. I don't want any of us dead, at least not for another century or so."

Ron held up a hand to prevent Harry from interjecting. "I know. If you don't fight him, he'll just come after you anyhow. I'm not going to pull either a Percy and desert you or a Scabbers and, well, rat out on you. It . . . it was just so overwhelming when I realized it."

"It is," Harry agreed. "It was always bouncing around in the back of my head, but one night when we were alone last July I woke up. Luna was all snuggled close, and I was so happy for a moment. Then, it sort of hit me like a hammer, so hard for a moment I thought Voldemort had to have planted the thought. I might not get to enjoy that feeling again after the summer. That Voldemort will attack me again and again, until one of us is dead."

"That's that prophecy, right?" Harry just nodded. "I figured," Ron said. "It doesn't seem fair, does it."

Harry's mouth quirked. "I know, I know," Ron said, "life isn't fair."

"Not that I've seen," Harry agreed. "I mean, there are some bloody wonderful parts of life, but they don't totally make up for the bad."

"Like dying," Ron said. "If I didn't know Nick, and know there was something . . . after, well, I think this would drive me crazier than it is."

"I know. Still, remember what Alton told us."

"Now is the time to make mistakes in combat, because it won't be fatal," Ron repeated with a sigh.

The two teens sat back in their chairs. They were in Ron's room, waiting for Astor to send someone to tell them it was time to head off to their waiting area in the amphitheater.

After a few moments of silence, Harry said, "How's Rora?"

Ron shrugged. "We're still getting along fine. It's just too bad she feels she can't mix with us at all."

The day of the Final Combat was becoming overcast. The Markons came into the arena looking very nervous, and to a slightly greater ovation than the Dumbledores. Considering that the students had been told several times that the Markons were the least popular local family in the region, that said quite a bit about how the locals felt about the strangers who were dominating their tournament.

The Markons merely waited for the Dumbledores to set themselves. Since the Dumbledores were the obvious favorites by this point, they could hardly step back from the implied challenge under the local code of conduct.

Harry and Ron exchanged looks, and Ron nodded. Harry faded back a few steps, while Ron stepped forward, Ginny slightly behind him and to his right, near the arena wall. Neville and Hermione were behind Ron's left side, with Harry behind them and Luna behind Harry.

Tonks frowned. "What are they playing at?"

Astor shrugged, while Remus said, "You know Ron likes being out front. He knows that if he fought like this for real, he could be killed, and is afraid of it. This is his way of dealing with it."

"Seems silly to me," Tonks said.

"Boys are only slightly sillier than men," Alicia retorted. Astor and Remus both grimaced.

The Markons smiled, and they lined up to try an opening salvo. Ron and Ginny paled, but stood their ground. Ron glanced back at Harry, and the rest of them did as well. Harry flashed a set of signals, and they all nodded, Ron rather unhappily.

When the sparks went off, Ron hit the dirt while Ginny, Neville, and Harry set up their strongest general shields ahead of Ron. The opening salvo was therefore deflected.

Ron set up his own barrage in response from his prose position. The Markons suffered one slight injury, but they adjusted quickly, two defending against Ron while four kept up the general attack. Two were trying to break down the shields around Ron, while the remaining two tested the shields protecting the rest of the Dumbledores.

Despite the unconventional (for them) formation, the Dumbledore team had practiced all the variations they could think of. The group's trainers were quite certain that Harry alone could protect the group against any likely six opponents head-on, provided Voldemort was not one of the six.

After some four long minutes of this exchange, both Ron and the Markons slowed their attacks. Ron was getting tired, and the Markons also wanted to make certain they didn't exhaust themselves. They stepped back their attacks, and waited to see what the Dumbledores might try next. If Harry dropped some of his shielding and tried something like the whirlwind again, it was pretty obvious that the Markons could lay out a heavy attack on the others.

"Ready?" Harry called out, keeping his strongest shields in front of the others.

The rest of the team got ready to attack, and the Markons started to shift into a full defensive posture. Ginny instantly began an attack, which Ron picked up. Hermione, on the other hand,



started transfiguring the ground around the Markons, while Harry, Luna, and Neville provided cover and shielding.

A group of engorged grass and weed roots shot up and enveloped two of the Markons. As a third was distracted by the startled screams of his team mates, he was stung by Ginny and disarmed by Ron. The growing roots grabbed his wand arm.

Meanwhile, Neville saw an opening on the other extreme of the Markon line. Inspired by Hermione's transfiguration, he sent off an engorgement hex. Had it struck true, it would have enlarged that witch's wand arm to the point that she couldn't have moved it.

Instead, the witch reflected the hex back towards the Dumbledores. Harry captured the hex in mid-flight and tossed back in a spiral that hit the startled original target on her wand hand.

Unfortunately, Neville was equally startled by Harry's newly-demonstrated power -- Harry had never tried to do that with this type of hex before. Neville managed to partially deflect one stunner, but he was hit by a second one. Luna just managed to stop a deflected hex right in front of her face, which blinded her for a few seconds.

The witch with the enlarged hand managed to deflate it, and then partially disarmed Luna right before Ginny disarmed her in return. Ron, meanwhile, had forced the other two remaining Markons back to defending themselves.

Seeing that one of the Markons entangled with the roots had lost his boot, Hermione transfigured it into a small but very loud terrier. It instantly latched onto the ankle of the nearest Markon. Trying to dislodge the dog distracted the young wizard enough for Ron to disarm him.

This left one remaining Markon wizard standing up against four fully ready Dumbledores, plus Luna (who was still seeing some spots before her eyes and barely had control of her wand).

Ron strode towards the Markon, who nodded. The pair squared off and began a straight duel. While that was going on, Harry sent Hermione over to disarm the entangled Markons, and to make certain the others had been ruled 'out'. He sent Ginny off to take on the remaining Markon, should he get past Ron while Harry made certain Luna was alright.

Ron, meanwhile, had managed to force his opponent to his knees, and with a final flourish disarmed him.

While the crowd didn't roar with approval, the Dumbledores did receive more than polite applause.

"We're not going over the fights again, are we?" Neville asked as he took a seat in the small parlor between Harry and Luna's room.

"No," Harry promised. "This morning, when Ron and I were talking, waiting to leave for combat, I remembered something. I've hinted around, but I've never actually told any of you the full Prophecy."

"Really?" Ginny. "Not even Luna?" she asked, glancing at her friend.

"I know the Prophecy in general," Luna put in, "but I don't know the details."

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Harry?" Remus asked.

"No," Harry admitted. "Still, I think everyone now has a good enough grasp on Occlumency not to lose the details accidentally. Anyway, Trelawney made the Prophecy to Dumbledore a month or two before I was born, when she was applying for the position of Divination."

"That must have been some interview," Ron said.

"Dumbledore wanted to sort of brush her off. He knew she wasn't terribly talented. . . ."

"There are many levels of the gift," Luna said. "Professor Trelawney possesses some Sight, and apparently has some gift of Prophecy as well, and she really does know the theory. She just isn't as gifted as she likes to imagine herself, and isn't a very good teacher in some ways." Hermione rolled her eyes.

Harry shrugged. "In any event, Dumbledore met her at the Hog's Head. He was very surprised to have her issue what seemed to him to be a genuine and important prophecy concerning Voldemort's fall. He was aware that someone was listening in, but he, or someone, somehow managed to get rid of that person before the whole prophecy was spoken."

"Which is how Voldemort found out about the Prophecy in general," Tonks said.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "That's why Dumbledore hired Trelawney, just in case she came up with more prophecies, and to keep an eye on her."

"Keep an eye on her?" Ginny asked.

"The seer doesn't really remember these types of prophecies," Luna said, "but there are supposed to be ways, very Dark ways, to make them relive them."

"That makes some sense," Hermione agreed.

"So, let me think . . . 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. . . . Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . . and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not . . . and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. . . . The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies'."

"Seventh month?" Neville asked nervously.

"It could have been either of us," Harry acknowledged. "Voldemort chose, and marked, me."

"I don't see what the big deal is," Ginny said. "Voldemort knew enough to mark you. I would think knowing you're his equal wouldn't mean as much as 'the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord' would."

"More likely, it's having the 'power the Dark Lord knows not'," Hermione said. "If Voldemort doesn't think now in terms of a new power, at least to him, then he'll think primarily in terms of what he knows and what he can do."

"That does seem more likely," Remus agreed. He turned to Harry. "You have a higher degree of wandless magic, but that doesn't seem the best bet for this 'power'."

"Come on," Tonks said. "We've all seen how powerful Harry is."

"But raw power doesn't seem to be what the Prophecy is talking about," Hermione pointed out. "The raw power and the wandless magic may just be off-shots of whatever this power might be."

"The power is the power of love," Luna said simply. "Not so much his ability to love, but his ability to inspire love of all kinds. The love his mother had for him, the love Sirius had for him, the love we all have for him, and Harry's ability to use that love to channel his magic."

"How the devil do I do that?" Harry asked. "Go around, thinking about love all day?"

"There are worse things for you to think about," Luna said simply. Neither Harry nor Neville thought much about that statement, but only Ron rolled his eyes at it.

"Possibly," Remus agreed, "but I don't think that would actually help Harry access this power. If it's the power to inspire, then he should be learning to somehow use your affection and powers to augment his own. I haven't seen much of that. Have any of you?"

There was a long pause. "Not exactly," Luna finally said. "However, Harry learned the Patronus very early under your guidance. You were the first adult to really try and teach Harry as an individual, and I'm sure your affection for Harry bled through, even if you were under orders to keep a very professional relationship with him. Harry was so nervous before the First Task that his magic hit a blank wall. Hermione finally broke through that, again with personal tuition, again also coupled with affection."

"Now," she went on before Remus and Hermione could interrupt, "you might say that most students respond well under those circumstances. Yet I saw Harry's wandless magic just plain blossom as we worked on it together. I certainly wasn't teaching him, as I had little skill before then. I think it was that we were working together in an affectionate setting. We saw his powers increase last year during the DA, and it really expanded this summer, again, I would suggest, because of the affectionate nature of the instruction and the personal interactions between the eight of us."

"Or at least three of us," Ron muttered.

Harry glared at Ron, who flushed. "I'm sorry," Ron said. "It's none of my business."

"But if it's true that love helps Harry's powers . . . somehow," Ginny said, "then it's really not surprising that it's increased since we've been here."

"What. . . ?" Harry started.

"Harry," Neville said, "I think all of us have a rough idea of who is sleeping where every night." Ron glared at Neville.

"I love your sister, Ron," Neville said quietly.

"And I love Neville," Ginny stated. "If you bother us, I'll. . . ."

"You'll all behave," Tonks said firmly.

"Harry," Luna said in part to distract everyone else, "I love you. Hermione, I love you." She leaned forward and kissed them both lightly.

"I love the two of you," Hermione said very quietly.

"Actually," Harry said, "I love all of you." That got everyone's attention for a moment. Harry turned back to the two girls. "But I'm in love with both of you."

Hermione and Luna joined hands with each other and with Harry, smiling. Harry glared at Remus. "Well?"

Remus flushed. "I . . . I think we should go back on topic. Where were we?" Tonks rolled her eyes.

"Why Harry needs love to learn," Ginny teased.

Luna said thoughtfully, "That would explain why Professor Snape totally failed in his Occlumency tuition, I would say. He must have lacked the affection needed to bring forth Harry's powers."

After a moment's silence, Neville said, "Well, I don't think anyone could argue with that idea, anyway." The students all smiled.

"Well," Remus said to Luna, still a bit doubtful, "you might be right. It certainly can't hurt to keep it in mind for the next stage of training."

"And that will be?" Ron asked before anyone else could.

"I thought we knew, but Lord Dumbledore said after the combat today that he might have some new ideas."

"Would that have anything to do with the wizard in the multi-colored robes that was talking to him after the match?" Hermione asked.

"Probably," Remus admitted. "He'll be at dinner tonight."

"Which brings us to dinner tonight," Tonks said, picking up the theme. "There will be a full feast."

"Which means?" Ginny asked.

"Which means we have to be on our best behavior," Hermione said severely, mostly in Ron's direction. Ron scowled. "Don't you give me that look, Ron Weasley!"

"We are being judged, Ron, by one of the highest authorities on this planet," Remus stated. "What each of us does reflects on the others, and on our own wizarding culture as well."

"And if **that's** not important enough to get through that thick head of yours," Ginny nearly snarled, "just remember that other little course of action you've undertaken."

"What?"

"WHAT? **WHAT?** Screwing that . . . that pneumatic serving wench, you idiot! Remember, if you get her preggers, you won't be here to help any magical child. Whatever reputation you earn here will affect that child. Think about **that** when you're thinking about stuffing your face like a starving refugee."

"I haven't acted like that since we first got here! Why is it every mistake is thrown back in my face?"

"Because you're still stuffing it!" Ginny responded. "It just hasn't been as egg . . . ex . . . what's the word?" she asked, turning to Hermione.

"Egregious?"

Ginny nodded, "That's it."

Ron's scowl went even darker, and he began to color. It was clear there was an explosion coming. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Remus, and Tonks all started to make that intake of breath signaling an argument. Each of them, and Ron, had a definite, if angry, opinion they wanted to express.

"Quiet!" Harry ordered. Everyone looked at him, surprised. "I won't have it!" Harry exclaimed, almost hyperventilating. Tonks and Hermione exchanged looks, realizing that Harry's breathing had been irregular for a few moments before that.

"Won't have what?" Tonks asked placatingly.

"Calm down, Harry," Hermione urged, worriedly.

"No," Harry managed to say while trying to control his breathing. "Important."

Remus conjured a paper bag, and the group got Harry calmed down. When he had caught his breath, Harry managed to say, "That was . . . odd."

"Was it really?" Luna asked.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"If Harry is drawing power from our affection for him, or is forming any sort of connection based on that affection, then it's possible our being angry with each other would affect him as well."

That made everyone stop and think. Finally, Harry asked, in a small voice, "Is that really possible?"

"It's possible," Remus acknowledged, "although I wouldn't go further than that."

"I suppose," Hermione said slowly, "that if Harry was more closely connected to us right now, emotionally as well as magically, because of the combat this afternoon, negative emotions could hit him harder now, too."

Remus nodded. "In any case, we all need to calm down. Let's get dressed for dinner."

This night, there were nearly 100 people crowded into the reception hall for dinner. The six students were all on their best behavior, although Ron enjoyed teasing Hermione and Ginny in little ways that made them think he was about to embarrass himself, and therefore them and their hosts. Ginny caught on fairly quickly, but Hermione didn't until quite late in the game.

One thing that caught both Remus' and then Harry's eyes were three wizards in the distinctive purple, red, and blue robes which Remus had pointed out in the tournament. Remus wasn't totally certain what they represented, but knew that they represented power.

Harry didn't pay a lot of attention to them at first, until he realized that while everyone in the hall was looking at the group of teen warriors, those three were looking the most intently at Harry.

Two of them were in their late middle-age. The third, who had been the one present at the tournament two days before, looked to be just a bit older than Remus. When the dinner broke up, the three men disappeared with Lord Dumbledore and the Sibyl quite quickly.

Harry wasn't terribly surprised to be asked to join them shortly thereafter.

## **Chapter XIX**

To Harry's surprise, Lord Dumbledore merely showed Harry into a small, private study he had never noticed before. "Harold, these three men are what we call Dragons. In some ways, they resemble what you would call aurors, hit-wizards, Unspeakables, and warrior monks. You may trust everything they tell you."

Lord Dumbledore then bowed his way out of the room.

"Our names are relatively unimportant," the oldest of them said. "For your purposes, Mister Potter, you may call us Two, Three, and Four."

"Who is Number One?" Harry asked.

"You would be known as Five, should you join us for a period of training," Two went on.

"What kind of training?" Harry asked, suspiciously.

"Magical training of an order you could barely understand the outlines of right now," Number Four answered.

"No outsider has been offered this high of training since the three Dumbledore brothers," Two went on. "Albus completed the Sixth of Nine Levels, the other two managed to complete the Second level. When he contacted us, we did not think we would offer you this training, but something more . . . simple and suitable."

"For one thing, a wizard of your age would not normally be considered for this training," Three went on. "What convinced us otherwise was the synergy of your group."

"All six of you contribute, it is true, but you supply the conduit, you supply the power. In return, the others contribute their feelings and talents. That has created a unique situation which, coupled with the possibilities of what your raw power may grow into . . . well," Two said, "that convinced us to make this change of plans."

"What Levels of training are you offering us?" Harry asked.

"As to that, your five friends and two trainers would only be given a very few aspects of the First and Second Levels, in order for them to understand something of your powers and training. As for you, well. . . ." Two shrugged, "considering the time constraints, you may achieve as High as full Third Level training, perhaps even most of the Fourth. We may wish to continue the training even longer, but we shall see."

"And what will my friends be doing while I'm doing this training?"

"It will seem a tad paradoxical, but to increase your group's power, we shall have to split you up for nearly three months," Four answered. "Each of the others will be given specialized training, according to their talents."

"Your friend Luna will be doing the promised training with the area's Sibyl," Three said. "Hermione will be studying with a powerful group of scholarly witches. Neville will be on a large island, which acts as a nursery for magical plants, studying with the herbalists and gardeners. Ronald will be given warrior training, and if he completes it, he will be able to find himself taken on by the hit-wizards of your Ministry. His sister will be given some of that same training, and you will be given more. She will also be schooled in some of the knowledge she desires to help Neville along his path."

Harry frowned.

"You forgot two people," Four prompted.

"Oh, right. Dora has a very rare gift, which she has developed quite well. We shall help her make her transformations with greater ease. I doubt we can improve her actual ability at all."

Harry stared at them, shocked.

The three men smiled. "We quickly understood her abilities," Number Two said, "just as we saw your guardian Remus Lupin is a werewolf on your world. We can do nothing for his condition, but he is also a very scholarly man, and we shall help him gain greater knowledge as well."

"And what do you get out of this?" Harry asked.

"Tom Riddle cannot win in your world," Two answered. "If he is thwarted long enough there without being destroyed, he may turn his attentions here. Even though we understand he is even more mentally disturbed than he had been in his first incarnation, he is still dangerous. We would destroy him if he comes here, but if he brings those dementors with him, they may multiply."

"We no longer have dementors here, and do not want them to return," Three stated firmly.

Harry thought about all that, and then asked, "How long will we be apart?"

"The mid-summer celebrations are in three days. You would separate on the Twenty-third. You would be brought together sometime before the equinox, say between the Fifteenth and Twentieth of September."

"It seems a long time now," Four said, "but it really isn't, in the larger scheme of life. We can promise you at least six, if not a score or more, of days more-or-less alone together afterwards, so that you may reacquaint yourselves, as friends or even as more than friends."

Harry sighed. "Well, it's what I came to this world for," Harry said. "I can't answer for the others." He smiled slightly. "I know Ron will be disappointed, at the least. He wanted to play Quidditch."

"You can always play Quidditch later. Talk to them tonight and in the morning," Two said. "Give us our answer tomorrow at noon."

"Agreed."



"Well," Harry said to the seven shocked faces looking back at him, "say something."

"Something'," Ron said. Ginny whacked his arm. "OW!"

"You're going, aren't you, Harry?" Neville stated more than asked.

"It's sort of what I came here to do," Harry answered in a regretful tone.

"That's true," Remus agreed.

"Three months. . . ." Ginny said, giving Neville a sideways glance.

"Well, we have until noon tomorrow," Hermione said. "Let's think about it tonight, and talk about it in the morning."

"Good idea," Ron said. "Pity if we have to miss the Quidditch season."

"This will look the same in the morning," Luna said, ignoring Ron. "It might just take until then to accept it."

#### Back in London

"Sit down, Draco."

Draco sneered. "Cousin, the Head of the Family might be illegally stuck in prison, but I still don't take orders from you."

"CRUCIO!"

Draco screamed in agony as he hit the polished floor of Julian Malfoy's new corner office.

After twenty seconds of torture, the curse was lifted. A silky voice said softly, "No, you take your orders from me, boy."

Draco stopped hugging himself and managed to look up, gasping in agony. His breath caught in his throat for a moment, and then he nearly vomited.

Draco had always imagined the Dark Lord to be either tall, slim, devilishly handsome, and charming -- or perhaps tall, broad, and ruggedly handsome. What he saw was inhuman, a monster. Tall, certainly, but more of a snake in human form, with blazing red eyes.

"Tell me everything you know of Potter and his friends," Voldemort commanded. "Tell it to me correctly, without embellishment or editorializing. Every lie, every exaggeration, every unasked for opinion, will get you two seconds of pain, all added together at the end. Every fact you tell me that actually impresses me will spare you one second of the agony. So, little

prince, speak to me your story." Voldemort changed his eyes to gaze on Julian. "You have a suggestion?"

"If you have the time, Master."

Voldemort smiled. "I have an abundance of time today."

Julian bowed and turned to Draco, "If the Master agrees, I want you to tell him the story of your time at Hogwarts. Start from the moment you met Potter. Concentrate on Potter and his friends, but also tell us about the House dynamics, tell us about all the people in your year. Tell us about your teachers. Tell us . . . everything that will help the Master and his servants understand the current dynamics of Hogwarts, and what happens around Potter."

"And do not think I will not be meeting others who can tell me stories," Voldemort said with a hiss. "You will earn your place today. One way, or another."

Draco lay on the floor, trying to think, trying to come up with something to help himself.

"Sit up," Julian commanded. "Start with when you first saw Potter."

Draco sat up and thought for a moment. "It was either the end of July or early August," Draco said in a hesitating voice. "I was finally being fitted for my school robes. . . ."

Nearly six hours later, the exhausted, bruised, slightly broken body of Draco Malfoy was transported back to the luxury of Malfoy Manor, where Draco would need some time to recover.

Voldemort turned to Julian. "Concerned for your cousin?"

"No, Master," Julian said honestly. "I am pleased you were so merciful."

"Merciful?"

"You obviously learned a great deal more than I did, Master, to have spared him so much torment."

Voldemort nodded, "Yes, he is an arrogant little shite, isn't he?" Voldemort's face suddenly contorted in hatred, "Vile, spoiled little beast! How I loathed the type when I was at that school!" He recovered himself. "Perhaps your cousin has a better idea now of where he stands in the scheme of things."

Julian wisely said nothing, merely bowing his agreement.

"Tell me, what did you learn from his meanderings?"

Julian frowned. "Well, Granger must be even more remarkable than I thought."

"For what reasons?"

"I'm surprised Draco hasn't put things together yet, but that had to have been Potter and Weasley using Polyjuice their Second year. Granger must have made it, unless a teacher was helping them."

"That I doubt," Voldemort said. "I am certain the Old Man allows Potter and his friends a great deal of freedom. That would pass for his idea of training, no doubt. Yes, I am also certain Granger must have made the Potion. It is difficult. Young Crouch managed an E.N.E.W.T. in Potions, and I still had to help him a bit with the Potion. For a mere Second year to have mastered it . . . remarkable." Voldemort glared. "What?"

"She must have made some sort of mistake with her own dose," Julian said in a hesitating voice.

"True. I did not miss that, either." Voldemort shrugged. "I doubt they had ideal laboratory conditions to make it in. It isn't difficult for a dose to be contaminated." Julian bowed.

"What else?" Voldemort demanded.

"The Weasley girl would likely be the most difficult to get a hold of," Julian answered. "The Weasley boy and Longbottom are certainly possibilities."

"Yes, I noticed how young Draco managed not to admit that the Weasley girl hexed him and most of his friends last June, leading the break-out in fact. She must be a feisty one." Voldemort hesitated, but then said, "However, we must still consider her as a possible target."

"Yes, Master."

"Young Malfoy didn't know the details, but his father arranged for a . . . device to be given to an unsuspecting First year. This device gradually gained partial possession of the Weasley girl, and launched the so-called Monster. If we do succeed in taking her, she might be easier to repossess."

Julian bowed yet again.

"Why not the Lovegood girl?" Voldemort demanded. "I grant you, Draco knew little about her."

"I am not absolutely certain yet, but it looks like she might be a full Seer, Master."

"Really?"

"Yes, Master. She is definitely on the desensitizing potion, but I haven't tracked down the dosage yet."

"Is that so?" Voldemort asked in a way that seemed to invite more. He knew that a full Seer could be difficult to trap.

"Yes, Master. I have inquired of Snape through Pettigrew about all Hogwarts students who are on the potion, but I haven't gotten an answer yet."

"You were wise to disguise your actual interest. It could be you have asked too much as it is."

Malfoy shuddered, but said nothing as he bowed.

"We shall see how things turn out. What else did you learn?" When Malfoy hesitated, Voldemort commanded. "Speak!"

"Are you satisfied with Snape's loyalty, Master?"

"Yes. I am satisfied he is a traitor of long-standing. It is useful to play him along. That was well-spotted, however. No one else has mentioned any such doubts."

"I hadn't many doubts until a few days ago," Julian admitted. "The portrait could not tell us much, but some of the little she was able to say made me wonder about him. If I had known four days ago what I know now. . . ."

"What made you do more than suspect him today?"

"I cannot believe the Old Man would tolerate the behavior described. I had thought Snape would act much more circumspect. He therefore either knew Snape was your servant and was using him, or he had turned Snape. What advantage would Dumbledore have in allowing a Snape loyal to you roam Hogwarts and influence young Slytherins at the least? There were few I could see, none outweighing the losses in Slytherin to your recruiting. I just don't see Dumbledore letting that happen. Hence, my questions about the House dynamics." Julian shook his head. "Draco should be smart enough to realize that Snape isn't encouraging the Slytherins in your direction, he's drawing them out."

"Exactly. Now, I have seen you glance at that pile of paper several times since I arrived this morning. What is so important?"

"I do not know, Master. They are reports from the Muggle detectives I have working on finding Potter, in case he is hiding in the Muggle world."

"I see. Well, see if there is any news."

"Yes, Master." Julian slit open the reports.

"Some news?" Voldemort asked five minutes later. He was impressed that this Malfoy knew how to behave, and also knew how to do his work even when he was being observed.

"Yes, Master, although I'm not certain if it's good news or bad."

"Well, at this point what we need in information. So, speak."

"Papers have been filed with the Muggle courts, Master. Potter and Granger have new guardians."

"The Weasleys, no doubt."

"Surprisingly enough, no, Master."

"Well, don't make me guess, boy!"

Malfoy quickly said, "Potter's is one Alastor Moody, Granger's is Lovegood's father, Daniel Lovegood."

"Moody is a rather broken-down retired auror. Clever, capable, but paranoid and crippled." Voldemort thought a moment. "He would offer the Boy little active protection, but actually could make a decent coach. I would imagine that the werewolf is with him, wherever the Boy is, helping to coach him as well."

"Most likely, Master."

"Is this Daniel Lovegood the auror?"

Malfoy was very glad he had recently found this out. "He was, Master. After the last of your followers' trials, Fudge, who was promoted to head the Exchequer, slashed taxes to promote growth, and therefore also slashed services. The aurors were cut by at least a fifth, probably more since they haven't hired nearly as many replacements as they should have for subsequent retirees. Lovegood was one of the first ones cut. He runs a very odd little scandal sheet. It's a weekly called The Quibbler."

"I see." Voldemort stood. "I have not felt even the slightest connection to the Boy in nearly five days. I suspect he has been moved far from Europe."

"Should I alter my searches, Master?"

"Actually, you may call off the searches in the Muggle world. Go back to my businesses here, and help that idiot Wormtail. Those should occupy you for the time being. At some point, the Old Man or the MLES will decide to break the Fidelius at Grimmauld Place. I am certain the Old Man must have left some trap door that will break the charm. When they invade the house, I want it ready to greet them."

"As you command, Master."

"You have played your role moderately well, Malfoy. Yes, you have earned a Mudblood or two to stud. Perhaps Granger, since you seem to have taken an interest in her. What has to be done next is beyond your talents, so go back to doing what you do so well. Enjoy your promotion."

"Thank you for allowing me to serve, Master." Voldemort disappeared. Julian fell back into his chair, and sighed a huge sigh of relief.

June 23, Day 54

"I don't want you to go," Hermione said, squeezing Luna hard. She only eased up when Luna squeaked a little.

"What, you're not going to miss me?" Harry teased.

"Of course I will," Hermione said, still holding Luna tightly, her head pressed against Luna's breast. "Just like I know you'll miss me. You'll just miss Luna even more."

"It is what we came for," Harry pointed out.

"I know," Hermione agreed. "We all need to gain as much knowledge and experience as we can."

"And a few months apart now may bring us over a century of togetherness," Luna said with some satisfaction.

"Is that something you see with your Inner Eye?" Hermione teased.

"No, that is what I hope for in my inner heart," Luna replied. "I love both of you dearly."

Hermione breathed in sharply and let go of her lover. Luna had said that just once in front of both Harry and Hermione (and the group), just like neither of them had said it in front of both of the others other than that one time.

"I do love you," Luna said, looking Hermione in the eyes. "You are smart, kind, honest, passionate, and zealous. Harry and I are both as honest and kind as you, if in different ways, but lack your passion for life and zealousness for abstract principle. Harry's passions are directed for helping people in concrete ways, just as you strive to help them in the abstract. You and I have passions for knowing the world, even if we look at that world differently. All three of us are passionate for each other, and for the concept of family."

Luna wrapped her arms around Hermione, and kissed her passionately. "My love and passions will wait for both of you." She squeezed Hermione again, and then leaned over and kissed Harry in turn.

"I love you," Harry said simply. Every time he said it, he said it with a bit of surprise in his voice, as if he were still surprised that anyone could hear him say it without rejecting him. "I love both of you." Hermione and Luna leaned in and kissed his cheeks.

"I love both of you, too," Hermione said, grabbing them in a hug.

"I'll see you in September," Harry said, and after a last hug, the trio broke up to say goodbye to their other friends.

Back in London  
Friday, August 9, 1996

"Kingsley?"

"H'mmm?"

"There's someone here to see you."

Kingsley Shacklebolt frowned but looked up from his reports. "Who is it?" 'If it's that idiot Weasley,' he thought, 'I'll boot his arse back to Fudge's office so fast. . . .'

"His name is Dean Thomas."

Kingsley thought about that, and gestured that the clerk could show the teen in.

"I'm sorry to bother you. . . ." Dean said at the threshold of the small office.

"No, come on in, and shut the door," Kingsley said. "I did say you could drop by any time."

"I wasn't sure if you'd even be here. . . ."

"I might have to leave. Come in and sit down."

"Nothing I can ask about, right?"

"Not the specifics," the auror answered. "In short, we have a good idea of who put the finger on the Grangers and Potter's relatives. The problem is, he's never at home or on the streets. Unfortunately, we can't take him at work, for reasons I won't go into" -- the aurors knew that anyone in the Marvolo Building, now that they had figured out the connections to Voldemort, could escape before they got past the foyer -- "and he's traveling magically someplace else." 'Headquarters, no doubt, not that we can access the place now,' he thought.

"Oh, well, if you have to leave. . . ."

"I'm glad you understand. Is this just a social call, or is there something I can help you with?" Kingsley winced internally at how that must have sounded.

"I was just wondering if you could tell me any non-specific news of Harry and the others."

Kingsley smiled at that phrasing. "Actually, I found out just two days ago, and it wasn't very specific. Harry and his five friends, plus Lupin and another tutor are well outside Europe. I doubt if anyone besides Dumbledore and Moody have the slightest hint of where they are. I certainly don't."

"But they are safe?"

"They are."

"Good enough."

"Anything else? It seems like a long trip just to ask that, even if you were worried."

"I've decided to take you up on your offer."

"Which one?"

"I can use some dueling coaching."

"You did say you earned an O on your Defense practical," Kingsley pointed out.

"And I'll be taking Defense, but things happen around Harry, and I might be around him a fair amount. I need to be ready."

"You do," Kingsley agreed. "Let's set up some lesson times."

## Chapter XX

September 15, Day 138

Rora stared. She had been sweeping the walkway in front of a small cottage. She had been setting it up for the previous two days, waiting for Ronald.

The man walking towards her looked a bit like Ronald -- the hair and height were right, but this muscular, handsome man couldn't be Master Ronald, could it?

"Rora!" Ron called out happily. Rora ran to his arms, and she squealed happily as he lifted her a foot off the ground and swung her around in a circle. "I've missed you!"

"I missed you, too, Master," Rora said. She had really had to work hard for the remaining part of June, after he had gone. "I barely recognized you."

"Yeah, I put on another stone of muscle," Ron admitted, who had gained nearly that much from the beginning of his summer vacation until he had left for this latest training. "It's going to be tough staying in this good of condition." He set her down and looked at her. "You look good, but you look . . . softer."

"I suppose I am. I'm over three months along."

"Along . . . you . . . you're pregnant?"

"I'm due between next March First and Fifteenth," she said, a small smile on her face.

"Wow. . . ." Ron said.

"Come in, come in, Master! I think you need to sit down." She led him into the front room of the small cottage. Ron sat on the small old-fashioned sofa and looked around.

It was a small cottage. A front room, a kitchen that ran the length of the back of the cottage, one bedroom (next to the front room), and a small room with a toilet and a shower stall (between against the side wall of the kitchen and the entrance to the bedroom, and obviously added long after the cottage had been built), with a large chimney as the central core, with large fireplaces in the front room and kitchen and a small one in the bedroom.

"The front fire is hooked into your fire-talking thingy," Rora said. "Master Remus and Madam Dora are at Spruce Cottage. Your sister and Master Neville are at Apple." Ron frowned at that. "This is Pine Cottage, by the way. Madam Luna and Madam Hermione will be at Oak Cottage tomorrow, and Master Harold will join them in two days." She frowned, trying to remember what else she had to tell him. "The fire places are connected for fire-talking only. We move on on October First."

"Fifteen days alone together?" Ron said, surprised. He had hoped for some time with alone with his friends as well. "Then back to the Dumbledore Villa, I guess.

"No, Master," Rora answered, staying in servant mode. "We all move on together, but I'm not certain where. You return to Lord Dumbledore's on the Tenth."

"That sounds good."



"I was told to tell you that the woods are fairly safe, so that you may continue your exercises, but that you should carry your wand at all times."

Ron shrugged. "No problem. Still, that's not the kind of exercise I'm interested in." He hesitated and said, "That wouldn't hurt the baby, would it?"

"No, Master, of course not!" Rora answered with a small smile.

Ron stood up and took off his robe. He hesitated. "Do they know if it's a boy or a girl yet? It usually is a boy, of course."

"They think it's likely to be a boy," she answered. "They also believe it will at least be slightly magical, but there's no way to know how magical for several years yet."

"Well, we'll just hope for the best," Ron said.

"Neville!" Ginny nearly screamed. She rushed from Apple Cottage and leapt into Neville's strong arms.

"Ginny!" Neville clasped her in his arms and kissed her deeply. "I've missed you so much, luv."

"I know," Ginny murmured in Neville's ear. "Writing every day wasn't a pinch on just holding you."

Neville gave a sigh of contentment, which brought a smile to Ginny's face. "You look beautiful," Neville said.

"And you look pretty buff," Ginny said back.

"Really? What to see?" Neville teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Grand idea."

Tonks gave a contented stretch and curled up around Remus. "We should have done this long ago," she said.

"Probably," Remus agreed. "It just didn't seem right."

Tonks' finger traced a scar. "You're looking better than I've ever seen you."

"No transformations for over four months does that for me," Remus admitted. "You, on the other hand, are as stunningly gorgeous as ever."

"I'm twenty-three, and was already in perfect physical condition." She shrugged. "Why would I change?"

Remus rolled part way over and grasped Tonks. He breathed deeply, and sighed. "You don't."

Tonks stared at him. "I am still a werewolf, even if I haven't had to change," Remus pointed out.

"What does that mean . . . for us?"

"Well . . . any children should be fine, but if anything happens to you, I can't raise them."

"Children?"

"If you'd care for any."

Tonks smiled slightly. "I'd like a few, after the war. Anything else?"

"Well . . . I do have a lot of stamina."

"I think four times in one afternoon has taken care of my stamina," Tonks admitted. "Especially after not having any for almost four years. Maybe tonight." She giggled when Remus lightly tickled her. "Later, I said."

"Alright. Shall we talk, or eat?"

"Talk," Tonks said.

Remus leaned over and licked his new lover from the crook of her elbow to the tip of her fingers. "What shall we talk about, my lovely Nymph?"

"Stop that!" Tonks protested insincerely.

"What should we talk about?" he asked, kissing her finger tips.

"Did they tell you how powerful Harry is now? They wouldn't tell me anything beyond what they taught me."

Remus stopped what he was doing. "No, no they weren't totally forthcoming. I have to admit, I never thought of accessing magic in these ways."

"Most of us can't," Tonks said a bit bitterly. "We should have known that Harry's level of wandless magic meant something significant. I mean, I can't conjure much at all, and here Harry will have some real control over raw magic."

"I know what you mean. Harry will be operating at a very high level. There probably aren't a hundred wizards and witches back home that can do the sorts of magic he'll be able to do. I wouldn't be surprised it turned out to just be Harry, Dumbledore, and Voldemort in Europe."

"Has he finished his training?"

Remus shook his head. "He'll keep training part time for the rest of our time here."

"I thought he was going to be finished. Is he carrying on because he did so well or because he didn't?"

Remus snorted. "He exceeded their expectations of course. When has Harry ever let anyone down?"

"Poor kid, having all that on his shoulders."

"We'll all take a little of his burdens. It won't be enough; it can't be enough. Still, every little bit. . . ."

"That's your biggest regret about being a werewolf, isn't it? That you couldn't raise Harry?"

"Biggest regret? No, but it's certainly up near the top," Remus agreed. "I can't bring my self to be very sorry that the Dursleys were killed. They nearly killed Harry's spirit. If I could have raised him. . . ."

"I know. You should have been allowed. Those Muggles were so antiseptic and so determinedly normal, and yet so despicable and, underneath it all, spoiled in every sense of the word."

They were silent for a few moments, luxuriating in just being close. Finally, Tonks said, "Do you think the kids have changed much?"

"Three months is a long time for a teen," Remus agreed. "I barely recognized Harry when we went to pick him up that night."

"How do you think they've changed?"

"Actually, I did get some reports. The boys each grew a little more than a quarter of an inch, Hermione and Luna a little under. I really think they've all done most of their growing."

"Even Ginny?"

"Hopefully she'll do a bit more. Four eleven is a bit too short for her taste, I'm sure."

"Hey, I'm only five four!"

"I know. I doubt Hermione will ever reach your towering height, or that Ginny's will ever match Hermione's."

"Ron must have taken it all."

"True. He and Dean will likely tower over everyone at Hogwarts except Hagrid." Remus quirked a smile.

"What?"

"I just remembered Sirius complaining how he always felt short whenever we came back from visiting Hagrid."

"Well, a little humility was good for him."

Remus laid back. "I wish I knew where it all went wrong."

"It all comes back to Voldemort," she said, slightly surprising Remus by using the title. "Few people are totally good or totally bad. I'm sure even Aunt Bella and Lucius Malfoy had some good in them, somewhere. Hidden very deeply no doubt, but there somewhere. Even Voldemort probably had some good in him at one time. He made his choices, and since then, he's been drawing people into his web of evil."

She paused a moment, and went on, "I haven't been in a lot of firefights, but I thought I had met some bad people. Most of those Death Eaters last June . . . they almost literally reeked of evil." She shook her head. "I just can't understand the hate that drives those people."

"I know. Neither can I."

The two laid there, entwined, until they both drifted off into a nap.

#### September 16, Day 139

Hermione Granger paced back and forth in the front room of Oak Cottage. She stopped and looked around the room yet again, as though a clock would suddenly appear where there hadn't been one before.

Of course, she had seen many stranger things than that.

No, there were still two heavy wooden sofas, with old-fashioned feather-stuffed cushions. "Wait," she muttered, "they were actually called settles, not sofas." She frowned. "Oh, who cares what they were called during the Jacobin period." She went over and kicked one of the four chairs that matched the settles in frustration.

Besides the settles and matching chairs, there were four wooden cathedral chairs, a few matching tables with either lamps or candelabra, and one had a Muggle (or at least quiescent) chess set. There were no decorations on the old paneled walls.

Finally, Hermione heard the soft 'pop' of someone apparating near the front of the cottage. Hermione flung open the door and then stopped, breathing hard.

Luna looked wonderful. She looked a bit more mature (unsurprisingly), but other than that, she looked much the same. The quizzical look on her face was certainly one Hermione had become used to.

Luna cocked her head to the left. "From the force you used to fling open the door, I would have thought I would at least be the recipient of one of your famous. . . ."

Hermione flung herself onto Luna and hugged for all she was worth.

"That's better," Luna managed to say with what little breath was left. "I've missed you, too."

"I **never, NEVER, NEVER** want to do this again," Hermione said as Luna hugged her lover back. "Never!"

"Do what? I thought you would like doing pure research. . . ."

"Not without you. Not without Harry. Not without all my friends." She tightened her grip for a moment, and then said, "I loved the research, but it was so . . . so sterile."

"Life's meaning comes from people, not from research, you mean."

"Well, a good part of it, anyway," Hermione admitted. "Not that I would tell Ron that."

Luna smiled and took Hermione's head between her hands. "May I?"

Hermione looked startled for an instant, but then nodded. Luna stared deeply into Hermione's eyes for over a minute, and then she nodded. "Yes, I feel the same for you. I love Harry, in the physical senses, a bit more than you, but I think our feelings are much the same, overall. It will be a difficult road for the three of us, but so long as we're not overly demonstrative in public we can tolerate the speculations."

"You're getting good at that," Hermione said.

"I am. It's still not absolutely certain if I'm a Prophetess as well as a Seer. I confess, I will not be disappointed if that part of the Gift stays out of my reach."

"Can you really be a full-Seer without it?"

"No, I suppose not," Luna agreed. "Still, having such strong Second Sight is enough of a burden for any one person. They've reduced my potion by a quarter, and it's a bearable burden, but a burden nonetheless."

"I understand," Hermione told her lover. She had managed some research into the subject.

"Have you been here long?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I should have learned how to transfigure something into a clock."

"A mechanical clock is probably pretty difficult. Maybe we could work out a water clock between the two of us?"

Hermione smiled. It was good to have someone as smart as Luna as a lover. "After lunch?"

"After lunch. Then we can see if they have the ingrediants for a treacle tart. I bet Harry is craving one almost as much as he is the two of us."

Hermione laughed. The two witches joined arms and went into the cottage.

September 17, Day 140

"I swear, you're more nervous than I am."

"I suppose I am."

"Why?"

"Why am I more nervous, or why are you less nervous?"

"Either one."

Hermione stopped pacing. "I suppose it's partially a matter of temperament."

"True, but you never struck me as the impatient sort before," Luna replied.

"Except when it comes to Harry, and now you," Hermione answered. "That was one thing that nagged at me for two years."

"It might be the potion, but I'm not following you, my love." Luna had just taken her reduced potion a few moments before.

Hermione smiled, as she did any time Luna used an endearment. Harry rarely used one, and was always shocked when she or (more commonly) Luna used one. Her own parents had rarely used them, either, so she also reacted a bit like Harry when one was applied to her. "Well, I was interested in Viktor and Ron through most of my Fourth year, and Ron all through my Fifth. I kissed Viktor a few times, and dreamed of kissing Ron even more. I almost never fantasized about kissing Harry. . . ."

"Or me."

"Actually, I did, after the Ministry, but that's not important at the moment. The important thing is, even though I never fantasized much about kissing Harry, and I don't think I ever dreamed about him, well, in that way like I did Viktor and especially Ron. . . ."

"Go on."

"Even if I wasn't lusting after Harry, all my non-romantic thoughts that weren't on school were on Harry. How to help Harry. How to comfort Harry." She frowned. "When Mister Weasley was attacked last Christmas, I didn't rush to headquarters to comfort Ron, let alone Ginny or Mrs. Weasley. I went to comfort and help Harry. My life has been centered around Harry since sometime in our First year, and I never realized how important he was to me emotionally until my parents were killed."

"I know. When you embraced Harry at the Weasleys, I questioned if our love would be able to withstand the love you and Harry have for each other. Then I thought about some of the feelings I had for you last spring, and here we are."

"In a triangle."

"Nonsense, my love. We are not in competition for each other."

"I hope not, anyway." Hermione smiled. "I'm glad we had last night alone."

"So am I. Still, it will be lovely sleeping between the two of you, especially now that the nights are getting cool."

"I sometimes suspect you're a hedonist," Hermione teased.

"Oh, yes," Luna teased back, "we are both such Epicureans, in the misused modern sense."

The two witches laughed at the joke. At that point, they heard a soft 'pop'. Hermione was out the door in a split second, and, as Luna heard the collision followed by the explosion of breath squeezed out of Harry, she laughed with joy.

### September 18, Day 141

Hermione woke up early, for once even before Harry. She smiled, remembering Harry saying that he was likely to experience something similar to jetlag, considering the distance he had traveled the day before. All the apparating had tired him out as well.

She undid the piece of yarn that kept her hair tied in the night. She had been amused to learn months before that while Harry really enjoyed all parts of her and Luna's anatomy, he had something of a hair fetish. He loved brushing their hair, running his fingers through their hair, watching their hair move.

Hermione had always had a large bush of wild chestnut hair. She had let it grow even longer, once she had learned a spell which would instantly control it in any combat situation. Now it cascaded to the bottom of her shoulder blades in the back and to just above her nipples in the front. Luna had let her long (once nearly waist-length) straight hair grow to just past her buttocks. The attention Harry lavished on them the evening before was more than worth the effort it took to control their hair.

Hermione looked closely at Harry. She remembered how he had looked at the end of the last school year all too well. He had been exhausted, emotionally, physically, and mentally. He had had dark circles under his eyes and he moved like every motion caused him agony.

The Harry who had hugged her that night at the Weasleys had been a revelation. Hermione had been shocked at how healthy and vibrant Harry was that night. Later, she had realized that she had been surprised because Harry had had that tinge of exhaustion and stress since the run-up to the Third Task, and it had even appeared as early as when she had coached him for the First Task.

Now Harry looked tired, but still far better than he had since before the Third Task. His jaw line was a bit firmer, and his beard stubble was a bit heavier, but he was still in the same great shape he had been when they had been separated. Now it was Luna who had a few stress lines even as she slept.

Neither Luna nor Hermione had expected them to reduce her potion this soon. Still, the Sibyl and her other trainers had decided to give it a try, and it had allowed her powers to grow more obvious and usable, without (so far at least) any bad side effects.

Hermione recognized the signs of both her lovers starting to wake. She smiled and laid back down, draping her self over them in an embracing hug.



## **Chapter XXI**

Friday, August 16, 1996

"Well done!" Kingsley told his nephew.

"You still beat me," a panting Dean said.

"Remember, I'm an auror," Kingsley said with a smile. "I doubt if your pal Potter could take me one out of ten times, or even one out of twenty. You lasted over two minutes. Believe me, that's a great time."

Dean didn't look convinced.

"Trust me, Dean, you're fighting at the N.E.W.T. level now. You have the talent to become an auror, if you want to."

Dean laughed. "The talent maybe, but certainly not the grades."

"What were your O.W.L. results? You never said what they all were."

Dean shrugged. "Let's see . . . I got P's in Astronomy and Divination . . . what a waste of time that class was! I got A's in Potions, Herbology, History, and one of the theories; E's in Transfiguration, Care, and the other theory; and O's in Charms and Defense."

"Pretty good, but you're right, those aren't quite good enough. There are some other MLES positions you could qualify for, if you're interested. What are you going to take?"

"Defense, Charms, Care of Magical Creatures, and the Magical Traditions course. I started Runes as a tenth course last year, so I'm in the Fourth year of that. I need to get at least an A O.W.L. in Runes to fully qualify as a magical artist. I'm also taking drawing and art lessons with a Master in Hogsmeade." Dean shrugged. "If the war is still on in two years, I'll have to consider those MLES jobs."

"Sounds reasonable. If Potter has his club next year, will you be in it again?"

Dean nodded, "Of course. In part to support Harry, but also because we all might need it after school as well as during it."

"You already said that! Why would you need it after school? Do you really think the war will still be going after you leave?"

"Come on! How long did the first war last? How many aurors are there in Britain and Ireland? If you could fight a straight-up battle with the Death Eaters, you'd almost certainly kick their arses, but how likely is that to happen? They're a terrorist group, and if I've learned anything about these types of groups from living in the Muggle world it's that terrorism only ends when you smother it. You'd have to outnumber them fifty or a hundred to one to do that, and you don't, do you?"

"No," Kingsley admitted. "If we were full strength, we'd outnumber them at best five to one, fifteen to one for the entire MLES. Right now, we're at about two-thirds what we should be."

"And, if I'm around Harry, there's a chance I might need these skills, Uncle, even before I leave Hogwarts."

"You're right. I just wish you weren't."

Dean shrugged. "Anyway, any leads on those bas . . . err, people who got Hermione's parents?"

"We know one person who's involved. He'll have to come out of hiding some time. And, when we do, we'll have him."

"You have something to say to me?"

Julian bowed low. "All the work on the house has been completed, my Lord. We didn't uncover anything new inside the house in the process."

"And outside?"

"They have taken over the same flat that I used to survey them, Master. Should anyone come in that way, they will be identified."

"Anything else?"

"Not yet, Master."

Voldemort thought for a moment. "Tell me, those leases on the flats behind the property, the ones you were going to rent. Have you checked on them?"

Julian's eyes went wide. "No, Master, I have not."

Voldemort took a long, deep breath and let it out noisily. "Your first error. Do not make another."

Julian bowed deeply. "Master."

Voldemort smiled. "Crucio!"

September 21, Day 144

"They're here," Luna said.

"You're getting eerie," Hermione teased, "you know that, right?" Luna merely smiled.

Harry smiled as well, and got up to open the door. "Hi Gin, Neville. Where are Dora and Remus?"

Two pops announced their arrivals. Harry dropped his arms from the hug he had had around Ginny. "Great to see the two of . . . ah, Dora! You finally bagged your wolf, I see."

Remus blushed, but Tonks kept her hand firmly in Remus'. "Watch it, 'Harold', I'm still not enamored by the name."

"But what do we call you after you're Mrs. Lupin?" Harry teased. Tonks simply opened her mouth, and was left speechless for a moment.

Finally, she finally said, "Fine, stick with Dora."

Harry turned back to Ginny. "No Ron?"

Ginny shrugged. "Rora is preggers. She's not likely to get a lot of pampering after Ron leaves, or even once we move on on the First."

"True," Harry agreed.

"Since we're supposed to spend ten days as a group before we go back to the Dumbledores', it's hard to get down on him," Ginny went on. The others could only agree.

"Come on in the back," Harry said to distract them. "I've been cooking since yesterday and need to check on the meat."

"You've been cooking?" Tonks asked.

"Hermione doesn't care much for cooking, and she and Luna were going over the O.W.L. material again."

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "Please, don't remind me. I need to do that some more, too."

"We'll go over everything with you and Luna at least one more time in early October, and again in late November," Remus promised as they all went around the cottage into the back garden. The cottage was too small for seven people to eat in at the same time.

"What are we going to be doing?" Hermione asked Remus as she set a large salad on the table she had configured earlier that afternoon. Harry was checking on the roasting goose and two ducks.

"Well, every morning Harry will be spending two hours in his special training, and we'll all continue being coached. When we come back, we'll do half an hour or so of group combat training. The afternoons will be ours."

"Does that apply at the Dumbledores as well as early next month?" Ginny asked before anyone else could.

"Pretty much. We might have a day off here and there."

"I almost don't want to go back," Neville said. "I can understand Ron's point of view."

"Since you said 'almost', I won't argue," Hermione said primly.

As they sat down at the table, Remus stopped Harry. "Did you ever find out why you hyperventilated that day?"

Harry nodded. "It's taken care of," was all he would say. 'But it certainly opened up possibilities -- some good and some other things to worry about,' he thought.

On October 1st, the group moved out of the cottages to a small rustic villa owned by the Dumbledore family. Rora was installed as the overseer of the maids. She was still a bit embarrassed to intermix with the other seven magical visitors, although Ginny forced some interaction.

Each morning, Harry went off to continue his education with the Dragons while the others practiced their own lessons. In the early afternoons, all the older visitors came together and helped Luna and Ginny go over their O.W.L. materials, followed by some time going over some of the Sixth year material for Hermione, Harry and especially Neville and Ron, who had done less of their work than Hermione and Harry had.

The early October weather was cool but fine. As the leaves fully turned, five of the students joyously flew each late afternoon. Hermione flew as well, although not as happily.

On October 10, the eight visitors, once again a close-knit group, prepared to move back to the main Dumbledore villa, where they would still have a little under two months to spend.

The next evening, after dinner, Lord Dumbledore met with the Sibyl and a special guest.

"You asked to meet with me, Lord Alexander?" the Sibyl asked at the threshold.

"Yes, in part as an intermediary. Come in."

The Sibyl was puzzled until she entered Lord Dumbledore's little study. The visitor's aura had been suppressed until that moment.

"Albus," she said with a nod to the figure she now saw was in a corner.

"Sibyl," he acknowledged.

"I had wondered why I was summoned," she said, "now I know. You wish to know how our visitors are."

"I do," Albus acknowledged.

"I would as well," Lord Alexander pointed out. "I had little direct information while they were away."

"Perhaps Albus will start off by sharing what the Dragons have told him."

Albus Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably. "Ronald, Ginevra, Neville, and Dora performed adequately by any standards. They now have a decent idea of how magic works, but really have little ability to control raw magic itself. This is of course true of most wizards and witches. Remus . . . poor Remus. He would have had a brilliant grasp of the essence of magic, if he were not cursed." He looked at them. "You have figured that out, correct?"

"It took some time, but yes," Alexander said drily.

"Hermione and Luna both completed the Second Level, which was most gratifying, and slightly unexpected. Ginevra finished all the combat training associated with those levels as well, while Ronald finished most of it. Of the seven, only Luna has any real mastery of wandless magic. Harry has already finished the Fifth Level, and should officially finish the Sixth by the time he leaves. He will even have had some training in the next three levels by the time he leaves, although he will not be close to finishing the Seventh Level, as that is forbidden. In any event, that is quite an accomplishment."

"Faster than you made the Sixth Level, I believe," the Sibyl pointed out.

"Indeed," Albus agreed. "It was very fast work on his part."

"True. I also believe you were quite a bit older."

Albus nodded, and obviously he was not going to be any more forthcoming. Alexander frowned at the pair of them.

"You are unhappy with Harold's progress, aren't you?" the Sibyl stated.

"I had hopes he would progress into aspects of the Fourth and Fifth Levels," Dumbledore answered. "The Sixth Level has answers which will bring many choices to Harry which I wish he could be spared. He has direct control of magic in some situations. That is a great of responsibility for a person of his age."

"And beyond that?"

"I did not think any but natives were even considered for that training," Dumbledore stated, and then admitted, "nor did I think Harry would progress so fast that it would even become an issue."

"I must admit, I have not heard of any outsider being given any training in the three highest levels," Alexander agreed, "nor anyone progressing that fast. Of course, since I am not a Dragon. . . ." He shrugged.

"In any event, I shall have to have a talk with Harry when he comes home about his responsibilities to the future." Albus turned his attention fully on the Sibyl.

"I see," the Sibyl said. "Very well. Obviously, I am most familiar with Luna. We decreased her potion slightly, and she has suffered no side affects. Her Second Sight has increased dramatically, but there have not been any instances of any prophetic ability, at least not yet."

"We have gone into her training in some depth. She has probably come well beyond the requirements equivalent to your N.E.W.T. in Divination. She has a very good grasp of the

theory. I think Lord Dumbledore would agree that she is quite well-prepared to go back to the stresses of your world, as are all the others."

Lord Dumbledore nodded, and the Sibyl went on, "Luna is very strongly attached to both Harold and Hermione, and they to her and to each other. This will no doubt cause the three of them some difficulties, but I believe all three have the strength of character to ignore outside criticism."

"A triangle?" Dumbledore shook his head. "That could cause . . . difficulties."

The Sibyl ignored that and went on. "Hermione. . . I would say that she has slightly mellowed during her time here. She is still as certain of herself and her moral positions as she was when she arrived, but had gained a little tolerance. You of course probably have an even greater knowledge of her talents than we do."

Albus nodded.

"Ronald is the only one who has succumbed to the temptations offered to wizards on our world. . . ."

"Then perhaps it is a good thing that he and Hermione were no longer together," Albus mused.

"Indeed. That would have caused great stresses to the group," the Sibyl acknowledged. "I admit, I worry about this one. He has great talent and a great mind, and refuses to exercise either except when necessary."

"Having six older, very talented brothers tends to cause that," Albus admitted.

"True," she agreed.

"His . . . relationship has fructified?"

"Yes."

Albus frowned. "Has Harry. . . ?"

"Oh, yes. He gave each of his young companions something like twelve or fifteen thousand Galleons. I suspect Ronald will donate the minimum, unless his sister says something. He would not listen to Hermione, and I doubt any other, even Remus, would say anything to him."

"The minimum is still twelve hundred?"

"Thirteen fifty," Alexander stated.

"I shall donate either three hundred or make whatever Ron gives up to a total of eighteen hundred," Albus said.

"Very good of you," Alexander said. "We're going to contribute three hundred, as well as housing Rora and the child, if it's magical." If it was not, then of course Rora and the child would still be owned by the Dumbledores.

"I wonder if anyone has explained to Ronald that the amount is merely the barest minimum?" the Sibyl mused. "How much would it cost to really raise a wizard moderately well?"

"Somewhere between eight and nine thousand Galleons," Alexander admitted.

"I think you should point that out to him," the Sibyl said, "and then leave it up to him."

"I suppose you're right, as usual," Alexander grumbled. "Go on with your evaluations."

"I presume you knew about the blocks to Neville's magic?" she asked Albus.

"We long suspected them," Albus said. "When they started to dissolve last year, we were quite relieved."

The Sibyl nodded. "I understand. They seem to be totally gone now, although Neville still has some doubts about his own abilities. He is quite fortunate to be friends with this group, and to have Ginevra as a lover." Dumbledore winced. "His feet could have strayed from the Path of Light otherwise."

When Albus didn't say anything, she asked, "What troubled you?"

Albus sighed. "Molly Weasley is . . . a most formidable woman. She is not going to be pleased about Ronald and Ginevra's . . . amorous activities. While sexual exploration is quite common at their ages, they have gone further than most."

The Sibyl shrugged. "The two couples and the trio are all well matched. Ginevra is lively and even fiery, Neville a bit plodding. Both are very loyal in their hearts. Neville will keep Ginevra from becoming flighty, she will keep Neville from becoming staid."

"Remus has been greatly injured by his curse. Dora's kind heart and beauty will persuade him that he deserves some softness and goodness in his life, while her toughness will convince him that she should be allowed near him. Remus' wiseness and kindness will convince Dora that she is not the freak she has believed she is in her inner heart. Her abilities were already quite amazing, but they are now easier for her to perform."

"Now, Harold and Hermione would not have made a good couple. Harold, as you should know, does not react well to strident authority."

"That's certainly true," Albus agreed. Harry would obey well-explained or politely requested orders, but as his run-ins with Professors Snape and Umbridge had showed, he would not be cowed into obedience, nor follow unexplained orders he considered unreasonable.

"Hermione loves Harold, but would try to pressure him to conform. Harold loves Hermione, but would find her annoying in time in a monogamous relationship. Luna loves both of them, and acts as a buffer. She takes the sting out of Hermione's single-mindedness, and the trio's relationship, as I have said, has helped mellow Hermione just a little." She smiled. "I believe it is very passionate and sensuous."

Albus made a face. The Sibyl laughed at him. "Anyway, I now have a difficult time reading Harold. I have little doubt that Luna can read him as easily as ever, but I no longer can easily probe his emotions. I can say he is . . . happy, and still surprised he can be happy."

"As for Ginevra, never take her out of your calculations. She is a lioness. I saw the group practicing their combat today. Harold and Ronald did not realize it, but they were picking up many of their clues on how to adjust their actions from her body language. She is nearly as naturally brilliant as her brother, but uses it more than he does. And, if there is a time when raw passion, for love or anger, is necessary, the group will draw on her."

The Sibyl shook her head. "If I did not know how evil this Voldemort was, I would feel some pity for him."

"There are many reasons to pity Tom Riddle," Albus said. "This is not one of them. He has painted his own fate."

#### October 17, Day 170

It was late at night. Harry was going to be getting up early to go on a hunt with the Dumbledores before his training session, and so both Luna and Hermione were planning on sleeping in the suite's other bedroom. They had gotten very interested in books in the villa's library and were staying up in the library reading, as they had nothing scheduled the next day until after lunch.

Hermione was seated on a rather bench-like sofa, her feet on a footstool. Luna was laying on the sofa, her head on Hermione's lap. Both were deeply engrossed in their books. It wasn't the most comfortable arrangement, but they liked it well enough.

The hours stretched from just before 11:00 until just after 1:30. Suddenly, Luna made the first sound, other than turning pages, that either had made since they had gotten settled.

"Merlin!" she exclaimed, making Hermione jump.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked. "And what is it you're reading, anyway?"

"Nothing's wrong, and it's a book on the occult. Here, read this chapter."

Hermione frowned, but took the book. The 'chapter', describing a ceremony, was only two pages long, and she read them both quickly.

"Are you serious?"

"Quite simply, yes."

"We can't do it here."

"We could, but we probably shouldn't."

"We'd have to go through Remus, and probably Moody," Hermione pointed out.



"Yes," Luna agreed. "That's the best way. Mister Moody would make nine. It shouldn't be difficult to get two more."

"Three, you mean."

Luna pointed at one paragraph in the directions. "I think you'd agree there's only one person Harry would want here," Luna said.

"You're probably right," Hermione agreed. "We'll talk to Remus about it before even mentioning it to Harry, and if he agrees, we'll try and pull everything together before we go back to Hogwarts."

"Deal," Luna said, sitting up. She kissed Hermione lightly on the lips. "Let's go to bed."

Hermione smiled and stretched. "Right you are."

## **Chapter XXII**

October 23, Day 176

"Where's Harry?" Hermione asked when she came out of the shower.

"Ronald came for him," Luna answered.

That spoke volumes to Hermione. Luna had gradually started calling Ron 'Ron' instead of 'Ronald'. Any time he annoyed her, which only he seemed capable of doing, he was back to 'Ronald'.

"What did he do?"

"It wasn't what he did, he was what he was feeling." Luna's empathic powers were more powerful now and she was more open about displaying them. "He was angry, and trying to hide it. He was jealous of Harry, and trying to hide it. And he felt demanding."

"And was trying to hide it?"

"Yes."

Hermione placed her towels on a drying rack near the small fireplace and then climbed into her winter dressing gown. "I would imagine he needs something for Rora, or more likely, their baby."

Luna looked at Hermione with what Hermione considered to be Luna's most avian look. "Why?" she finally asked.

"Because it takes a lot to bend Ron's pride," Hermione said simply. "The baby is about the only thing, the only person, I can think of that would make Ron come to Harry with the feelings you describe."

"Yes," Luna agreed, "you're probably right."

"So what's the problem?" Harry asked, honestly puzzled. "You now think you need about nine thousand Galleons for your son, and I gave you twelve."

Ron winced. "You're right, of course. I'm sorry I almost asked you for. . . ." Ron was truly embarrassed and sorry.

"Don't be that way," Harry nearly begged. "Tell me. What were you going to do with the money? Before you found out how much you really needed to leave here?"

"Well, I was going to leave six thousand," Ron said. "Did the twins talk to you about money?"

"No, I barely had time to do much more than say 'hello' at the funerals," Harry said. He thought a moment, and added, "They did say they had some business to talk over with me whenever we get back."

"Right. I guess Ginny and Hermione didn't mention it, either, probably because they didn't think it was their place to. The short version is, they're doing so well that both Gambol and Jakes and Zonko's are willing to sell out to them after Christmas, lock, stock, and patents." Gambol and Jakes was the joke/novelty store in Diagon Alley, Zonko's the one in Hogsmeade.

"Neither will have much stock after Christmas if they're selling out," Harry pointed out.

"That's what Mum, Bill, and Hermione all said," Ron admitted, "but getting the lease of Gambol and Jakes' store, and ownership of Zonko's, helps make up for that. Gambol's has been going downhill since Jakes bought the family out back in the mid-Eighties, and the twins have always said they haven't introduced anything decent since then, either. Zonko is a little older than Dumbledore, and none of his family care about jokes, so if the twins keep the name on the store, he's willing to sell out, too."

"How much will all that cost them?"

"Thirty thousand."

"That's a lot less than I thought," Harry said.

"Gambol and Jakes will go under in a year or so no matter what," Ron said. "The twins have just given 'em too much competition. They're just taking over the lease, not buying it out. It works out roughly a little more than a third for the Gambol patents and the contents of the store, and the rest to Zonko."

"That makes sense," Harry agreed. "What's the deal they're offering us potential investors?"

"The way they're working it is that the current shop is worth half, because that's where all future ideas will come from," Ron said. "Each twin gets forty-five percent, and you get ten."

Harry frowned. "They don't have to do that!"

"They want to," Ron answered. "Anyway, each one will also put in at least nine hundred Galleons each."

Harry thought about that and nodded. That way, the twins would own at least 51% of their new company.

"They obviously hope to invest more, but they said they'd need their cash for putting into products and advertizing." Harry nodded his understanding again.

"Lee is investing three thousand and is going to manage the Zonko store, and they let the Grangers invest fifteen hundred." Harry nodded again. Lee was already helping out in the store part time and was the twins' best friend. Hermione was also a friend, and had been dating Ron at the time.

"Mum and Dad pledged three hundred," Ron went on. "Bill pledged three thousand, and Charlie seven-fifty. They said they'd ask you for anything the family couldn't pledge, and go for the goblins for anything else."

When Harry didn't say anything, Ron went on. "Like I said, I was going to leave six thousand here. I was going to invest forty-five thousand, I mean hundred. Ginny mentioned before we all split off for training that she would invest six thousand as well." He smiled. "She said she'd leave fifteen hundred if Rora has a girl, but since she's the first girl born a Weasley in I forget how many generations, I don't think that's much of a worry. She said she'd leave seven fifty for her nephew."

"That would have left me with something like . . . nine thousand one hundred and fifty Galleons for the twins if I did the math right." Harry thought a moment. "I'd be happy to. It's a great investment."

Ron winced. "You're right, of course. I was just getting a little greedy. I'll leave nine thousand here, invest two with the twins, and that will still leave me with a thousand to live on until I set myself up after Hogwarts."

Harry smiled. He had wanted to bring this up, and this was his chance. "Tell me, Ron, would you consider doing me a favor?"

"Sure, what?" Ron was happy to make up for his almost begging for money.

"What are you going to name your son?"

"I hadn't given it much thought," Ron admitted.

"Would you name him Sirius?"

Ron thought about it, and smiled. He had always liked Sirius, except for having his leg broken, of course. "That's a great idea."

"So, here's the deal. You leave seventy-five hundred here for a magical child. You invest three thousand with the twins, and you still have fifteen hundred to get you started. If it's a girl, Ginny's fifteen hundred will make up the sum to the nine thousand, and I'll add fifteen hundred as well. If it's a boy, and he's named Sirius, I'll match your seven thousand five hundred. If he's not, I'll still give fifteen hundred. No matter which way you and Rora decide to go, a magical child will be taken care of."

"Weasleys are always magical," Ron said. "There hasn't ever been a Squib born to a Weasley, even from mixed marriages."

"I thought you were Pure-Bloods."

"We are. Some of our cousins aren't. Three Weasleys will be starting next year, six more over the next few years. All boys."

"The Sorting Hat and Snape will both be pleased." Harry frowned, and said, "I thought there was an accountant somewhere?"

Ron waved that away. "Mum's second cousin. And even he wasn't really a Squib. He attended Hogwarts but never got past his O.W.L.s. I think any bad blood came from his father's side of the family anyway."

"Really? Would I know them?"

"Oh, yeah. He's not only Mum's second cousin, he's Malfoy's, too. His name is Julius or Julian Malfoy, I think."

"I guess all you Purebloods really are interrelated."

October 31, Day 184

Lord Alexander looked at the six eager young faces before him. They had all come a remarkably long way in the six months they had been on his world. They drew strength from each other. Even when they had been separated, they had thought in terms of their little group nearly as much as they did of themselves.

He had just finished telling them basically that. They had all picked up on the fact that this was likely leading to something interesting.

"We were wondering," he said, drawing them out, "if any or all of you might be interested in some intense training of a different kind."

"That depends," Ron said with a smile.

"On?"

"On what kind of training, and who we would be with while we were doing it," Ron answered. The rest of the group seemed to agree. They didn't want to be separated again, and of course Ron wanted to spend as much time with Rora as possible.

"You would all be together, if you wished, at the hunting lodge of a friend of mine. While he has a few servants of his own, you might wish to take one along with you."

"And what would we be studying?" Ginny asked.

"We rather thought you might wish to be animagi," Alexander said.

While most looked pleasantly surprised and interested, Hermione asked, "Can that be done in the time we have left?"

"Oh, yes," Alexander assured them.

"It took my father three years," Harry pointed out.

"It took us three years to research the charms and potions, and gather the materials and brew the potions," Remus said. "The actual transformations they did over one Christmas break."

"It will take about one week to do the preliminary work," Alexander said. "At that point, if your magic is compatible with the potions and spells, you will know what your animagus alter ego will be. If you choose to go through with the transformation, there is a week or so of practice and then the fixing potions."

"Why wouldn't we go through with it?" Neville asked.

"Not everyone's magic is really compatible or powerful enough to get a good transformation. You are all powerful enough, but that doesn't mean your magic will be compatible," Alexander answered.

"Think of Rita Skeeter," Hermione reminded them. "She's a beetle. Good for her eavesdropping, but also easily smushed."

"And a friend of my father was a kangaroo," Luna said. "He decided not to go through with it. I mean, kangaroos are rather conspicuous in Denmark."

"Quite," Alexander said, not certain what a kangaroo was or where Denmark was but understanding the basic point.

"Well, I'll give it a try," Harry said. That was the opinion of all six students.

After the meeting broke up, Luna and Hermione steered Remus into the library. "What's up with you two?" he asked.

"There's something Luna found while doing some general reading a while ago," Hermione said. "We haven't had the time to talk to you about it before now."

"We feel it's something that could really make you, Dora, and Harry feel better," Luna said.

"Here," Hermione said, "read this. It's the quickest way to explain."

Remus hesitated, but then took the parchment Luna had extended to him.

He read it, twice.

Remus looked at Luna with a combination of respect, gratitude, and a little fear. "Are you sure we could pull this off?"

"I have some confidence in my abilities," Luna answered, "and I asked the Sibyl about it. I have every confidence that, if we all desire the ceremony to work, it will work."

"Fair enough. What does Harry think?"

"We haven't told him," Hermione admitted. "We wanted to know what you and Dora thought about it, and maybe sound out Moody and Dumbledore when we get back, before asking Harry."

"That way, if there are any objections, we won't get his hopes up," Luna added. "We're sorry we can't do the same for you. After all, for all we know, it might even be illegal back home."

"I understand," Remus answered. "Thank you. I'll bring it up with Albus before you go to Hogwarts. With luck, I'll have an answer for you after the feast."

"Thank you."

November 17, Day 201

The six teens were standing out in the middle of a large field near the hunting lodge where they had been studying to be animagi for two weeks. This was the afternoon they would all learn what their shapes would be, should they go through with the process.

They had drawn straws for the order. Luna was first. She took a deep breath, and then drank the potion. She waited the necessary twenty seconds, turned her wand on herself, and said the incantation.

Her body seemed to blur for a moment, and suddenly there was a swan sitting where Luna had been standing. It gave a startled hiss, and a moment later, Luna was standing there again.

She shook her head. "What was THAT!"

"You were a swan," Hermione answered before anyone else could. Luna concentrated, and turned back into the swan. She stood, and managed a very awkward take-off, a shakey flight, and an even more awkward landing. She reverted, laying on the chilly ground. "This will take some practice," she said.

"I take it that means you want the next dose?" Lord Mikos, their trainer, asked. This would allow her to transform for a week without her wand, at which time she would either have to take the fixing potion or let the ability disappear forever.

"Yes, please."

Ginny went next. She eagerly made the transformation. She blurred and transformed into a small Welsh Terrier. She moved around in a circle for a moment, as if trying to figure out what she had changed into, and then broke into loud, excited barking. She transformed back. "Was I a dog?" she asked.

"A Welsh Terrier," Tonks confirmed.

"Cool!" She took the extending potion as well.

Hermione was a bit more nervous than the previous two girls. The potion made her cough, and she nearly missed the signal to transform.

"What a pretty bird," Ginny said.

"She's a parrot," Neville said. Hermione was indeed a very large, green parrot.

"Aren't those famous for talking?" Ron asked. "Does that mean she'll be able to talk while a bird?"

"Yes, but she'll have to work on it," Remus said as Hermione hopped around on the ground, fluttering her wings. She finally popped back. "Another bird?"

"A big green parrot," Neville repeated.

Hermione frowned and then shrugged. "Well, it could be worse," she said, reaching for the potion.

"Are you ready, Neville?" Lord Mikos asked.

"Ready," Neville said, taking the potion in a gulp. The group goggled at the resulting small pony.

Neville popped back, echoing Luna: "What was THAT?"

"You were a pony," Hermione answered.

Neville wrinkled his nose. "Not very useful," he grumbled.

"You never know," Ron said, taking his dose and staring at it for a moment before swallowing it. In his place was a magnificent Irish setter. He barked joyfully and gamboled about for a few moments, although Hermione had to force him from sniffing at her too intimately.

He popped back. "What kind was I!"

"Irish setter," Harry said as he took his own portion of the potion. "Seamus will be pleased."

Ron laughed and drank the extending potion as Harry took his dose. Ron stopped laughing and the others stared. In Harry's place was a huge Kodiak bear. The bear sat back on his haunches and roared. Harry went down on all fours and ambled over to a small tree, about four inches thick. Harry rubbed against it and then went up on his hind legs. He grasped the trunk in his huge paws, and snapped the tree in half.

Harry snapped back. "Was I a bear?"

"A bloody big bear!" Ron exclaimed.

"Well, I can't go out in public too often," Harry said with a grin, but he thought it could definitely be useful -- or at least fun.

All six students went through the rest of the process and became animagi, although Neville was the least enthusiastic of them. They were registered with the Dragons and in the town of Ruchak, just as they had done with their apparating. This would give them legal cover until they reached their official seventeenth birthdays, when they should register in Britain.

With the exception of Ron, the visitors were yearning to return home throughout most of November, despite their general interest in the animagi training. The other five students made certain Ron had all the time he could get with Rora, while supporting him whenever they were together.



None of the group (other than Ron of course) had ever really warmed up to Rora too much, but they certainly did not dislike her. They therefore did not have to push too far to sympathize with Ron's position.

Yet finally, December 5 in local time came around. Rora never asked Ron to stay, and so he never thought of the idea on his own. They had returned to the Villa the night before, and set off for the stone circle after breakfast. All eight visitors were quiet on the trip, Ron most of all.

They joined hands in the center of the circle, and Remus said the long returning spell.

In less than five minutes, the travelers felt the temperature go from just below freezing to a hot and humid summer's day.

They were back.

Saturday, August 25, 1996

Alastor Moody clumped out into the bright sunshine of the Adriatic dawn. Seven of the eight travelers were still asleep, but he needed to talk with the eighth.

Harry came running up a path and jogged in place for a few seconds before coming to a complete stop. "Good morning, Alastor."

"Morning, lad," Moody said. He shook his head. "I knew what was happening, and it's still difficult to accept all the changes you went through."

"Well, for you it was less than three weeks, for us more than seven months."

"Aye, I know. I'll have to treat you even more as an adult than I did before."

"Thank you. We spent all day telling you what we did, but you never said what has been happening here."

"If you mean here on the island, not much of anything. I relaxed, and I'll thank you not to pass that on to anyone other than those two lasses." He frowned. "Two lasses?"

Harry shrugged. "For now, at least."

Moody returned the shrug. "As for the rest of the world, there was an attempt to break the Death Eaters out of Azkaban. More Death Eaters were killed than were freed, however, including Lucius Malfoy. The Lestrangle brothers are loose, though. On the whole, it's been quieter than anyone had anticipated."

"And . . . and . . . damn, I can't say it. Headquarters?"

"It's under a Fidelius again, done by Voldemort himself. The man who coordinated the attacks on your relatives and Grangers has been identified; he's probably hiding at Headquarters,

along with Pettigrew. Dumbledore and I thought about what you said about Snape, and we agreed with you. Snape will not be meeting with his former master again."

"I bet he hates that!"

"He does, but he also accepts it."

"So, what do we do now?"

"In the fight against Voldemort? Nothing. You're stronger than anyone ever thought you could be so soon, but you're not totally ready to force a final show down. You'll be ready sooner than anyone thought."

"Which is?"

Moody shrugged. "We figured three to five years. I'm betting two at the most now."

Harry frowned but did not argue. "And in the short term?"

"Enjoy two more days in the sun. We'll go home on Monday. The Ministry just agreed two days ago to bring in aurors and some lesser law enforcers from around the world. The North Americans are sending a hundred all by themselves, and they'll be arriving Monday as well. If Voldemort is up to something right away, it's unlikely to be against you or your friends. Dumbledore figures it's safe for the two Weasleys to visit the Burrow for a day or two, and for Longbottom to go home for a few days as well." He grinned. "You can go, too, but do you really want to be there when Ron tells Molly she's going to be a grannie?"

"When you put it that way, no," Harry admitted.

"I rented a place in Diagon Alley, the flat right across from Lovegood in fact. You and I can stay there for a few days, and Granger can stay with the Lovegoods. Dumbledore decided to let all of you ride the train after all. Lupin, Tonks, and I will be on the train. Tonks is assigned to Hogwarts for greater security and of course Lupin is going, too. I think, between the three of us, the rest of the staff, and you and your friends and your defense club, we should be in pretty good shape."

"We can but hope," Harry said.

"Aye, lad. We can. It's good to have you lot back."

"I missed you, too."

"Come along, then, my boy. Get that cane of yours, and I'll show you how to use one for more than walking, although I hope you don't need it for that for at least a hundred years!"

## Chapter XXIII

Friday, August 30, 1996  
Diagon Alley

"I really hate to see this," Ginny said. She, Ron, and Neville were seated on a small second floor balcony over-looking Diagon Alley, taking a break from helping the twins. The ground floor was the premises of Weasleys Wizard Wheezes, the first floor of the narrow building held the kitchen, dining room, and a parlor, and the second floor three bedrooms and a bath. The trio was staying the weekend (helping out in the store), and was currently waiting for the missing trio of Harry, Hermione, and Luna. They had stayed at the Lovegood and Moody flats the night before, and Harry had met with some financial people early that morning (to learn about his assets, and also to arrange financing for the twins). After that, the trio had planned a little shopping, and then would stop by before lunch.

"What don't you like?" Ron asked.

"How empty the street is."

"I've never seen it like this before in August," Neville agreed. The street was hardly deserted, but it looked more like the thin traffic of a typical early morning than the usual later morning crowds right before the start of Hogwarts.

"It's not like there have been many attacks, either," Ginny said. That was true. Between the time they had left and the night before, there had been twelve attacks on empty, wizarding houses, and the massive attack on Azkaban, which had resulted in one more Death Eater being killed than there had been Death Eaters freed.

"I guess a lot of people remember the First War," Neville suggested.

"And the wars against Grindelwald," Ginny added. "In some ways the second one was worse, because the Muggle Second World War was on, and the bombings sometimes penetrated to wizarding sites. Diagon Alley, the Ministry, and Hogwarts were the only places with wards strong enough to protect them."

"You were around Hermione too much," Ron grumbled.

After a few minutes of silence, Ginny remarked, "I wonder which direction they'll come from."

"Well, if they're coming from the Leaky Cauldron or Gringotts, they'll be coming from our right. If they're coming from The Quibbler offices, that's that building just over there to the left," Neville pointed out.

"Of course, if they're coming from Quality Quidditch supplies, they might just drop down next to you," came a voice from above them.

"Harry!" Ginny squealed happily. "Get down here!"

"Now there's something you don't see every day," Neville said laughing as Harry landed his Firebolt lightly on the small balcony, forcing Neville and Ron back into the guest bedroom. Hermione, who had been riding behind Harry with her eyes shut and a very firm grip on him

(her flying had improved, but she still didn't like heights), finally opened them as she felt her feet touch. Luna, sitting sidesaddle on a broom, landed next to him. Ron remarked to himself that while he still was not attracted to Luna in that way, she did have really nice legs.

While Ron had seen the others enough not to really notice how much he and the other four had grown over the summer, he finally noticed that the changes in Harry were almost shocking. His hair was much the same, although a little longer. Without his glasses, his eyes were actually mesmerizing. Still, it was the other changes that Ron remarked on.

Harry would never be tall. Ron was now towering well over six foot three, and Neville a very muscular five foot ten. Harry was a good two inches shorter than Neville, and still built along the long-legged, rangy build he had always had. Harry only had a colored undervest on (Ron wondered what the Oakland Raiders were, and where Harry had gotten it), and was showing he had a lean but fairly muscular upper-body. Harry's forearms were even more muscular, almost massive.

"Sorry for dropping in, but Luna wanted to test her new Clean-Sweep All-Weather," Harry said with a smile that lit up his face. He reached over and shook Ron's hand, as if they had been separated for a long time, and Ron was very happy to get it back in one piece. Neville was less reserved, and he and Harry shook hands and clasped each other's shoulders. They all went downstairs to hassle the twins and eat lunch.

Even though Ron, Ginny, and Neville were helping the twins with the pre-Hogwarts rush that had finally materialized most of the afternoon, they did manage some fun shopping to spend their wages. Harry, Luna, and Hermione spent the entire afternoon shopping, despite Hermione's protests that Harry and Luna should leave her to her own devices so they could go to places other than the used bookstores she wanted to shop at.

"Diagon Alley should be mostly safe," Harry said simply, "but we can't be certain. Three is safer than two."

"And we're not going to disappear into dark corners, especially without you," Luna said, wrinkling her nose. "Besides, they're dirty as well as dark."

The trio stopped in front of a 'second hand' shop, and just looked into the windows, trying to see if there was anything interesting. Harry had his arm around Luna, and then placed his hand on Hermione's lower back to steady her as she tried get up on her toes to peer at a high display.

"Well, Mudblood, I see you've grown some tits at last, even if your hair is worse than usual. At least you dumped Scarhead and the Weasel, even if it was to sell yourself to someone else."

Hermione saw what happened in the reflection of the window. On the one hand, Harry seemed to move with such languid movements that it looked casual. On the other, he moved so fast no one had time to react.

Harry dropped his arm from around Luna and his hand from Hermione's back, and went into a spinning kick right to Malfoy's mouth. When his foot came down, Harry's other foot followed through and caught Goyle on the jaw. Harry ended up standing almost nose to nose with Crabbe. It had taken perhaps two seconds at the most. "Perhaps you should help your friends to get up and see a dentist," Harry said.

Crabbe finally blinked. "Potter?" he asked. Not even Draco had recognized who this was.

"Yes?"

Crabbe shook his head, and helped the confused Goyle to his feet. Together, they took the unconscious Malfoy away. The whole thing had happened so quickly, it had not even attracted any attention from most of the other people on the street. The only ones who saw was a quartet who simply moved on after they saw the Slytherins were making a rapid retreat.

"You weren't kidding about the martial arts work that went along with that Dragon training," Hermione said, still slightly in shock.

"No, I wasn't," Harry answered. "Ignoring Malfoy hasn't worked, cursing Malfoy hasn't worked. Your slapping him didn't work. Still, a little negative reinforcement seemed to be in order."

Hermione goggled at little at Harry's use of the term, but she let it go.

"It might make you feel better, but I don't think it will help Draco adjust his attitude," Luna pointed out, to which Hermione could only agree.

Harry shrugged.

The quartet of friends took the Muggle Underground to one of their parents'. They were fairly silent, thinking about what they had seen as opposed to what they had bought. The Thomas household was quiet, as all the younger children were visiting relatives for the week with their mother, while Mr. Thomas was still at work.

After putting away their purchases, the four went up to the roof to get a little air.

Finally, Lavender Brown said, "Have you ever seen anything like that?"

"A little," Dean said. "Aurors learn some of that kind of fighting, but Harry really looked like he knew what he was doing."

"He looked like some martial art movie characters I've seen," Seamus said.

"And Malfoy and Goyle looked like movie extras," Dean agreed.

"I just couldn't believe that was Harry," Parvati said.

"He really must have worked out this summer," Seamus pointed out.

"I'll say!" Lavender exclaimed. Seamus frowned. He had been pursuing Lavender since the Yule Ball a year and a half before, and she had only agreed to date him exclusively a few weeks before. This was the first time he had managed any time with her all summer. Dean and Parvati were in a similar situation, although they had met to go to the cinema twice over the summer.

"I wonder if he was with Hermione or that blonde," Dean remarked. "He looked pretty friendly with both."

"That's true," Seamus jumped in to say. He did not want Lavender thinking of Harry any more than Dean wanted Parvati to.

"She sort of looked like that Ravenclaw, Loony Lovegood," Lavender said thoughtfully. "You know, a year behind us."

"Ginny Weasley did say she was with them at the Ministry last June," Parvati reminded them. "If Harry's friendly with her, dating her or not, we'd better drop the 'Loony'."

"True," Lavender said.

"Maybe he's dating both of them," Seamus teased.

"You had better worry about keeping one woman happy without fantasizing about two," Lavender snapped.

"Yes, ma'am," Seamus said with a grin. "Any thoughts on how I should do that?"

Lavender rolled her eyes mockingly. Parvati was not ready to leave the subject of Harry. "I would think Hermione would be far too possessive to share Harry in any way if they're seriously dating."

"That's true," Lavender agreed. "And after teasing Ron along for a year, too! Still, I always thought she had a thing for Harry."

"I wonder if Harry was wearing those Muggle things, you know, the little lenses for the eye. . ."

"Contact lenses," Dean supplied. "He might have been wearing them. There are some new surgical techniques available, too."

"Either way, I never knew his eyes were that gorgeous."

"True," Lavender agreed, "those eyes are even dangerously sexy than that bod!"

Dean and Seamus both scowled. Parvati and Lavender laughed and looked at each other in silent communication.

Finally, Parvati stood up.

"What?" Dean asked.

"Why don't you show me your new football posters," Parvati said. Dean looked confused. "The ones down in your room." Dean looked embarrassed for a moment, but only for a moment. He stood up and glanced at the confused-looking Seamus and the grinning Lavender.

"We're going to stay here," Lavender said.

"Oh . . . alright."

Parvati rolled her eyes and grabbed Dean's hand, and then dragged him from the roof.

"What was that all about?"

"Parvati's taking Dean to his room to snog."

"That's what I thought, but he didn't seem to be thrilled about it."

"He's thrilled," Lavender said, "just a little scared."

"Oh."

"He was also worried that I might take you to his room to snog instead."

"Oh." Seamus thought about that, and his face fell.

"It's probably better if we snogged up here instead, don't you think?"

Seamus smiled. "I'm sure you're right."

Sunday, September 1, 1996

Harry, Luna, and Neville settled into their compartment as the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny of course had to start the train ride in the Prefect's compartment.

After searching for something new to talk about, the three spent a very interesting time talking about wands in general. Neville knew a lot about the magical properties of wood, Luna was a cousin of the Ollivanders and had picked up some of their knowledge and interests, and Harry, to his slight surprise, found the subject very interesting.

Some 45 minutes into the ride, the door of their compartment flew open with a bang, revealing Draco Malfoy, with Crabbe and Goyle behind him. Harry could see that two other Slytherins, Nott and Montague, were standing facing either direction in order to cover Malfoy. 'Drat,' Harry thought, 'Malfoy's getting a little sense.'

Harry said, however, "I see you're no longer eligible for the Prefect's carriage." There was no sign of the prefect's badge.

"That's another thing I have to blame you for, Potter," Malfoy spat.

"Let's see, you back Umbridge, go overboard bullying people, she loses, and you blame me. Yes, that sounds about your level of intelligence."

"You also had our fathers arrested. . . ."

"I didn't arrest them or tell anyone to arrest them. I didn't force them to follow Voldemort. . . ."

Draco shivered in fear. "Don't you **DARE** use his name!"

"Fine," Harry said in a bored voice. "I didn't force them to follow Tom Riddle, and I didn't force them to attack us in the Ministry. We did beat them, poor excuses of wizards that they are or were. . . ."

"How dare you. . . !"

"Come off it! Six students beating on twelve nasty Death Eaters? Of course, come to think of it, four students beat your Inquisitorial Squad. . . ."

"**SHUT UP!**" Draco screamed.

"Crabbe, I can understand that you and Nott are kind of stuck, since your fathers were at the Ministry, too, even if your father was also killed trying to escape." Harry raised his voice, "What about you, Montague? What's your connection? How about you, Goyle? Your father was at Voldemort's, excuse me, Tom Riddle's rebirth, but he wasn't at the Ministry. Why are you sticking to the losing side?"

"I don't know who this Tom Riddle is, Potter. . . ."

"That's all right, Malfoy. I didn't see the connection at first, either, but then, I was twelve at the time. Tom Marvolo Riddle was Head Boy back in the early 1940s. He was the heir to Slytherin who opened the Chamber then. Your father slipped a magical diary into a First year's supplies, and it used a form of the Imperius to use the First Year to open the Chamber of Secrets."

"There is no magical family called Riddle. . . ."

"True," Harry agreed. "His mother was the heir of Slytherin, the last Marvolo. Riddle was a Muggle. Your precious leader is a true half-blood."

Malfoy, pasty white, whipped out his wand but Harry already had him covered. "Watch and learn, Draco. The avatar of Tom Riddle did this little trick for me in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry's wand sketched out the name 'TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE' in fiery letters, and then Harry rearranged them into 'I AM LORD VOLDEMORT.' "This isn't really about your Pure-Blood claims, Draco," Harry said firmly, putting his wand away, "it's about an egoistical, evil monster who is using them and you to gain power for himself."

Draco hesitated, trying to put all the pieces together, then brought his wand up. Even though he could see none of the three in the compartment had their wands out, he felt a hex hit him. He coughed, and tried again to curse Potter. Nothing came out of his mouth. He turned to



Crabbe and Goyle. They could not speak either. They had somehow been hit by a powerful muting course, which, apparently, had hit Nott and Montague as well.

"I tried talking nicely to you, Malfoy," Harry said coldly. "I tried to reason with you. Why don't you five go off and really think about what I told you? Before I hurt you. Badly."

All five scowled, but there was little to do except do as they were told.

"What did you do to them?" Neville asked.

"Did you see me do anything?" Harry asked innocently, while Luna shook her head.

"No, I didn't," Neville answered, "but. . . ."

"Then let's say I must not have done anything, and leave it at that. Much safer, all around."

"Alright," Neville said. He knew a good deal about Harry's powers, but was not going to argue.

"What we don't know for sure, we can't tell," Luna pointed out.

Ron and Ginny were not happy they had missed seeing Malfoy and his goons routed. Hermione had scolded Harry, since it seemed evident he must have been behind the muting charm somehow.

"But how could I have done it?" Harry asked.

"Harry, don't be daft," Hermione said. She had an even better idea of how powerful Harry was than Neville, after all.

"I've heard the great thing about wandless magic is that you can't prove someone has used it," Harry said with a grin.

The six friends enjoyed the rest of the train ride, as a number of the previous year's DA membership had dropped by and agreed to continue the club. When they got off the train, Harry was especially happy to see Hagrid calling out to the First years. Hagrid waved at Harry, and Harry could see that unlike in the summer, there were no obvious bruises or injuries. He hoped that meant Grawp was someplace far away, or had at least calmed down.

Harry, Luna, Ginny, and Neville waited towards the end of the carriage line while the Sixth year prefects made certain that the other students stopped talking and greeting each other and got into the other carriages. Harry walked a little ahead, and patted the rump of the thestral. Harry looked towards the head of the line, and saw that most of the students were aboard, and many of the carriages were already moving out.

At that moment, behind him, Harry heard a cry of "Now! Get 'em!"

As Harry turned, he heard Ginny scream, and saw Crabbe hit Luna in the back of the head as hard as he could with his Beater club, while Montague hit Neville at the base of his neck with another club. Ginny was struggling with Nott, who was trying to choke her with his bare hands.

A flick of Harry's wand immobilized the three Slytherins, and Harry looked around for Malfoy or Goyle. He didn't really pay attention to the fact the Sixth year prefects were coming quickly. Harry instead went over to his friends.

Ginny was already kneeling over Neville. "He seems to be okay," she said. "Just knocked out."

Harry nodded and knelt beside Luna, checking her pulse. At first, he thought she was dead, but then he felt a slight flutter. As Hermione knelt beside Harry, Luna opened her eyes. "I love you, Harry," she said simply. Her eyes moved to Hermione. "I love you, too. Don't either of you . . . grieve . . . too much. Make sure . . . you both get hugged and kissed . . . at least . . . twice . . . a day. . . ." Luna shut her eyes, and a long breath slowly escaped her lips.

Harry looked at Luna. He looked at the immobile Crabbe, the bloodied bat still in his hand. He looked at Luna.

Harry snarled as he stood and took out his wand, pointing it at Crabbe while Hermione broke down, crying and keening for a brief moment as she held Luna.

Harry started to lower his wand, and then looked at Luna and Hermione. He growled, and raised his wand again.

Hermione looked up and took this all in through her tears, and stunned Harry before he could kill Crabbe. Then she went back to holding Luna's limp form.

## **Chapter XXIV**

Harry woke up with a headache.

Simply taking a deep breath told Harry he was in the Infirmary without even opening his eyes, and he wondered for a brief moment if Voldemort had overcome all his training and had managed to attack him.

Then he remembered who had been attacked. Harry scrunched up his face, determined not to cry.

He felt a weight he hadn't been aware of movement by him on the bed. "It's alright to cry," Hermione said with a sob, "I know I am." Harry grabbed onto Hermione and cried on the shoulder of her robe while she held him and cried nearly as hard as she cradled Harry in her arms.

They cried for some time, but as Harry wound down, he had to ask, "Why?"

"We don't know, Harry," another voice said.

Harry instantly stopped crying and managed to sit up without dumping Hermione off the bed. Harry glared at Dumbledore. "How long have you been here?" Harry demanded.

"Not long," Dumbledore said. "None of the three perpetrators will say anything, other than confessing their guilt. They are not currently under the Imperius, and claim that they were not. Mister Nott and Montague have been expelled and may be arrested for assault. Mister Crabbe has been arrested for attempted murder."

"Attempted? You mean. . .!"

"Miss Lovegood suffered a cracked skull and a very severe concussion, but she will pull through," Dumbledore said. "She will need a deep healing sleep tonight, and a few days rest to fully recover. You may see her after breakfast."

"Thank God," Harry said. He realized that Hermione's tears had been tears of relief, not sorrow. He frowned. "Malfoy. . . ." Harry started.

"Mister Malfoy may or may not have been directly or indirectly involved," Dumbledore admitted. "Both he and Mister Goyle left on one of the earlier carriages, and since the other three have confessed, they may not be questioned further under any form of compulsion."

Harry frowned.

"Harry, we know that Mister Malfoy may have been involved, but if you do anything, it will look unprovoked. If he was involved, he will give himself away, and we can deal with him then. Until that happens, you must **not** allow yourself revenge. You must **not** leave your self open to punishment."

Harry said nothing.

"Because of this attack, Fifth and Sixth year classes will not start until Tuesday morning," Dumbledore went on. "You may stay here, or go back to Gryffindor as you please tonight."

Dumbledore leaned over and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I am very sorry for this, Harry. Although I of course am not as close to Miss Lovegood as you, I am saddened by her injury, especially in this evil fashion."

"Thank you, sir," Harry whispered. He looked blankly at the ceiling, debating. He really wanted to be alone, or alone with Luna and Hermione, but he could almost hear Luna telling him he should not be alone at a time like this, and he was sure he could not convince Dumbledore to let him see Luna until the morning at the earliest. "I guess I should go back to Gryffindor, sir."

"Very well. Do you think you could eat anything?"

Harry looked ill just at the concept. It had been a very close call, both in terms of Luna's life, and his using the Killing Curse.

"I thought not," Dumbledore admitted. "Here, I had the kitchens send this up."

Harry stared at the tall glass, confused.

"An American confection -- a double chocolate malted milkshake with an egg whipped in. You need some sustenance, and the chocolate should help you a little. You may go when you finish it."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Harry said in a dispirited voice. He and his group had failed their first real challenge.

After Dumbledore left, Harry asked, "How are Neville and Ginny?"

"Ginny is spitting fire," Hermione admitted. "After . . . oh, that's right. I need to apologize to you."

"You're the one who stunned me?"

Hermione nodded. "I couldn't be sure you wouldn't kill Crabbe." Hermione scowled. "I know I was considering it until I realized Luna wasn't dead, and I didn't have time to convince you she wasn't."

Harry nodded. "I would have. I wish you could have thought of some other way of stopping me, but I'm glad you did stop me."

"Sorry."

"I forgive you, Hermione," Harry said, hugging her close. "Tell me about Ginny and Neville."

"Ginny went over and really stomped on, well, she stomped and ground her heel into them. Even magical repairs won't work, and so they won't be having children. Ever."

Harry grimaced.

"Physically, she's fine. Neville is fine, too, and he'll be allowed out in the morning. He's sleeping now."

"What time is it?"

"A little before Ten. Harry, you know how I feel about Luna, how Luna and I feel about you, right?"

Harry nodded.

"You'll try not to hurt Malfoy, right? At least until we can legally prove he deserves it?"

Harry smiled grimly. "Since you put it that way, I'll agree. However, I think I'll be putting a lot of muting charms on the little prick until then."

"As long as it's nothing much worse than that, I won't say anything other than to mind your language."

"Hermione."

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too." She hugged him close, and then reminded him, "Now, drink your milkshake."

When Harry and Hermione got back to the common room, he was surprised to see all the other Fourth through Seven years there (except for Neville, of course), along with Dennis Creevy. Harry remembered that they had all been in the DA the year before.

Katie Bell stood and came over to Harry. "Harry, we've been friends for five full years now, haven't we?"

"We have," Harry agreed.

"Then I hope you don't mind," she said, and threw her arms around Harry's shoulders.

"Harry," she whispered as she hugged him, "I am so very sorry for what happened. Ginny told us how friendly you are with Lovegood."

"Thanks, Katie," Harry said. Katie kissed his cheek and let him go.

Every one of the Gryffindors present at least came up and shook Harry's hand and offered their support. Unlike the start of the year before, Harry knew, his House would be firmly with him.

In the end, Harry was standing with Hermione, Ron, and Ginny, while the others had gone to their rooms. "Harry," Hermione said, "I hate to bring this up, but do you remember the last thing Luna said before she passed out?"

Harry nearly teared up a little, but merely nodded and fought the tears down.

"Well, she usually knows what she was talking about. She woke up for about ten minutes in the Infirmary, and made a suggestion, which I've decided to implement. It will also partially hide the fact that Luna and I are, well, that we're with you and each other like we are. We are going to make certain that **this** time, you have all the support you can get. For part of that support, well, here." She handed him a sheet of parchment. "Do any of the names on this list bother you?"

Harry glanced at the list and frowned. "Bother me for what?"

"This is the HPSN," Ginny announced grandly.

"The what?"

"The Harry Potter Support Network," Hermione replied. "Every day, or at least every day each member can without disrupting class or something like that, each member will give you a kiss."

"You have got to be kidding," Harry protested. "There are . . . sixteen names here!"

"Colin isn't one of them, is he?" Ron asked.

Harry scowled at Ron, and then looked at the list again. He reached over to a nearby table and picked up a quill, scratching Colin's name off the list.

"Harry, admit, you tend to isolate your self and brood," Hermione accused.

"Maybe," Harry admitted.

"Well, Luna and I can't be as close to you as often as we'd like to be, like we were when we were away. This is one way we're going to make certain you get the emotional support you're going to need in the fight against Voldemort. That's because a lot of your moral strength comes from emotional support, platonic love, if you will. You're going to get plenty of it."

"This seems a bit extreme, to say the least," Harry pointed out. Ron snorted, but wisely said nothing.

"I'm sure the list will get longer, once we let Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws join," Ginny teased after giving her brother a dirty look.

Harry's scowl easily equaled anything Krum ever managed.

"It's a good thing you stopped being the Seeker," Ron said to Ginny.

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to scowl like that," Ginny teased, getting the joke.

"You and Luna won't mind?" Harry asked.

"Of course not," Hermione said. "You love us in all the important ways. This is just to get everyone thinking in terms of supporting and helping you."

Harry sighed.

"And to distract everyone from your relationship with both Hermione and Luna, and their relationship as well," Ginny reminded him. Harry frowned again.

"It won't be that bad," Ron said. "Think of it as just a small sacrifice for the cause."

"Seriously," Hermione said also after making a face at Ron, "go to sleep. Madam Pomfrey gave me this. It's not a Dreamless Sleep Potion, but it should help you tonight." She handed him a small vial.

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Goodnight," Hermione said, kissing Harry deeply.

"Goodnight," Ginny said, kissing Harry's cheek.

"Come on, mate," Ron said. He hesitated, and then put his arm around Harry's shoulders and took him up the stairs.

Monday, September 2, 1996

Dean Thomas woke up early. He was usually the first boy awake in the room. This morning, he saw that Harry had beaten him, which was unsurprising considering that Harry's restless dreams had woken Dean three times in the night despite the potion. The smaller teen (for Dean now stood more than an inch taller than Ron) was still just able to squeeze himself into the small window seat length-ways, something Dean had not been able to do for a few years. Dean went over and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Morning, Dean," Harry said without looking up.

"Morning," Dean acknowledged. He knew there was very little good about this morning from his friend's point of view. "Harry, there's been something I've been meaning to tell you for a couple of months."

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"I'm sorry for not being there for you last June at the Ministry."

Harry finally looked at Dean, confused. "Why would you be sorry for that? It was a horrible experience, and a horrible mistake on my part."

"I'm sure it was both," Dean agreed. "Still, if I had also been there, maybe things would have gone just a tad easier on you and the others who did go."

"Maybe," Harry agreed. Dean had not been one of the best at Defense in the DA, but he was very good.

"Based on the last five years, you might need some more people with you this year. I'm with you, Harry."

"Thanks, Dean."

"There's something I need to tell you, which I haven't told anyone but Seamus and Parvati."

"Then Lavender probably knows, too."

"Probably," Dean agreed with a smile. "Anyway, I found out this summer I'm not Muggle-born."

Harry looked confused. "How?"

"It turns out my father was an auror. He never told my Mum that he was a wizard; she thought he was in the British secret service."

"How did you find out?"

"It turns out his younger brother is also an auror. He visited us for Dumbledore, and he looks a lot like my father."

"That wouldn't be Kingsley Shacklebolt by any chance, would it?"

"Actually, it is. He told me you know him. He gave me over three weeks of extra dueling practice." Dean looked determined. "Next time, I'm with you, Harry." He stuck out his hand, and Harry shook it with a smile.

"Come on," Dean said. "You can get breakfast as early as Six-thirty. I've almost never seen a certain group of snakes there before Seven-twenty. Let's avoid the rush."

Harry managed to smile back.

To their surprise, Ginny, Hermione, Katie, and fourth year Natalie Macdonald were sitting and waiting for him. Each had a bright green band around their upper left arms, with 'HPSN' in gold letters.

"You're joshing," Harry said. The girls smiled. "I am going to get SOOOO much teasing about this."

Ginny stood and walked over to Harry and embraced him. "Yes, we're serious, and yes, you'll get teased, but the benefits should outweigh that. You can't wallow in self-pity and anger like last year if at least fifteen girls are hugging or kissing you every day." She pulled Harry down and kissed his nose. "Right?"

"I guess," Harry said softly, "although you should know why that was unlikely anyway." The other three girls came over and did the same, Natalie very shyly, since she didn't really know Harry all that well.



"That's something you don't see every day," Neville teased from the entrance to the common room.

The group looked up. Ginny ran over and hugged him with even more enthusiasm than she had Harry.

"I don't get anything from the rest of you?" Neville teased.

"No, Longbottom," Katie answered, "you're Ginny's private property. Sorry."

"That's alright, I'm pretty happy with that arrangement." Neville came over to Harry. "Harry, I'm sorry I wasn't able to do anything last night."

"I know, Neville. I feel the same way. We shouldn't have been taken by surprise like that." He looked at the group. "You know. . . . OW!"

Katie and Ginny had both slapped him on the back of the head.

"Yes," Hermione said, "we know it's dangerous to be around you. You know what, Harry? It's dangerous to be alive right now. It's dangerous to be a Gryffindor. It's dangerous to come from a family that supports Dumbledore or has any Muggles in their background, as I found out last summer. I'm sticking with you. So, sorry, but that argument didn't work for the five of us this summer and it won't work with anyone with any brains or guts this year. Those thugs would have attacked anyone standing around you last night, so you're just going to have to remember you're a target, and remember that we don't care. We're going to help, and you're going to beat Voldemort."

Harry looked doubtful.

"Harry," Dean said, "do you want Voldemort to win?"

"Of course not."

"Is he coming after you again?"

"Yes," Harry said simply.

"Then if we want him defeated, we have to help you. Since you're our friend, we want to help you anyway. Give up and admit you need us and need our help. It will make life easier for all of us."

"But it's dangerous. . . ." Harry stopped when Dean raised his hand.

"Harry, if I dope-slap you, it'll hurt a lot more than if Ginny or Katie does it. This attitude of yours is a form of egotism, and I don't like to see you think this way. Just give up and accept the fact that we like you, and that we're with you."

Harry sighed. It had been difficult to accept with his close friends, who were now to some degree trained warriors. It wasn't easy to accept with his more casual friends, but he knew he had to.

"Come on," Katie said. "Let's eat."

Even though it was still well before 7:00, there were already a number of very quiet students in the great hall. The assaults of the night before had brought home that the war could touch people even at Hogwarts. Before Harry had walked five feet into the hall, a group of six Slytherins headed his way, the Slytherin prefects.

Harry only knew two of them by name, and it was Daphne Greengrass, the new sixth year girls' prefect, who acted as the speaker for the group. "Potter . . . Harry . . . we've never gotten along, and I doubt if we will now. Still, we wanted you to know that most of us, hopefully all of us, still in Slytherin are very sorry for the incident, the near-tragedy, last night. Most of us would never even consider following the Dark Lord, let alone staging an attack like that."

"Longbottom," Blaise Zabini added, "we're glad you weren't hurt too badly. Potter, I know you're usually a pretty fair guy. Right now, I think Draco is confused, especially by something you told him on the train. He swears that attack shouldn't have happened, and Greg couldn't have faked at how shocked he was to learn it happened. I'm sure you're tempted to take out what happened on them, and who knows, maybe they've fooled me and you should. Could you try not to until they do something else stupid?"

"Like actually kill someone?" Harry asked drily. The Slytherins all winced. "I'll do my best, but he had better watch himself around me and my friends. If Luna and Neville hadn't been in my line of fire a moment too long, neither would have been hurt, and there wouldn't have been enough of Crabbe and Montague to have been identified."

Coming from a sixteen-year-old, that should have sounded like an empty boast. None of the students who heard it thought it was anything but a plain fact.

"Right," Zabini said. "So, like Daphne said, we are sorry for your friend. We all hope she's better soon."

"Thank you, Zabini," Harry said. "I might wonder whose side any individual Slytherin might be on, but I've never thought most of you were Dark."

"There is a simple answer to that, Potter," the Seventh year female prefect said. "Right now, few of us are on either side and the ones who are, are on yours. From your point of view, that's an improvement over the last two years. Trust me on that, if nothing else."

"Thanks." The two groups nodded, and went to their respective tables.

Harry was surprised at how hungry he was, even though he had not eaten anything other than the malt the night before. He sat so that he faced the Slytherin table. He was not about to allow Draco to come up behind him.

At about 7:20, Malfoy, Goyle, Parkinson, and Bulstrode came into the great hall. A hush fell over most of the students, and then the First years quieted as well.

Malfoy flushed, and herded his little group to the Slytherin table. He sat them, and himself, facing away from the Gryffindors, which Harry took as a sign they would not be causing trouble that morning at the least.

Harry quickly finished and excused himself from the table. Hermione was about to remind him that the class schedules needed to be distributed yet, but caught herself. Harry would not care about his schedule that morning; Hermione barely could bring her self to care. He would be visiting Luna, and she would be right behind him.

She and the rest of the table, and many of the others in the hall, saw Harry stand, stop, and then stare fixedly at the spot where Luna should have been sitting, and then flee the great hall, nearly in tears.

In the silence, a soft sob was heard. Looking towards the front of the hall, the students saw Professor McGonagall almost throw the schedules at Katie (who was standing beside her) and flee into the small teacher's room. The other three heads of House, even Snape, looked shocked for a moment, and then quietly started to distribute the schedules. After a moment of hesitation, Katie did the same.

Harry stood in front of a window overlooking a courtyard. He was not thinking about anything, he was just standing. If anything, he was trying to avoid thinking. He was avoiding thinking about the attacks the night before, about Sirius, about the Prophecy, about Malfoy, about classes, about Snape, about Voldemort. As he tried to keep his mind clear, he grimaced, as he realized he had a lot he did not want to think about.

"Harry?"

Harry turned at the soft sound of his name, and saw that Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott, the Sixth year Hufflepuff prefect, were standing there. The two best friends could easily pass as fraternal twins instead of second cousins. Both were average height and pretty with similar features. Hannah always had a pinkish complexion, with long, thick, pure blonde hair. Susan's hair was similar, although it had a slightly reddish tint to it. Both had long legs, and Susan was bustier.

For once, however, Harry didn't have an eye for their beauty. He just looked at them quietly.

Susan came a little closer. "We're very sorry about what happened last night, Harry," she said quietly.

"We don't know Luna very well," Hannah admitted, "but from what we saw of her in the DA last year, she's . . . nice."

"She is," Harry said with a smile, "Nice and kind and caring."

"We're still with you, Harry," Hannah said.

"Auntie Em told me once this summer that during the first war with You-Know-Who, people came to distrust one another and that wizarding society almost came apart," Susan said. "We trust you, Harry."

"Shouldn't you be trusting Dumbledore?" Harry asked.

"Harry, do you know how many times I've spoken with Dumbledore?" Hannah asked.  
"Never."

"Never?"

"Not even to say 'hello' in passing," Hannah answered, "and I'm a prefect. We know you. We trust you. And, we're hoping the DA will continue."

"It will," Harry said.

"Good," Hannah said, with Susan nodding her agreement.

"Do you think you could all try doing one thing?" Harry asked.

"What's that?" Susan asked.

"Say his name."

"You-Know-Who's?"

"Exactly."

The two teens looked confused for a second, and the recognition hit them. "Really?" Susan asked.

"Really. If you don't want to use his phony title, call him by his name."

"What's his name?" Hannah asked.

"Tom Riddle, Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Really?" Hannah asked. "The Marvolos were an old family that I thought had died out."

Harry again marveled at what Pure-Bloods knew and thought they knew.

"His mother was the last Marvolo, his father was a Muggle." The two girls looked shocked.  
"I'll tell the story in the first DA meeting next Sunday, if you really want to know. Third years and above."

"We'll want to hear it," Susan said.

"And Hufflepuff will be there," Hannah said. "We don't forget our friends."

"Thank you."

## **Chapter XXV**

Monday, September 2, 1996  
continued

Harry and Hermione sat on either side of Luna's bed all day. She woke up often, but fell back asleep within minutes almost every time. She had been very apologetic about having paid too much attention to Harry and Hermione, and so had missed feeling the attack coming from behind her. Madam Pomfrey said that this waking/sleeping was common with the potions she had Luna on.

Harry was touched that every Gryffindor above the Third year, and some of the younger ones, came to see them. The majority of Hufflepuff had come as well. There were no Slytherins, but Zabini had told Lavender (who told Hermione who told Harry) that this was because they did not think it appropriate under the circumstances, not because many of them did not want to show their concern.

Harry understood that.

What he did not understand was why only four Ravenclaws visited.

Harry knew that Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, Padma Patil, and Morag McDougal had come in part because of him (like her twin, Padma now sported a green armband). Harry also knew that Padma and Morag had done little to help Luna over the years, but had started to do so after the fiasco at the Department of Ministries. He therefore took their presence as genuine, as he did Terry and Anthony's. He understood when Padma has said some of the Sixth years had wanted to come, but did not want to tire Luna.

There was no excuse for no other Ravenclaw having had the decency to come visit a member of their own House, especially the Fifth year girls (the Fifth year boys and the Fourth year girls had at least sent cards). Most of the Ravenclaws had rejected Luna in need as they had over the previous four years.

"What do you think is going on in Ravenclaw?" Harry asked Ginny, Hermione, and Neville over dinner near Luna's bed. Luna was back asleep, while Ron had not shown up yet.

"I wish I knew," Ginny admitted. "I hate to say it, but I rather suspect that most of the trouble is coming from, well. . . ."

"Cho?" Harry asked.

"Cho," Ginny agreed. "She and Michael broke up some time over the summer. I heard some Fourth years gossiping, and they're sure she was hoping to come back after you."

Hermione snorted.

"Marietta is after you, but not in a good way," Ginny added to Hermione. "Between the two of them, the rumors are flying about all three of you, although not as a group."

"What do we do?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing," Ginny said with a smile.

"Nothing?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Ginny confirmed.

"What did you do?" Hermione demanded.

"How do you fight rumors and gossip?" Ginny asked.

"The truth. . . ." Hermione started.

"About the victim is useful, but not the best weapon in the short term," Ginny said.

"What is?" Hermione asked.

"Rumors, preferably ones that are true, about the people spreading the rumors," Harry said unexpectedly.

"Exactly."

"What have you done?" Hermione demanded.

"Cho and Marietta aren't the best rumor-mongers in Ravenclaw, let alone in Hogwarts."

"Lavender?" Hermione asked.

"She's one of the best, and Parvati is pretty fair, too. Dean asked them, and they're going after Cho."

"And Marietta?" Harry asked. He saw Neville grin knowingly.

Ginny said just one word. "Colin."

"Colin?"

"He's really good," Ginny answered. "They're working through some Hufflepuffs, who will be spreading rumors through the Third and Fourth year Ravenclaws, most of whom don't like Cho anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because she doesn't treat them much better than she does Luna. She only cares about the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh year girls who suck up to her, and the Sixth and Seventh year boys. The younger ones are too young to be of any interest to her. The Seventh years are with her, all the Fifth year girls except Luna are her little acolytes. The Sixth years are mostly against her. They're going to back Luna, and the Fourth years and younger will probably go with her, too."

Harry shook his head. "All this nonsense, instead of what's important."

"Which Ravenclaws will join your support group?" Ginny teased.

"No," Harry nearly spat. "That is silly, and you all know it. I'm only agreeing to it for cover for Hermione and Luna in the short term. What's going to happen when it comes out?"

"When what comes out?" Ginny demanded. "That you're casually dating Hermione and Luna? It won't be a big deal, as long as you keep it casual in public." She lowered her voice. "The truth won't come out."

"We're not ashamed," Hermione stated.

"Of course not," Neville said. "But who needs the aggravation?"

Harry gave a huge sigh. "I suppose it's best."

At that point, Ron came rushing into the room. He came to stop, but only his forward momentum ceased. He was bouncing up and down, and grinning to the point it was a little painful to see.

"What is your problem?" Ginny demanded, for she was in a demanding mood that day..

"I . . . I'm a father!"

"What?" Ginny was shocked.

"The time difference," Hermione reminded them.

"Dumbledore just told me. Sirius Arthur Weasley, nine pounds, red hair, healthy, and thriving. They aren't certain how magical he is, of course, but they have their own version of the Great Book, so they know his name was recorded as a magical child."

"Congratulations, Ron!" Harry said before anyone else could. He sprang up and shook Ron's hand. The others did the same.

"What's happened?" Luna murmured.

"Rora had the baby," Harry said. "Healthy and thriving." He sat and took her hand.

"That's great news. Ronald should be proud." She drifted off to sleep. After a bit more small talk, Ron left, needing to burn off his excitement.

"Well, few people in this world will know about little Sirius, but at least Ron has finally done something before any of his brothers or you," Hermione told Harry.

"True," Harry said. "It's too bad he won't be able to see much of his son."

"That's just one of many reasons why some of us never liked the idea," Ginny said.

"How good a father would Ron be right now?" Neville asked. "I mean, I know he would do it if he had to, and so would I. But I don't think I'd be very good right now."

"True, but you and I know what it's like not to have parents around," Harry said. "Still, Sirius has his mother."

"True," Neville had to agree. "But Ron won't ever know the boy, either."

"Not well, anyway," Hermione pointed out. "If he went for a day or two, our time, over Christmas, the boy would be nearly four already. If he goes back in early July, the boy would be nearly ten."

"Well, let's hope he gets at least a few chances," Harry said.

"I wonder what Sirius would think of all this," Ginny mused.

"Since he apparently did the same thing every time he visited, I don't think he would be anything but pleased to have a namesake, since it was his first name, not Black," Harry said.

"You're probably right," Hermione said.

Ginny shook her head. "I hope Mum doesn't yell at him again." She shivered. "Did Ron tell you what she had to say about all this?"

"Not really," Harry admitted. "What little he said didn't sound good."

"Not at all." Ginny grinned. "He and Remus both owe me huge favors."

"Why is that?" Hermione asked.

"Well, Mum was angry at Ron, of course, for, and I quote, 'thinking with the wrong head'. She was also quite ticked at Remus for not being a better chaperon."

"How did you divert her?" Harry asked.

"I convinced her it was Dumbledore's fault for springing the whole thing on us without decent preparation for the cultural differences. She's still angry at him anyway. She decided that all the anxiety you put us through this summer was more Dumbledore's fault for shoving you back to your relatives, so this was just something else she could blame him for."

"Poor Dumbledore," Harry said.

"He can stand it," Ginny said derisively.

Thinking about Dumbledore's age, Harry said, "I hope so."

Tuesday, September 3, 1996

The first class for the Sixth years was Transfiguration, and to the class's surprise, Snape was waiting for them.

"The Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress have to be at the trial this morning," Snape said with a tinge of disgust in his voice. "Since they confessed their guilt, the three perpetrators may already be sentenced even as we speak. Still, the forms must be observed, and I agreed to take this class this once."



He glared at all the students. "Let me say this. No matter what your beliefs, the type of base attacks perpetuated Sunday night have no place in wizarding tradition or in wizarding society. Unless the three in question were actually acting under explicit instructions from the Dark Lord, they had best hope they never come into his presence again! They will be tortured for losing him three potential agents at Hogwarts."

There was not a sound made by the twelve students in the room: Harry and Hermione; a suddenly pale Draco, Blaise Zabini, and Tracy Davis from Slytherin; Padma, Su Li, Mandy Brocklehurst, Anthony Goldstein, and Terry Boot from Ravenclaw; and Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones from Hufflepuff.

"Now," Snape continued, "Professor McGonagall wishes you to choose partners. You will be starting some very difficult and interesting work this year, which will eventually include transforming others and yourselves. You must choose someone you feel . . . comfortable with. At the same time, Professor McGonagall wishes you to choose someone from another House. Those of you who heard the Sorting Song Sunday night. . . ." Here Snape sneered at Harry. . . "will remember it yet again asked for House unity. No doubt, this is a reasonable response. As there are five Ravenclaws, it is just possible."

Snape leered at Harry and said in his oiliest voice. "Since you seem to have a penchant for Ravenclaw women, perhaps you'd like to choose one first, Potter. You seem to have skipped your own year."

Harry was surprised at how annoyed that tone made him. Still, he clasped his hands together on top of the work table, gritted his teeth for a moment, and then managed to say in a calm voice, "Perhaps I wouldn't be the best person to choose first, sir."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I see." He turned to the Ravenclaw girls. "I was surprised Mister Potter made the qualifications for the course, but the fact remains that he did match at least some of you. Despite what I have seen of his regard for safety rules, if you keep a close eye on him, he shouldn't be a very dangerous partner. Would one of you care to take him on?"

"I'll partner him, Professor," Padma stated quietly.

Snape's eyes flicked between Padma's green armband and Harry. He leered. "Ah, trying to become the Third Ravenclaw lass, hey? Well, I did ask for volunteers, so. . . ."

Snape stopped, as he felt some sort of hex or charm hit his head. Snape frowned. Potter hadn't moved, and he didn't think anyone else had, either. He glanced around the room, and the only student whose hands were not fully visible were Malfoy's, which seemed unlikely. Malfoy suddenly looked frightened at Snape's glance, and then placed his hands on the work table and shook his head.

Then Snape noticed that every students' eyes except for Potter's were growing wide with genuine shock. That made him a bit suspicious of Potter, but since the boy had seemed so determined to stay stoic, even Snape couldn't accuse him on that basis.

"What?" he demanded. All the students seemed unable to speak. "Well!"

"Excuse me, sir," Potter said, now also trying to contain himself, "but something seems to have happened to your, well, to your hair."

"WHAT!"

"Flowers," Malfoy managed to say.

"What?" Snape was puzzled.

"Your . . . hair, sir. . . . turned into . . . flowers," Zabini managed to say without laughing, although he had to twist his own fingers hard enough to cause real pain to prevent that laughter from bubbling out.

Snape turned to a wall and created a mirror. Sure enough, his long, greasy hair was now standing out, and about half way up each lock, it turned from black to dark green, and ended in a daffodil or tulip.

"If I find out one of you did this in a burst of childish, emotional magic. . . ." Snape was not sure what he would (or could) do, but he was sure he would do something. He stopped when he started hearing some very soft to slightly louder pops.

"Err, sir," Potter said.

"What **is** it, Potter!"

"There seem to be some hummingbirds and bumblebees trying to, well, excuse me for saying this, sir, but they seem to be trying to pollinate you."

"WHAT!" Snape turned back to the mirror, and about every second, a soft pop would sound and a bumblebee would appear. About every three seconds, a louder pop would sound and a hummingbird would appear.

Snape turned and swatted at them.

"Sir, won't that just anger them?" Granger asked.

"Silence!" A moment later, a bang was heard and six startled Cornish Pixies appeared.

Snape stared at them.

The Pixies stared back. The little pops continued to sound.

Then one of the Pixies darted forward, ripped off a flower, and started to eat it. Snape screamed in pain.

Six more Pixies appeared with a bang and they all attacked the flowers. The other five pixies did the same.

Snape ran from the room, screaming.

"Do you suppose class is dismissed?" Tracy asked.

"Maybe we'd best all pair off," Hermione suggested, "just to be on the safe side."

"Now there's something you don't see every day," Ginny said as Snape ran past her screaming, his flowered hair streaming behind him and followed by a swarm of bumblebees, a flock of humming birds, and a number of pixies waving half-eaten flowers.

"Shame, that," Neville commented. "It would really liven the dungeons up no end."

Fifteen minutes later, Zabini approached Harry. "I say, Potter, a brief word in private?"

"Sure," Harry said. He and Zabini went off to a far corner. "What's up?"

"Malfoy is wondering if he might have a private word with you." Harry scowled. "Yes, I understand. Still, if he comes over, what harm can it do when we're all here?"

"I suppose," Harry said.

"Maybe he should keep his hands in his pockets?" Zabini suggested.

"That doesn't matter," Harry said dismissively.

Zabini unconsciously looked in the direction of the door which Snape had exited. "Perhaps not."

Malfoy came over a few moments later, and all talk in the room died off. Malfoy flushed a bit, but came the rest of the way over.

"Potter."

"Malfoy."

"May I ask you to keep a hold of your temper?"

"Are you going to be testing it?"

"A little," Malfoy confessed. "At least hear me out, first."

"Alright."

"First of all, we did have a plan to harass you and your friends Sunday night. No one was supposed to be seriously hurt. Montague and I were to distract the Sixth year prefects, and the other three had a little device to use on you and your other friends that Montague brought along. If they had done it correctly, you would have been embarrassed, but not hurt. Or so I was told."

"Go on."

"After what you told us on the train, well, I wanted to think about it. I wish I could verify what you said." His memory suppressed those agonies he had suffered the previous summer at the Dark Lord's hands. If the monster was actually a half-blood, then Draco wanted even less to do with him. He knew what he was expected to do, but with the death of his father in late August, he was even less inclined to do it than ever.

"Sorry, I can't think of how," Harry said in a manner that clearly said that at that moment, he did not really care what Malfoy thought about anything. "I don't have access to a pensieve, and you probably wouldn't take the word of Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid, and probably Flitwick."

"I have learned since that there was a Tom Marvolo Riddle who was Head Boy, and he would have had to have been Half-blood," Malfoy confessed. "Anyway, I called off the prank, took the device, and I thought Montague had agreed. I don't know why Crabbe, and especially Nott, went along with his stupid idea."

Harry said nothing. He just stood and waited to hear anything else Malfoy had to say.

"So," Malfoy went on after a short silence, "I just wanted to say I'm sorry Lovegood was, well, almost killed. I had nothing against her, and I'm not so certain I want to be associated with the Dark Lord's movement anymore in any way."

"Did Montague have anything against her?"

Malfoy gave Harry a twisted smile. "He was a Seventh year, and is anxious to join the Dark Lord as soon as possible, so he wanted to hurt you. As for Lovegood, I think he might have fancied her a little, but I won't swear to it."

Harry's frown deepened.

"Look, Potter. First of all, I destroyed the pranking device. And, with Montague gone and me moving to neutrality, I don't know of any strong, direct supporters the Dark Lord has here, among the students, I mean." Harry realized that Malfoy at least thought Snape still supported Voldemort. "I don't like you and you don't like me. We haven't ever liked each other and never will. I don't intend on bothering you this year unless you bother me. Fair enough?"

"I suppose. And after this year?"

"My father was killed in the prison break. I'll be staying here all year. After that?" He shrugged. "It depends what position I'm put in."

"I see."

"Again, if you don't bother me, I won't bother you. The same goes for the Weas, err, Weasley and Granger and the others."

"Alright. Truce?"

"Truce."

They looked at each other, and decided neither wanted to shake hands. They nodded at each other and Malfoy went back to his seat.

Just as he sat, Dumbledore came into the room. "Good morning," he said. "I understand you've had an exciting class today."

The class moved around nervously.

"Would anyone care to comment?"

"How is Professor Snape, sir?" Hermione asked.

"His hair is back to normal, and the Pixies have been vanished," Dumbledore said. "However, we can not stop the periodic appearance of the bees and little birds, although we are vanishing them soon after they appear. They still seem . . . attracted to the Professor, but I'm sure Professor Flitwick will have him sorted out during the next break between classes."

"However," Dumbledore, "that is not what I meant. Harry, do you have any comment?"

"No, sir."

"No?"

"Other than I'm glad Professor Snape is alright. I take it he is alright, sir?"

"He is, but you know what I mean."

"Sir, I decided after the events of last year that whenever anything like this happens, I am not going to comment."

"Really? May I ask why?"

"Because I am not going to lie, sir. And, if I say when I'm not responsible, it would be easy to tell when I am."

"I see. Since no one wishes to claim responsibility, would anyone care to disclaim it?"

Su and Mandy each started to open their mouths, and were firmly elbowed by their neighbors.

"Miss Li?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Miss Brocklehurst?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you have any comment about the events this morning?"

"I'm very sorry that yet another class has been delayed, sir, this time frivolously."

"I see." He spoke to the entire class. "That will be one point from each of you, then, and you may all go towards your next class early."

The group left, but Dumbledore held Harry back.

"Yes, sir?" Harry asked innocently.

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, I know perfectly well if anyone did something to Professor Snape in class, it was you."

"How is that, sir?"

"Harry, don't forget, I am a very powerful Legilimens. If any of the students had done anything, none of them, not even Miss Granger, could have hidden it from me, other than you." Harry said nothing "Assuming you did do anything, would there have been any particular reason?"

"You mean, if I did something, would it have been because I was a bully, like my father and Sirius?" Harry asked, somewhat coldly, which made Dumbledore wince just a tiny bit. "Well, it wouldn't have been because he made a point of telling the class that I had some of the lowest scores of anyone in the class, and that he thought me irresponsible, because I expected that as soon as I realized he was taking the class. I could have taken offense when he insinuated that I was already looking for a new girlfriend, especially amongst the Ravenclaws, since he claimed I 'have a penchant for Ravenclaws'," Dumbledore winced again, "or when he hinted that Padma had agreed to partner me mostly from romantic desire. Or perhaps I could have lost my temper just because he was restarting the cycle of abuse he's directed against me for five years, and I wouldn't want to put up with it."

"I see. Well, Professor Snape believes that the, err, new hair-style was the result of a burst of childish, undirected anger on your part, and that others in the class managed the . . . additions. Would you be willing to tell him that as far as you know, you were not responsible for any undirected magic, but that if you were you are sorry for any embarrassment caused him?"

Harry thought a moment, and said, "How about if I write that as a letter, sign it first, and ask the rest of the class if they would care to join?"

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to think. Harry added at that point, "I'll make certain Hermione proofs the letter before I ask anyone else to sign."

"Very well," Dumbledore said. He hesitated, and then asked, "It seemed as if you and Mister Malfoy had come to some sort of truce as I entered. Would that be accurate?"

"I hope so," Harry said. "He claimed there was going to be a prank on us, but that after I claimed Riddle was a half-blood on the train, he wanted time to think things over. Montague therefore changed it from a prank to assault. Malfoy has decided he wants to try and be neutral, at least for this year."

"And after this year?"

Harry shrugged. "I think he'd join Riddle if the Death Eaters put any pressure on him next summer, but that he's not about to volunteer. He's still thinking short-term."

"Quite likely."

"Anyway, he promised to leave me alone if I leave him alone."

"And?"

Harry scowled. "I have never started a fight, sir. If Malfoy leaves me alone, I'll leave him alone. I'll tell Ron and Neville about it in Hagrid's class."

"And, assuming for the moment, hypothetically speaking of course, that if you did cause what happened to Professor Snape on purpose?"

"Then I would think I've made my point, and would not think of doing anything similar unless he treated me worse than he did today."

"Very well, Harry. I think we can leave it at that."

"Yes, sir."

"We do have to talk about your powers, and how you use them."

"Yes, sir."

After their talk, Harry left and Dumbledore shook his head. He knew very well that Harry had hexed Snape, and had done it without any real movement on his part. That was wandless sorcery of a moderately high order. Dumbledore himself could not have pulled that off until his late twenties. The conjuring of the bees, birds, and especially the summoning of the pixies was even more advanced, and Dumbledore could not have done that until well after his training by the Dragons, but then, he had not been quite as driven as Harry was, with a powerful Dark Wizard stalking him.

This could prove to be an interesting year.

## **Chapter XXVI**

Snape never commented on the events of the Transfiguration class, and he stopped his usual sniping at Harry on those few occasions when they ran into each other (although he was at times observed looking at Harry and grinding his teeth). Snape and Malfoy were also frequently seen in September and October struggling to hold their tongues successfully (at least in public) as the HPSN exercised their duties to hug and kiss Harry.

Meanwhile, Luna had been let out of the Infirmary for dinner that first Thursday evening. Alastor and Remus had already presented Harry with something he had long missed back in late August -- the Marauders' Map -- which Moody had found mixed in with some of his other possessions. Remus had made copies of it, and gave the original back to Harry, showing him some secrets which the twins had never discovered. At Harry's request, Remus made two additional maps, covering part of the castle.

Harry had made some quick plans, and consulted Dobby. Dobby had told Harry the results that Thursday morning, and now Harry was bringing Hermione and Luna to see the outcome.

"Do you see anything unusual?" Harry asked. They seemed to be in a blank corridor that served only to link to larger corridors together. Neither girl could see anything special about where they were.

"Where are we, in relation to the rest of the castle?" Harry asked.

"Well, we're about halfway between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor towers," Hermione said. "However, the main corridor between the two isn't used all that often, and it's the one right over there. The other main corridor leads to the major stairs. There are of course also sets of men's and women's toilets just around each corner."

"True," Harry said.

"This wall must be near the great lecture hall," Luna said thoughtfully. "The entrance to the back of the hall must be two floors above us."

"Also true," Harry agreed.

"There isn't a cross corridor on the floor above is, is there?" Hermione asked.

"No, there's not."

"So, if there were an entry here. . . ." Hermione started.

Luna broke in. ". . . it would lead under the seats!"

The wall was 16th century carved oak paneling, all flowers. "Which flower is out of place?" Harry asked.

It turned out that Hermione was searching the right area, and so found the Tudor rose, the only unrealistic flower. She pushed the center of it, and a door slid open. Harry escorted the girls in, and slid the door shut. Instantly, magical candles lit.



They were in a room some fifteen feet deep and thirty feet wide. There were comfortable sofas and chairs, end tables, and at either end of the room, two long work tables. There were three doors leading further under the seats.

"There you go," Harry said, "private work tables for both of you. The room to the left side has a toilet and a sink, the one to the right has a shower."

"And the room in the middle?" Luna asked.

"That has a big, comfy bed. Dobby arranged everything."

The two girls smiled.

"Here," Harry said. He gave each teen a piece of parchment. "It has the same password as the Marauder's Map." He turned to Luna. "Yours only covers this section of the castle, from the main stairs to just past Ravenclaw Tower." He turned to Hermione. "Yours covers from the Quad stairs to just past Gryffindor Tower."

He turned back to Luna. "I hate to say it. . . ."

"But I need to be careful, not to let the girls steal this," Luna said.

"Professor Dumbledore met with all the Ravenclaw girls and all the school's female prefects last night," Hermione said. "He said that anyone caught harassing you this year, and that includes pranking you or, as he said 'borrowing Miss Lovegood's possessions without her express permission,' would be expelled."

"Really?" Harry said, surprised. "That's pretty harsh, for Professor Dumbledore."

"He's really serious," Hermione said.

"That will not change what is in their hearts," Luna pointed out.

"No, but perhaps they will be less likely to express those sentiments," Hermione retorted.

"He can't make them like me," was all Luna would say.

"Come on," Harry said, going back outside after a quick look at the Map.

"There's more?" Hermione asked.

"Some. What can you tell me about this wall?" He pointed to the blank wall opposite the paneling.

The two girls considered the old stonework. "It's difficult to say," Hermione finally said. "There's just this large stonework . . . mass. If I remember, it's on every floor, and is a block about forty-five feet square. There are a number of them. I always figured they were some sort of central support piling that the castle was built around."

"True," Luna agreed. "There are what? six of them?"

"Nine, actually," Harry answered. "Eight are smaller than this one. You can't see three of them, because you can't see the stonework. They've been built around. One is near the back of the great hall, and the headmaster's office abuts another. There is also one of these cores near each common room."

"Come to think of it, this would be a pretty wasteful use of space and materials," Hermione said.

"True," Harry agreed. "The nine blocks do partially serve as supports, but mostly as magical supports. Each founder built two, and they built this one together. There are magical cores inside of each, and the wards are built around them. This is the central one, built by all four, and it incorporated an ancient stone circle, set upon an outcrop of living rock, inside it."

"How did the Marauders find out about that?" Hermione asked.

Harry just smiled. "They didn't."

"Then how did you find out. . . ."

"You didn't just 'find out,' did you?" Luna asked.

"Not as such," Harry admitted. "I recognized what was done as soon as I saw this one the other day. When I touched the stone, it was like I could read all the magic stored inside. It didn't interfere with anything, thank goodness, but I now can read the wards, which is something that only a full installed Headmaster can normally do."

"Do you ever get tired of these things happening to you?" Luna asked.

"I was tired of it by the middle of my Second year," Harry said. "I'm getting used to it."

Saturday, September 7, 1996

"May I talk with you?"

"Of course you may, Ronald."

Ron winced a little at her tone, but carried on. "I need to ask you a personal question about Harry."

"Is that why you had Hermione and Ginny occupy Harry's time?"

"Exactly."

"Then I forgive you for keeping Harry away from me when we were supposed to be going for a walk. What did you feel you need to ask about?"

"When you and Hermione . . . no, let me put it this way. Did Harry have nightmares before we came back to Hogwarts? Or before you came to the Burrow, for that matter?"

Luna thought about that, and decided she could share some of the information. "He did when we first got together. After the Eleventh of July, they started to fade. Did he have any after we came to the Burrow?"

"No, but he was pretty exhausted, not so much physically, but more. . . ."

"Emotionally?"

"Exactly."

"He had some that first night on the island. That was the day of the funeral, course." She thought some more. "None of them were directly related to Voldemort as far as Harry could tell, they were just . . . his feelings of guilt."

"And after that?"

"He had some restless nights, but he never had any real nightmares. If he had, I'm sure either Hermione or I would have noticed." She looked at Ron worriedly. "He's having them again?"

Ron nodded. "He is. Not too bad yet, but my bed is closest and I've heard him. Dean is probably the lightest sleeper, and he's heard Harry, too. His scar doesn't seem to be affected, but that could just because You-Know, well, Riddle hasn't broken through."

"That is possible," Luna admitted. "Keep an eye on him."

"Don't worry," Ron said, "we will."

Sunday, September 8, 1996

Hermione was a little surprised at the turnout for the first DA meeting, or at least its distribution. Unlike the year before, they were meeting down in the dungeons, between the base of Gryffindor Tower and the entrance to Hufflepuff. Lupin and Moody had greeted everyone, and then stepped out, leaving Harry in charge.

The Gryffindor turnout of Third through Seventh years was 100%, as all forty-eight were present. Twenty-four of the sixty possible Hufflepuffs were there, but there were only six Ravenclaws besides Luna, the now-usual four Sixth years and two Third year girls (Orla Quirke and Joyce Clearwater), who were there mostly because they somewhat liked Luna and really disliked Cho.

"What's going on in Ravenclaw?" Harry asked Padma and Terry before the meeting got fully started.

"It's Cho, Corner, and Cornfoot," Padma answered. "They've convinced most of the House that this isn't necessary, now that we have some good teachers and the Ministry has acknowledged that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back."

"Smith is the same way," Ernie said. "I was hoping to get at least half the House here."

Little Orla was about to say something, but changed her mind. She squeaked a little when Harry looked at her and frowned. She hid behind Ginny.

Harry managed not to roll his eyes. "You are?" he asked gently.

"Orla Quirk."

Harry gave her his best and friendliest smile. "What were you going to say?" he asked in his gentlest voice.

Half the girls in the room gave little involuntary sighs, while Orla blushed furiously and said, "Edgecombe told us not to come, because anyone who gets near you is likely to be killed, like Luna almost was."

Harry's hurt was obvious, but Harry thanked the two girls for coming.

"We don't believe her," Joyce added quickly. "Just like I don't believe what that idiot brother-in-law of mine says about you."

"Brother-in-law?" Ginny asked. "Aren't you Penny's sister?"

Joyce nodded.

"Percy and Penelope are **married**?" Ron asked, shocked.

"Last May," Joyce said. "And I think it was really very poor manners of you not to go. Just because your family doesn't like Muggles. . . ."

"Wait!" Harry demanded, before the Weasleys could riot. He turned to Joyce. "Do you like Percy?"

"Percy is a pig!"

"So, if we **all** tell you something that contradicts what Percy said, would you believe us, or him?"

Joyce thought. "I won't believe Percy, but that doesn't mean I should believe you."

"She belongs in Ravenclaw, alright," Ron said.

"Look, the Weasleys aren't perfect, because nobody is perfect," Harry said, "but Mister Weasley **loves** Muggles and Muggle culture. He works to protect Muggles, in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. I was Muggle-raised, Hermione here is Muggle-born. We've visited their house many times, and he loves to talk about Muggles."

"But that doesn't mean he'd want his son to marry the daughter of Muggles," Joyce said.

"Joyce, I'm Muggle-born," Hermione said. Joyce nodded her understanding, and gestured for Hermione to go on. Hermione pulled out a necklace she was wearing. "When Ron here told his parents we were dating, Mrs. Weasley gave me this necklace, which Mister Weasley had given her when they started dating. She told me she had been hoping to give it to Penelope,

but she couldn't because she and Percy had broken up. When Ron and I broke up after my parents were murdered, she told me I should keep on wearing it, because she loves me like a daughter. Percy is fighting with his family. He didn't want them at the wedding. I would imagine the Weasleys would have all gone, if they had known about it, but even if they had known about it and not gone, it wouldn't have been because Penny was Muggle-born."

"Oh. . . ."

"Alright, let's move on," Harry said, straightening up. He whispered Ginny a question. After a moment's hesitation, Ginny nodded her agreement.

"This was supposed to just be organizational," Harry said. "First, though, I think it's time to stop this He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named stuff. Everyone sit. I'm going to tell you the story of the Chamber of Secrets, and the story of Tom Marvolo Riddle and how he became Voldemort."

Harry told the story of Tom Riddle, and the Chamber of Secrets as well. Harry also told the story of the Marauders (leaving out the Map, and whose pet Wormtail had been), and how Sirius had been framed. He also briefly recounted the story of the Third Task and the Battle at the Ministry (leaving out details like his failed attempt at an Unforgivable and exactly what the Prophecy had been).

"So," Harry concluded, "Tom Riddle is a very powerful, evil wizard. I also think he's insane, not so much because of his opinions, which I think are as evil as he is, but because of his actions over at least the last five years or so. He must have been better organized last time." Harry shrugged.

"Maybe his followers were hungrier then," Hermione commented. Seeing she had everyone's attention, and that they were puzzled, she explained, "They seem to have been in their late teens to mid-twenties, whenever they joined back in the late Sixties to early Eighties. Now they're in their mid-thirties to mid-fifties. Many of them have families, they have rank and positions at risk. The really fanatical ones, at least when it comes to action, seem to be the ones who were in Azkaban, and at least one of them is truly insane."

"That could be," Harry agreed. "In any case, the title 'Voldemort' is nothing to be frightened of, even if the wizard is. If you can't say that word, or don't want to risk being targeted someday because you used it after tonight, fine. Just none of this 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' or 'You-Know-Who' nonsense."

"Should we call him 'Riddle'?" Anthony asked.

Harry shook his head. "That makes him angrier than using 'Voldemort'." Harry thought a moment. "Something like 'Moldiwart' would also cause a reaction, I suppose."

After a few moments of silence, Dean spoke up. "What about what Fudge called him?"

"What did Fudge call him? When?" several people asked. Hermione thought a moment, and then rolled her eyes, while Ron and Ginny started to snicker and Luna laughed out loud.

"Remember?" a chuckling Ron said, "in that interview he gave right after the battle at the Ministry?"

Harry's eyes went wide, and he started to laugh as well.

"What was it?" a number of voices demanded.

Ron and Dean looked at each other, drew themselves up to their full heights, and solemnly intoned, "Lord Thingy!"

Most of the students laughed, and the students agreed thereafter never to use 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named', 'You-Know-Who', or even 'the Dark Lord' again.

"Now," Harry said, "just tonight, I want us all to say 'Voldemort.' I want us to chant it together, to scream it if you can. That should prove, once and for all, that no matter what else is true, he won't appear if you say his name."

"Let's hope not," a Hufflepuff muttered.

Harry rolled his eyes, but had everyone take out their wands and get in a half circle, their backs to a wall. "Now, if he does show up, we all stun him, alright?"

"Yeah," Ron said, "maybe if we all do call his name, he'll appear and we can capture him."

"If he appears automatically, he might not even have his wand," Susan said, getting into the spirit of things.

"Maybe we'll catch him in the shower," Seamus joked.

"That would be something you don't see every day," Justin said.

"Trust me, you wouldn't want to," Harry said, eliciting a more nervous laugh from the students.

"After three, everyone," Harry said. "One . . . two . . . three. . . ."

"Voldemort!" about half the group said.

"Louder! One . . . two . . . three. . . ."

**"VOLDEMORT!"**

"Three more times. One . . . two . . . three. . . ."

**"VOLDEMORT!"**

"One . . . two . . . three. . . ."

**"VOLDEMORT!"**

"One . . . two . . . three. . . ."

**"VOLDEMORT!!!"**

"See," Harry said, "no wrathful Dark wizard, no naked Voldemort in a shower cap. No snakes, no Death Eaters, nothing. It's just a self-assumed title. Be afraid of the wizard, because he is nasty, very powerful, and insane. Don't be afraid of the name itself."

Many of the students cheered. When they had quieted down, Harry said, "Now, let's get organized."

To the surprise of everyone, the term proceeded quietly within Hogwarts. There were very few nasty incidents, no fights in the corridors, not even any really nasty name-calling. Malfoy and his little cohort, while not abjuring any of their Pure-Blood beliefs, refused to defend the Dark Lord or his activities.

Classes were calmer than at any point since September of Harry's Second year, perhaps even calmer since before Harry had arrived at Hogwarts, and the few incidents of bullying were at usually based on personalities rather than blood. The House teams shared the Quidditch pitch and each selected their new players and practiced with a minimum amount of spying from the other teams. (Neville made the Gryffindor team as a Beater, Ginny of course changed to Chaser, while Head Girl Katie Bell was the captain.) The DA met Sunday nights, and some of the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaws passed on what they learned to their House mates.

By now, there were 27 members of the HPSN. The resulting public displays of affections (PDAs) had caused a general upswing of light kissing and hugging in the hallways of Hogwarts. Such displays, when kept fairly 'modest' outside of class time and mutually agreed to, were not against any school rules. Not even Professor Snape could take so much as a point away from those who followed the rules, although his snappish commentary kept people from kissing near him.

By the end of the second week of class, the non-HPSN PDA's had not only grown in number, they were crossing House-lines. When two Fourth years, the boy from Gryffindor and the girl from Slytherin, kissed right before splitting off to eat lunch in the great hall, everyone knew things were changing at least a little at Hogwarts.

Outside of Hogwarts, Voldemort was still refraining from any direct attacks on wizarding targets. A few more unoccupied magical houses were destroyed, as were a number of isolated Muggle houses, this time with some casualties. A few Muggles were also appearing having been Kissed, although the Muggle authorities claimed these were the result of drug overdoses.

The rest of September went fairly normally inside of Hogwarts. As Hermione was the oldest in her year in Gryffindor, the House did throw her a small party on her 17th birthday. Other than that, the six friends managed to get together a few hours a week, both to practice their group combat and their animagus transformations.

In late September, there was one other development. Professor Dumbledore called Hermione and Luna to his office to discuss a matter Remus had brought up in late August. After that, he arranged a larger meeting.





## **Chapter XXVII**

Monday, September 30, 1996

Twelve people were summoned to Dumbledore's office after dinner. Besides Harry and his five friends, Remus, Tonks, Moody, Professor Trelawney were there, as were, to Harry's even greater confusion, Nearly Headless Nick and Griselda Marchbanks, the ancient witch who was the chief O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. examiner.

"Good evening, everyone," Dumbledore said simply. "Everyone knows why we are here, except for Mister Potter. The story starts with Miss Lovegood, and to some extent Miss Granger. Miss Lovegood?"

Luna took a deep breath, and explained. "Six of us were studying privately this summer, partially under the guidance of Professor Lupin and Miss Tonks. Still, where we were had quite an extensive library. In reading a book on Occult ceremonies, I came across one which will supposedly summons a spirit, even one that has fully crossed over, up to a year after the spirit's death."

Dumbledore broke in. "For those of you who have not studied Fifth year Divination and the theories introduced then for the first time, the myriad ceremonies commonly called seances work to summons those spirits which have not crossed fully over fully into death. That would include those who are still fully in our world, such as Sir Nicholas here, and other deceased people who are further towards the realm of death and who cannot, therefore, be sensed by those who are not either very sensitive or who are full or nearly-full Seers. Those who are fully past this physical realm are generally beyond the power of any to call." He nodded to Luna. Harry and Ron looked confused, since they obviously had not paid attention to that material in class the year before.

"For the ceremony to work," Luna said, "there are many conditions listed. First, it must be conducted by a full Seer. I am a full Seer. While I was under the full suppression potion, I could not conduct this ceremony. I am now under half the amount, and the Seer I was studying with this summer believes I now have enough power to conduct the ceremony."

"The description also suggests at least two must be present who have some sensitivity to the Gift," Luna went on. "Professor Trelawney and Professor Marchbanks are both very Gifted, of course, and both Harry and Ron have some touch of the Gift as well. Neville and some of the others may have some of the Gift."

"Other parts of the book suggest that this sort of ceremony will not work for calling Muggles, unless it's used within a few weeks of the person's death. Also, for this to work, at least three people must truly desire to meet with the deceased, and desire it out of love and affection. . . ." Luna went on, and it was here that Harry stopped her.

"You mean . . . you want to conduct a seance . . . to call . . . Sirius?" Neither Marchbanks nor Trelawney reacted to the name, as Dumbledore had briefed them.

"Yes, Harry."

It was clear that Harry was not happy to have this sprung on him. Only Luna and Hermione could do this to him without his losing his temper.

Luna asked, "May I go on?" Harry nodded, obviously torn by numerous emotions.

"You, Professor Lupin, and Miss Tonks would all greatly like to see Sirius Black once again. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and I would greatly like to ease your pain." She paused, and when Harry said nothing, she went on, "The final condition to call someone who has gone all the way into death, besides there needing to be at least twelve people, is the presence of an earthly bound spirit as one of them. In other words. . . ."

"Me," Nick said.

"Exactly. Either Professor Moody or Professor Dumbledore would be the twelfth person."

"I am also sensitive to the Gift," Dumbledore said. "Beyond that, either Professor Moody or I would do equally well."

"If you decide to do this, Harry, it would be up to you," Moody said. "However, it might be best if it were Dumbledore, while I keep my eye out and make certain no one interferes."

"The reason why this was sprung on you like this is because we ran into a time problem," Hermione said, giving Dumbledore a dirty look.

"The best time to conduct the ceremony would be the evening of the First of November," Luna said.

"And I decided that this was an excellent professional opportunity for Miss Lovegood, as well as a good personal opportunity for you, Professor Lupin, and Miss Tonks," Dumbledore said. "In short, by involving Professor Marchbanks, Miss Lovegood has a chance to earn extra credit on her O.W.L."

"Really?" Hermione asked, now curious.

"Oh, yes. Such extra credit must be done in the O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. year, and may be done outside of the normal testing period only if the opportunity is time-sensitive," Marchbanks stated. "In this case, done on the First, or the evening before or after the First, this ceremony should have at best a fifty percent chance of succeeding. On six other days between now and next June there would be a seventy-five percent less chance of succeeding, and almost no chance on any other night. In any event, under the circumstances we'll actually be operating under, I'd say there is only a one in three chance of this fully working. I would participate in the actual ceremony, while there would be a few observers as well."

"The possible O.W.L. credit is not important enough for me to make you agree to this if you're not interested," Luna said quietly to Harry.

"We're sorry to spring things on you," Hermione added.

"Some of us didn't know anything about it until a few hours ago," Ginny said.

"You would have been informed tonight in any event, if with a bit more privacy, except there would be a fair amount of paperwork to do for the O.W.L. credit," Dumbledore said. "As it is, you must decide tonight if we are to get all the forms completed. I apologize for the rush."

Harry just sat in his chair, stunned.

Professor Marchbanks stood and slowly moved to Harry's side. "Do what you think is best for you, Mister Potter. It only has a chance of working if you want it to. We can actually wait and start filling in the forms in the morning, if you wish to go through with it." She glared at Trelawney, who had been keeping silent only with great restraint. "You! And Dumbledore! Escort me to my carriage."

The two hurried to the ancient witch, and helped her out of the room. Each of the others took their leave after patting Harry on the shoulder (or kissing his cheek, in the case of Ginny and Tonks), until he was left alone with Luna, Hermione, and the now-quietly singing Fawkes.

Hermione knelt in front of Harry, putting her head in his lap. "I'm so sorry. We didn't mean. . ."

"To spring in on me," Harry said wearily. "I understand, and I'm not really angry with either of you. I'm sure Dumbledore talked you into keeping it quiet."

"In part," Hermione agreed.

"We didn't know until today if we would be allowed to do the ceremony," Luna said. "For all either of us could tell at first, it might even have been considered to be a Dark ceremony. I had to wait until I could ask the Sibyl, and she said it wasn't Dark, but that it might still be illegal in our world."

"And it is, unless conducted under certain conditions, which meant going through a lot of paperwork, which Dumbledore has already partially done," Hermione said.

"We didn't want to get your hopes up, and then not be able to carry through with it," Luna added, in a voice pleading for understanding. "I didn't know about this O.W.L. credit until this morning, when Professor Trelawney kept me behind and told me. We didn't know it had been tentatively approved until then, either. You know I don't care about O.W.L.s and such things."

"You should, at least a little," Hermione said, "but you're right, Harry shouldn't take that into consideration of what he wants to do."

Harry snorted, "Yeah, as if I wouldn't, any more than I would ignore the fact that you both obviously think it would be something I should do."

The two hugged Harry from either side. "Do you want a chance, maybe not a great one, but a chance to say goodbye to Sirius?" Hermione asked.

Harry sighed. "Yes, yes I would. As awful as the night of the Third Task was, it gave me a chance to say something to my Mum and Dad, and Cedric, too."

"Exactly," Hermione said. "As bad as it was, it also gave you a little closure. Hopefully, this will give you more. I wish I could say goodbye to my Mum and Dad."

"All right." Harry gave the two a one-armed hug each, and then he let them go and stood. "Tell Dumbledore to set everything up."

"Where are you going, Harry?" Luna asked softly.

"It's too late to fly. I need to walk." He kissed each girl, and then told Hermione, "Don't wait up for me." He walked out of the Headmaster's office.

Luna and Hermione hugged each other, worried about Harry. Fawkes sang a bit louder to try and comfort them.

Throughout October, Harry was much moodier than he had been in September. His room mates reported worse dreams, including some yelling or even screaming (although Harry never woke up), but his scar still seemed unaffected. Harry dealt with his problems without anger, but he spent more time flying and exercising. When he was able to find time to be alone with Luna and/or Hermione in their private suite, his lovemaking seemed more passionate but slightly less affectionate than it had been before.

While this was going on, Hermione and Ginny were concerned with Harry but even more concerned with Luna. The war against her in Ravenclaw was quieter but still active. No one touched her possessions, but her room mates never spoke a word to her outside of required interactions in class. The Seventh years ignored her as well. All of them, while not talking to Luna, had few hesitations in talking about her. By mid-October, Luna had actually been allowed to move in with the Fourth years, which finally largely ended much of the sniping.

Saturday, October 26, 1996  
The First Hogsmeade Weekend

"Come on, Harry," Ron demanded.

Harry continued to pout. "No."

"Please?" Ginny asked.

"No."

"You've got to!" Colin exclaimed.

"No, I don't."

"It will be good for you," Hermione pointed out.

"I doubt it."

"Luna will be waiting," Hermione stated.

Harry hesitated, but then said, "She's understanding, and you two can shop together."

"Do we have to carry you?" Seamus demanded.

Harry looked Seamus in the eye, and Seamus felt a bit weak in the knees. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Seamus," Harry stated very firmly.

Everyone crossed off that idea.

At that point, Bonnie More walked up to Harry. She was the smallest and shyest First year in collective Gryffindor memory, even tinier than Dennis Creevy had been. Two Slytherin Second years had been picking on her in mid-September when Harry had happened upon the scene. Harry had scared the pair so badly that they had refused to come out from under their beds until the next morning, and then only because they were more afraid of Snape, who was yelling at them at that moment, than they were of the then distant-Harry. Harry, and then his friends, had semi-adopted her, and she was often found reading on the floor near either Harry or Hermione.

"Harry?" she asked. Even while Harry was sitting, she had to look up into his eyes. Her light caramel eyes looked at him pleadingly.

"Yes, Bonnie?"

She handed Harry three Sickles. "Would you please buy me some candy today?"

Harry sighed in defeat. "Sure, anything in particular?"

"No, whatever you think best."

"Let me get my. . . ." Dean handed Harry his cloak.

Harry sighed again. "Let's go. First stop, Honeydukes." He shoved himself out of the chair, put on his cloak, and turned to go.

"Harry!" Bonnie admonished.

Harry turned around and picked her up. The only girl younger than a Third year allowed into the HPSN gave her here a hug and a kiss, and then Harry and the others left to go to Hogsmeade.

About half way to Hogsmeade, Harry suddenly felt the gloom lift off his shoulders. There was just enough of a chill in the air to be invigorating, the sun was bright, and the chatter around him was happy.

Harry felt an arm snake around his waist. He had slowly gotten used to that over the summer, and especially over the two months of term. Harry was not an overtly affectionate person, especially in public -- very few people growing up like he had with the Dursleys could be. Still, he had learned to accept the demonstrations of physical affection from his peers, and he realized that he actually liked it.

As another arm wrapped around him from the other side, Harry glanced and saw that it was Luna and Hermione today -- it could easily have been other members of the HPSN, but all of

them had learned that Harry's favorites were Luna and Hermione, even if none of them had yet guessed how close he actually was with them. Harry put his arms around them in return, making certain he only brushed the undersides of their breasts, which made them both giggle.

It was in that frame of mind that Harry and his friends entered Hogsmeade.

Harry really had little interest in being in Hogsmeade, but he decided that the walk and especially the company had both done him a lot of good. He therefore entered Honeydukes, rented one of their 'bottomless bags' (not really bottomless, of course, but they would hold a very large amount of items inside without expanding very much or adding any real weight -- when you were finished with them, you left them out for the elves to collect and return to the business) and proceeded to test how much the bag would hold.

"The kid only gave you three Sickles," Ron pointed out.

"So I give the First and Second years some treats," Harry said with a shrug, allowing Hermione to toss in copious amounts of the string mints that also cleaned teeth.

Albus Dumbledore sat in a room in the back of the Hog's Head pub. With him was Severus Snape as well as Moody, Remus, and Tonks. Dung Fletcher came into the room and dropped a note before leaving.

"Ah," Dumbledore said, "Harry and his friends are in the Three Broomsticks. Harry is saying he's staying there until it is time to return and his friends are all enjoying an early luncheon."

"And why is that good news?" Snape asked.

"We're on one end of the village, the Three Broomsticks is almost at the other end," Moody said. "Any attack will most likely be on the center."

"And you think Potter can take care of both himself and those around him?" Snape demanded.

"Yes," Remus answered, which was echoed by the others.

At that point the door opened, and the bar keep, who was also Dumbledore's brother Aberforth, stuck his head in. "Albus, a hundred and twenty dementors are approaching the village. It looks like twenty will sweep this way, fifty will head towards the Three Broomsticks, and the rest will attack the center of the town. The aurors you brought in will attack from the rear shortly, while the Order people are already moving everyone towards here, the Post Office, and the Three Broomsticks."

"Right," Dumbledore said standing. "Madam Rosmerta knows?"

"Dung is fire calling now."

"Excellent. Let's go."

Snape frowned, but left through the fireplace. He would be alerting the teachers left back at Hogwarts. It was always possible that this was a diversion for a Death Eater attack on the school, and of course Snape had a higher price on his head than anyone other than Potter and Dumbledore. Tonks had started throwing the same insults Snape's way as Snape had used on Sirius Black the year before, and Snape was thinking of them as he left.

Pomona Sprout was herding a large protesting group of mixed Third and Fourth years towards the Three Broomsticks. Looking up from her charges, she saw a ring of students in front of the pub. Most were facing the sides, making certain there would be no approaches from the alleys. Harry Potter and his five friends were facing the street.

Granger looked at them, and then the girl's face froze. Sprout needed no other warning. "Run, children! **RUN!**" she called, and only then turned around. She saw there were a dozen dementors gaining on them, and a larger group behind the dozen. "Expecto Patronum!" she called. Her Patronus was neither very powerful nor large -- a small swarm of bees -- but she hoped it would delay the dementors long enough to spare the children, even if she knew she was doomed.

At that moment, a sweep of bright white light burst past her, and leveled the dementors into piles of rags. It traveled on into the further group, and the leading dementors fell to the ground, writhing in agony.

Sprout turned around, shocked.

Then she was reminded of her best friend throughout school, who had been Muggle-born. Sprout had stayed with her over many summers. A word she had learned in the Muggle church now sprang to mind to describe Harry Potter.

Wrathful.

Sprout had always liked Harry, although not as much as Dumbledore, Hagrid, McGonagall, or even Flitwick liked him. Today, however, she was very glad Harry Potter knew she was on his side. He was not angry. He was far from out of control. He was not even vengeful.

Harry Potter was full of righteous wrath. To Sprout, he resembled a god or hero out of myth, rising to protect the weak and innocent (although Sprout later admitted that the older students immediately around Harry did not look at all weak or even innocent).

"Stay here, and keep an eye out in all directions," Harry commanded as he walked towards her. Sprout didn't think he meant to include her, but decided to obey the order. Harry strode past her, his green eyes actually shining with his power. He lifted his arms into the air, placed both hands on his wand, and swept it down like a sword, aiming for the dementors. In a moment of dazzling light, they were destroyed.

Harry did not turn. "Neville, Ginny, Luna, Hermione, Ron! come with me! Dean! keep an eye out. Professor Sprout, could you take command inside?"

"Of course, Harry," she answered.

"You five, pay no attention to what's in front of us. Ron, Ginny! eyes behind us to the outside. Neville, Hermione! eyes skyward. Luna, eyes on the other four. Ready? Let's go."

The little knot moved off with perfect coordination.

Professor Sprout approached Dean. "How did he do that?"

"I don't know," Dean admitted. "I overheard Professor Lupin say to Professor Flitwick that he might be more powerful, although of course far less knowledgeable, than Professor Dumbledore or Voldemort. Right now, I believe it."

The group of six moved cautiously down the High Street of Hogsmeade, sending the small groups of students and townspeople they found running up the street towards the Three Broomsticks.

They were very cautious.

The street was not straight, and when they rounded the bend near the center of the town, they saw there were perhaps sixty dementors trying to attack the Post Office, which was being defended by several Patroni sent from inside the Post Office and attacked by several from the far side.

"Do you all love me?" Harry asked in a strangely serene voice.

"Of course we do," Hermione answered.

"Well, Platonic love, anyway," Ron added.

"Speak for your self," Ginny muttered.

Harry ignored that. "If you love me and can do it without taking your eyes off your assignments, think of that love you feel for me, and for each other or for anyone else." He paused. "Are you all ready?"

The others murmured agreement. They were ready.



## **Chapter XXVIII**

### The Battle of Hogsmeade -- The Grapes of Wrath continued

"We seem to be having problems," Moody said. Each of the professors had their Patronus attacking the dementors trying to get at the Post Office, while Dumbledore was destroying the smaller group of dementors one by one.

Suddenly, a bright white light swept through the large group of dementors, destroying them. It spread out, finishing off the group that Dumbledore had been attacking and then hit the Hogwarts group. They had each braced for the impact, but to them, the light felt wonderful -- warm and bracing.

"What the hell was that!" Moody demanded when it passed.

"Harry," Remus said simply.

"Of course," McGonagall agreed. "We should have known."

Harry walked slowly down the street, followed by the rest of his combat group, who were trying to look in all other directions. "That takes care of all the ones we've seen," Harry said coming up to the professors. "Should I stay here, or retreat back to the Three Broomsticks, in case Voldemort attacks there?"

"Move back up the street," Dumbledore said. "We'll bring the students out of the Post Office, and then your group will lead the way back to the Three Broomsticks. The aurors are securing the village behind us, and we can leave them and the villagers to look after themselves. They will be well-able to do so once they are organized."

"Right," Harry said, moving his group down the street.

It only took Dumbledore five minutes to get the students organized, and the mass started moving down the street.

"Something's wrong," Harry said as he and his group fully cleared the bend.

Glancing ahead, Harry's followers saw that a group in black robes was exchanging curses with the defenders at the pub. Behind them, a tall figure was threatening them to do better, while Professor Sprout and Dean directed the student defenders.

"Riddle," Harry hissed. "Neville, get those students back down the street and warn Dumbledore. Hermione, Luna, stay here and shield them as necessary."

"Right," they said.

"What are you going to do?" Ginny demanded.

"Ron, Ginny, keep an eye on the Death Eaters. Curse them if necessary."

"But Harry. . . ." Hermione tried to protest. Luna shook her head, and Hermione stood down.

Harry walked forward.

Voldemort saw Harry, and turned to meet him, an evil grin on his face. Just as Voldemort was about to open his mouth, the white light again streamed from Harry, but this time from his left hand, taking the Dark Wizard by surprise. It was not as strong as the beam which had destroyed the dementors, but it staggered the Dark Lord.

Harry stopped the beam, and again used both hands to shoot the light from his wand. The stronger stream of pure light magic struck Voldemort, causing him to scream in agony. When it passed, Voldemort fell to one knee. He looked up at Harry in shock and pain, then triggered a portkey just before Harry could send off another blast.

Harry saw that the rest of the fighting had slowed but had not quite stopped. Harry scowled and cast an anti-disapparation field over the Death Eaters and a shield between the Death Eaters and his friends. "Get them," he ordered Ginny and Ron. Ginny and Ron had just enough time to stun one Death Eater each when all the people in front of the Three Broomsticks launched attacks on the rest of them. In less than five minutes, the eighteen Death Eaters resembled the slugs the DA had turned Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle into the previous June. Many students looked at the Death Eaters with real satisfaction.

The Battle of Hogsmeade was over. Voldemort's forces had been captured or (in the case of the dementors) destroyed. There had been many minor to moderate casualties on the side of the students and villagers, but nothing of lasting significance.

The forces of Light had won.

The problem was, no one quite knew how to explain it.

Albus Dumbledore frowned a mighty frown. Hermione thought he looked rather like images of Zeus or Odin at their most dyspeptic. He had wanted to talk with Harry before Fudge, the MLES, the aurors, and the Press all swooped down on Hogwarts, demanding explanations.

Harry had refused, or at least had refused to meet with Dumbledore alone. Instead, Harry sat facing Dumbledore, with Luna, Hermione, Ron, Padma, Susan, Neville, Ginny, Dean, and Professors Moody, Lupin, and McGonagall behind him, and Professor Sprout and Tonks off to the side.

After the silence had stretched out for too long a time, Harry spoke up, "Is there a problem, Professor?"

"Yes, Harry." Dumbledore paused. "You do realize that what you did this morning should not have been at all possible."

Harry nodded his head. "Yes, I know. I shouldn't have had that much power, and I certainly should not have been able to control it at all without my wand."

"Exactly. Nor should any one person be able to cast a disapparation shield. Even I cannot cast a disapparation field over that large a group by myself!"

Harry shrugged. "But I did."

"You did more than that! How?"

"Well, in part what happened was that Voldemort's possession of me in the Ministry triggered the powers that the Prophecy predicted." Harry turned and, despite the disapproval on Dumbledore's face, explained the Prophecy to everyone who did not know it. They did all agree not to speak of the Prophecy, but Harry was not longer worried about that.

"And what were those powers?" Hermione asked when Harry was finished. She of course had a very good idea, but thought this would help Harry explain to the others.

"I'm not certain exactly how they work," Harry admitted, "since my trainers this summer didn't allow me to explore their highest mysteries, but it seems that I can draw on the ambient magic around me to attack anything associated with Voldemort and work it to my will. I learned how to fully control it this summer." He did not mention the Dragons by name, which was understood by those in the room who needed to understand. "In addition, the powers can be augmented by positive feeling, in this case, the . . . affection my friends have for me. As long as I am not directing these powers out of negative emotions -- hate, fear, envy -- they can be very effective and powerful, as you all saw."

"What emotion were you using?" Remus asked. "It caused too much destruction to be love."

Harry grinned. "I was proving Bellatrix Lestrange wrong. When we fought at the Ministry, she said something like I could never win, because hatred is more powerful than righteous anger. I think I proved that, for me at least, she was wrong. It was righteousness, although there wasn't much anger."

Everyone in the room was frowning except for Dumbledore. They all knew that only a small part of the magic used by a witch or wizard actually came from the witch or wizard. Instead, the wizard's magic triggered a response from the ambient magic of the world, controlled by the use of set spells which had 'conditioned' a response from the ambient magic over the years, and which operated in part through the wand as the connection. Even Hermione and Luna were slightly surprised by Harry's explanation.

"What you're saying is, instead of triggering and manipulating the ambient magic, you're directly controlling it?" Sprout asked.

"Exactly," Harry answered, "but it seems to work best against Voldemort and those associated with him."

"Like Professor Snape?" Dumbledore asked drily.

Harry flushed. "Well . . . yes." Harry frowned. "I was really surprised that Voldemort survived that second blast of pure righteous magic, but I guess the burst was just too short. I could actually feel him about to come apart and die, and if I could have reacted just a touch faster, he would have been destroyed." He shook his head at his own reaction time.

"Are you sure it only works at this high a level against Voldemort and his followers?" Hermione asked.

Harry thought a moment. "I think so, although of course I haven't had any real chance to experiment, why?"

"I was just thinking of those dementors back at the end of our Third year." She turned to Dumbledore. "Sir, if you weren't being directly affected by dementors, how many could you easily drive away with your Patronus?"

Dumbledore thought a moment. "I am not certain. Most likely between fifty and seventy-five." He started to go on and ask a question, but Hermione out-spoke him.

"Professor Moody, what's the largest number you ever heard of being affected?"

"I've never heard of more than thirty being driven away by one Patronus, although I don't doubt Dumbledore's estimate of his own power." Moody looked at the others, and they agreed with him.

"Harry, how many did you drive away that night at the end of your Third year?" Dumbledore asked. He realized that he had never actually asked, merely assuming it had been a handful.

"I thought about a hundred, but I guess that can't be right."

"There were between a hundred and five and a hundred and seventeen," Hermione said. "There was too much movement to be more certain." She set her jaw. "I'd be glad to contribute a memory to a pensieve, if anyone needs to verify the count."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then, "Your point?" McGonagall asked.

"I don't think it's Voldemort that triggers this response as much as it's anything that is truly Dark Magic or which has been touched by Dark Magic."

"That's very possible," Dumbledore agreed. "If we release this, Harry could be an even greater target than he was before, if that's possible."

"Is it possible?" Hermione asked before several others could.

"Directly, probably not," Dumbledore conceded. "Indirectly. . . ."

"Indirectly," Harry said, "all your families will be greater targets."

"But that really doesn't make sense," Ron pointed out. "If V. . Vo . . . if Riddle captures Mum and Dad, that won't make you stop, it will just mean you'll go after him sooner. If he kills Mum and Dad, that will hurt you, but it won't stop you."

"We don't know if Voldemort will reason that way," Dumbledore said.

"There will have to be greater protections added for everyone remotely connected to Harry," Moody said.

"If those work, or if Voldemort reasons like we think he should, we're back to direct attacks on Harry," Ginny said. "That means attacks here at school. Could . . . could Voldemort repossess me?" Ginny was much more afraid of the name 'Riddle' than she was 'Voldemort'.

"In theory, yes," Dumbledore said. "However, he would have to capture you and work on you for some time. In addition, possession takes much longer than the Imperious, and if anyone sees you under possession you will be acting less like your normal self than you do under the Imperious."

"I think you'll have to ask permission from the Ministry for us to teach resistance to the Imperious," Moody said.

"I'm certain Minister Fudge will be here any moment," Dumbledore said drily. "So, what should I tell him, and the Press?"

"Tell them the outline of the Prophecy," Hermione suggested. "Tell them that Harry has the ability to defeat Voldemort. When someone asks why Harry doesn't just go do that, ask them to point out where Voldemort is. Also, remind everyone that it's still up to the Ministry to defend the community, not a Sixth year. It certainly is not his job to track Voldemort down."

"True, although not everyone will like that answer," Dumbledore said. He turned back to Harry. "And do you have a theory of why this has happened?"

"I think that when the Killing Curse rebounded from me, it didn't just create the link symbolized by the scar. I think the scar also symbolizes something almost like a . . . well, like an active vaccination, if there were such a thing. It doesn't protect me from Dark Magic, but it gives me the power to fight it."

"That makes some sense," Dumbledore said. "In any event, I shall concoct a story which is true, but which should not put too much pressure on Harry here. Only the people in this room had a good view of the actual battle. I propose you downplay Harry's power at least a bit. The full truth will actually create even greater expectations than Harry can deliver."

Dumbledore turned to the two Defense instructors. "I shall press Cornelius for permission to teach resistance to the Imperious, although we cannot force any student to accept such training."

Moody and Lupin nodded their understanding.

"Is there anything else?" Luna asked.

"There is one brief item I need to discuss with Harry, alone," Dumbledore admitted. "Why?"

Luna pointed to the Honeydukes bottomless bag still tied to Harry's belt. "Harry promised candy, and he has to deliver it, and we all barely ate any lunch. Most other students didn't even start."

"There should be a plentitude of sandwiches and drinks in the great hall," Dumbledore said. "Not as satisfying as the food and butter beer of the Three Broomsticks, but filling, nevertheless."

Everyone nodded, and made their way out, leaving Harry standing near the door. "Sir?"

"Your power was most impressive, and unexpected. I was wondering if you would be willing to try and use it in another way."

"I know what Hermione thinks, but I don't think it would work that well against anything that wasn't touched by Voldemort."

"What about directly against Voldemort's touch?"

Harry frowned a moment, and then asked, "Sn . . . Professor Snape's Dark Mark?"

Dumbledore nodded.

Harry shrugged. "If you think it might work, and if he promises not to hold it against me either way."

"Agreed." Dumbledore sighed. "Severus developed a quite remarkable salve. It has prevented the worst effects of the Mark to manifest. However, its effects are starting to wear off."

"We can try tomorrow morning, if he agrees."

"Thank you, Harry."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"Exactly that, Minister. Mister Potter is a Sixth year student. It is not his duty to go out and hunt down Dark Wizards, it is his duty to study."

"That's nonsense and you know it. If he has the power to destroy . . . Lord Thingy, then he should do it!"

"You have had the power to undermine Voldemort's organization, yet you have not done so," Dumbledore stated.

Fudge and his aides gaped at the Headmaster.

"Voldemort is severely injured," Dumbledore went on. "Now is the time to strike against his followers." He handed over a set of parchments. "Those are the names, although I doubt any will be new to you. These also detail the evidence. If you cannot strike against the followers, you have no right to expect anyone to do any part of your job for you."

Fudge swallowed and gestured to Percy to pick them up while he glared at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore smiled. "Three other things, Minister. First of all, we have sent an account of the battle to the various media. People **will** notice and wonder if your official accounts do not match ours." Fudge turned an even deeper shade of purple than he had been. "Second, Mister Potter and the others will be available, here at the castle, tomorrow afternoon at One, should there be any further questions, but you will be meeting him only with Professor Moody and their Heads of House present. Three," he finished with a beatific smile at Percy, "I wish to offer my congratulations to Mister Weasley here. I have just learned of his marriage. I understand his family will be discussing the matter with him as well."

Percy looked away in embarrassment, but said nothing.

When Harry entered the common room, he was smothered in a hug by the anxious Bonnie. Once he pried the First year off his neck (although she remained firmly attached to his waist), Harry tried to distribute the candy, but Hermione stopped him. "We need to tell everyone what happened," she pointed out. "We don't need them on a sugar high on top of everything else."

Harry shrugged, and reluctantly called everyone to gather around.

As Harry was telling the story, Dean moved over to Ron's side. Ron had been standing alone, over near the stairs to the boy's rooms. "Are you alright?" Dean asked softly.

"Not a scratch," Ron replied.

"That's not what I mean," Dean pointed out, "and you know it. What's wrong?" He nodded towards Harry. "Envious again?"

Ron glared, but did not deny it.

"I understand," Dean went on. "When we see Harry like this, it's difficult not to be just a little envious. I mean, look at that; it's hardly something we see every day." Harry was sitting on the largest sofa. Little Bonnie was sitting curled on his lap, her arms around Harry and her head on his left shoulder, gazing at him with unadulterated hero worship. Harry's left arm was supporting her. Natalie MacDonald and Ginny were seated further along on his left, while Hermione was cuddled in his right arm with one arm around his waist, the other holding his hand, and her head was on his shoulder -- the most blatant display of affection she had shown Harry in public yet -- while all the other students were fanned out in front of him and most of them (especially Colin), even the Seventh years, were mesmerized by Harry's story.

"It is easy to be a bit jealous," Ron admitted, "even though we know what kind of life Harry leads the rest of the time."

"How bad do you think the nightmares will be tonight?"

Ron shrugged. "Hard to tell. Hopefully, not too bad. On the one hand, no one was killed or Kissed, Harry destroyed a lot of dementors, and something like eighteen Death Eaters were captured. On the other hand, even though he defeated Riddle, the bastard's still alive. Just seeing him that close. . . ." Ron shuddered. "Harry might not be the only one with nightmares."

Dean nodded. "That's true, he looked more like an 'it' than a 'he'. It might even be worse for you than for Colin, Hermione, or me."

"Why is that?"

"You haven't seen any Muggle television or films, have you?"

"A little, this past July at Hermione's, but not too much. Why?"

"You probably didn't see much if any science fiction or horror movies, right?"

Ron shrugged. "Probably not. Why?" he asked again.

"Well, they use a lot of special effects and such to make people and puppets appear like creatures in those types of movies. Trust me, as horrible as Voldemort looked, he's nothing like the creatures in some films like Alien or Predator. Of course, Voldemort is real, and those aren't, but he's not quite as scary appearing to me as he would be to you. Plus, of course, you were raised to be afraid of him, and we weren't."

"I guess. It looks like 'story hour' is breaking up." Harry had indeed finished, and many of the students congratulated Ron, Dean, and the others who had followed Harry up and down the High Street or defended the pub as they left the group to go on to other late afternoon activities.

As Harry came over towards Ron, Ron saw Harry give Bonnie and the other First and Second years their candy. The youngest students ran off to their dorms, clutching their sweets. "I see you finally lost your leach," Ron teased.

"She does seem possessive at times," Harry said mildly.

"Yeah, all the benefits of having a little sister, and none of the problems," Ron joked. Ginny stuck her tongue out at him.

Harry looked around and saw that only his combat group (minus Luna) and Dean were with him. "First of all, I want to thank all of you. The reason why we succeeded was because we worked together." He nodded to Dean. "That applies to you, too. You did a great job keeping the students in line at The Three Broomsticks, and I told your uncle that when we were walking back to the castle. The students would have gotten massacred by the Death Eaters and Voldemort if it hadn't been for you."

"And Professor Sprout," Dean said.

"I saw enough of what was happening to see that you were directing the fight, and she was making certain the students followed your orders," Harry replied. "I wish I could have finished the bastard off, but we got rid of almost quarter of his dementors and over a third of the known Death Eaters. Even with Fudge still as the Minister, the Ministry should be able to keep things in check for a while."

"We'll get 'em yet," Ginny said, and on that note, the group broke apart.

Hermione took Ron back into the corner of the common area where he had been watching Harry. After a brief hug, she looked into Ron's eyes and said, "Keep a close watch tonight."

Ron nodded. "Dean and I already talked about that. We should all be ready, in case it's bad."



## **Chapter XXIX**

Monday, October 28, 1996

"Oy, you lot look like shite," Justin said.

Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Ron sat down at the empty Gryffindor table. It was still well before 7:00 am.

"We feel worse than we look," Ron muttered.

"Another bad night?" Ernie Macmillan asked. Most of the castle had heard how bad Harry's nightmares had been the night after the battle. In part, they were caused by the agony that Voldemort was in. The Dark Lord's thoughts had not bled through, but his pain had. The rest had been caused by Harry's own subconscious. Between the two, all of Gryffindor had been awoken, and Harry had only had a few hours sleep, the others only slightly more.

By Sunday evening, everyone was worried about Harry, since he had disappeared without a word that morning. At that point, no one except himself, Dumbledore, and Snape knew that Harry had been busy removing Snape's Dark Mark, although its removal had left quite a nasty scar in the same shape in its place. Dumbledore was still considering how to use the information to the Order's advantage. Snape had been so shocked that it had been totally removed, that Dumbledore had been able to make the Potion Master to swear to leave Harry be.

No one was certain how long that promise would last.

"Just about the worst ever," Seamus answered, "and that's saying something."

"At least Harry didn't wake up last night, despite the screaming," Ron said. "We were all miserable yesterday, and he was the worst."

"How did you keep. . . ." Justin started to ask.

"Uh-oh," Ernie said. The group looked at the entrance.

"There's something you don't see every day," Neville said as Professor McGonagall stormed in, barefoot, her hair in curlers, and wearing lime-green pyjamas and an orange dressing gown.

"What exactly went on last night!" she demanded. "Why are there six girls sleeping in your room?"

"Six?" Dean said blearily, "I thought there was five."

Ron tried to think. "Hermione, Ginny, Lavender, Parvati, and Bonnie. Yes, that's five."

"You despicable! . . . disgusting! . . . an eleven year old!?"

"Don't forget Colin," Seamus said, ignoring the sputtering professor. "The way he was dressed, he looked even more . . . feminine than usual."

"True."

"You slept with. . ."

"Of course not!" Neville said, offended. "We most certainly did NOT sleep with our girl friends! Harry did."

**"WHAT!"**

"The nightmares were horrible last night, almost as loud as they used to be, and he had been sleeping so badly even before the battle, we didn't want to wake him up," Ron explained. "The screaming brought just about everyone to our room, but that didn't last long. Little Bonnie just leapt onto Harry and hugged him while we were debating if we should try to wake Harry up, since his scar was normal. That quieted him down a little. The other girls we mentioned gathered around, and they took turns all night, two at a time. The others went to bed."

"He slept better, but not well," Seamus went on. "There was a lot of incidental magic, and we had to stay up reversing it."

"Is that why Miss More is copper-toned this morning?"

"She was copper with blue stripes and green hair, before we corrected most of it. Hermione said the copper skin tones would fade off by noon," Dean offered.

When McGonagall found her self speechless, Neville added, "Harry can't take the Dreamless Sleep Potion again until Saturday or Sunday night, he took far too much earlier in the month, and the other potions don't work. Face it, the only thing that might work is the physical affection. One or two girls cuddling with him each night, before his nightmares start."

"Yeah, two girls. I hope Colin's gone before Harry wakes up," Seamus said. "He was wrapped around Harry so tightly I couldn't get him off."

"Physical affection, note I said 'affection', nothing more, seems to be what Harry needs," Dumbledore said, surprising everyone, since no one had seen him approaching. "I suggest he sleep on that over-sized sofa in the common room for a while. It should be easy to transfigure into something comfortable. Some of his friends may take turns nestling with him, while others keep an eye out for any incidental magic."

McGonagall was still speechless, so Dumbledore turned to Ron. "Did I hear you correctly? His scar did not seem affected in any way, Mister Weasley?"

"No, sir," Ron answered. "It wasn't even warm. Hermione and Ginny each checked it several times."

"That's good, at least. Very well. Carry on."

At that moment, Natalie Macdonald came rushing in. She stopped short, panting and obviously wondering whom she should report to.

Dumbledore solved her dilemma. "Yes, Miss Macdonald?"

"Excuse me, sir. Harry is awake . . . well, you see, sir, Harry woke up and, well. . . ."

"And found he was cuddled with Mister Creevy?"

"Yes, sir. The thing is. . . ."

"I shall come along and de-hex and uncurse Mister Creevy." Dumbledore paused. "Exactly what did Mister Potter do to Mister Creevy?"

"Well, that's part of the problem. Colin . . . Colin isn't really Colin anymore. He's, well, he's more like a Colleen, I mean, he's a she, and she, err, he won't let Hermione change her back to him. Harry isn't quite sure how he did it, and can't change Colin back, either."

"I see. Well, I'm certain I can sort Miss Creevy out, one way or another. Come along, Miss Macdonald. Professor McGonagall, perhaps you would care to assist?"

Still speechless, Professor McGonagall followed the Headmaster from the hall.

Draco Malfoy chose that moment to pass by. "My, my. It's a good thing Potter is so noble and trustworthy. Just about any other red-blooded Sixth year male would take at least slight advantage." He hurried away before anyone respond.

The three Sixth year male Gryffindors affected looked at each other, and sat huddled at the end of their table, along with Ron.

"You know, I hate to say it. . . ." Seamus started.

"Then don't," Ron retorted.

"Harry does seem to be getting some very . . . roving hands," Dean admitted.

"He was asleep!" Neville protested.

"He was," Dean acknowledged. "Still, I was awake most of the night, and he had his hands up the front of all our girl friends and a smirk on his face. If he hadn't been asleep, I would have hexed him." Seeing the looks on Ron and Neville's faces, he said, "Alright, I would have tried to hex him. I got a good show out it. Shall I tell you how the girls' boobs and nipples differ?"

"Please!" Seamus said. Neville and Ron punched him on either shoulder. "OW! I meant, please don't."

"All the girls looked pretty happy about it, too," Dean said, "and they **weren't** asleep. Thank goodness Bonnie was sleeping off her color changes by then."

"So. . . ." Neville started, but couldn't continue.

"So, we need to get permission for Luna to sleep in the Gryffindor common room, along with Hermione," Dean said. "I don't want to think what might happen under a duvet on the big sofa if Parvati was there."

It was clear the other two boys did not either.

"But how do we tell the girls?" Neville asked plaintively. "I mean our girls. Ginny hits and hexes, and Lavender and Parvati scream and scratch."

Each of the other teens looked offended, but none dared deny what Neville had said. Each was a little afraid of the girls' offensive capacity.

"Boys are so stupid." The four teens jumped and looked guilty. Katie Bell looked at them with a pitying smile. "Who has the strongest claims on Harry right now in the dating department?"

"Hermione and Luna," Dean answered.

"Right. So don't say anything to Ginny, Parvati, or Lavender if you value your manhoods. Make the suggestion directly to Hermione and Luna, and if they're interested, have them come see me, and then the three of us will take it to McGonagall."

"Thank you, Katie," Dean said with real gratitude. The other two boys echoed her.

"You're welcome." She turned and faced Ron. "Tell that git of a brother of yours to write soon, if he wants to see me over the Christmas break."

"I will," Ron answered, although he couldn't remember if she had dated Fred or George. He decided to write to both of them and let them figure it out.

"I still don't see why we have to allow an outsider in here," Natalie grumbled that night. Parvati and Lavender growled their agreements.

"Because Harry likes Luna, because Luna was driven out of her room by those bitches in her year," Hermione reminded the nine assembled girls, "and because your boyfriends are jealous of the idea that any of you join Harry."

"Padma said the other boys made the suggestion to Luna," Parvati said. "You have to admit, some of us let Harry get a little too friendly last night."

The other two girls involved blushed slightly, and couldn't deny it. Hermione just smiled.

"At least it's only one outsider," Lavender said. In addition, one Fifth, Sixth, or Seventh year Gryffindor girl would sleep in a nearby easy chair, in part as a chaperone and in part to undo any incidental magic. Despite vigorous protests, Dumbledore had changed Colin back into a male and he was not allowed a turn chaperoning.

"It's difficult to be angry with Luna or the boys," Hermione pointed out. "Let alone Harry or McGonagall or Dumbledore."

"Still, I do feel we ought to be angry at someone," Lavender stated.

"How about Malfoy?" Ginny suggested. "Joyce said he's the one that planted the idea in the boys' excuse for brains."

"Sounds reasonable," Lavender agreed.

"But what should we do about him?" Parvati asked.

After a brief silence, all of the girls turned and looked at Hermione.

"What?" she demanded.

"Well, you are supposed to be the cleverest witch of at least your year, if not the current and last generation or two," Natalie pointed out.

"There must be something we can do to get the ferret," Ginny agreed.

"It sounds more like a Weasley plot than a scholarly exercise," Hermione said primly.

"I don't know if Rita Skeeter or Umbridge would agree with that," Ginny retorted.

Hermione sighed. "Those were hardly elaborate plots," Hermione pointed out. "I'm willing to get Malfoy, but I don't know how a group of us could do it. It would take. . . ."

"Fred and George?" Ginny supplied.

Hermione shook her head. "It would probably take someone with a fair amount of training in arcane magic."

"You mean you don't?" Parvati demanded.

"Not the way we'd have to use it," Hermione admitted.

"Who is like that around here, who could actually help us?" Ginny asked. Seeing the looks on Lavender and Parvati's faces, Ginny explained, "Professor Lupin could certainly do it, but he wouldn't help prank a student."

"Maybe Harry could do it," Parvati said to Hermione. "He seems to be ahead of everyone but you in every class this year. Between the two of you, you should be able to come up with something."

"But would he?" Lavender challenged.

"He would, if Hermione asked him to," Parvati said.

"Parvati!"

"Oh, Hermione. You know perfectly well that even though Harry may or may not be in love with you, he loves you very much in every other way. You just have to make it clear that we just want his help in the planning. We'll do the execution. I'm sure he'll feel helping us more directly than that would violate the truce he has with Malfoy."

"You're probably right," Hermione answered, glad that her two roomies had not discovered their secret.

At that moment, a rather embarrassed Harry came down, dressed in his dressing gown and slippers.

"Ah, there's the sleepy head," Ginny cooed, making Harry blush. "Already to be tucked in? Where's the other hot water bottle?"

"Call me that outside of here, Ginny, and I'll show you some tricks Harry taught me," Luna teased back, coming down the girls' stairs.

"Sorry," Ginny said, "I meant to tease Harry, not you."

Luna smiled. "Fair enough. Who's chaperoning tonight?"

"I am," Katie called from across the common room. "So, you two snuggle up with Harry, and I'll turn off the lights. The rest of you, shoo!"

The younger girls kissed Harry goodnight, and wished Hermione and Luna pleasant dreams.

Tuesday, October 29, 1996

"Now, let me get this straight," Harry said the next morning. "You girls want to prank Malfoy?"

"Yes," they all said.

"Because you don't get to sleep with me?"

"Well . . . not exactly. . . ." Parvati hedged, while Lavender blushed.

"Yes," Ginny said. "Harry, it's time you face some home truths."

"Ginny!" Hermione hissed.

"Quiet. First of all, we all really like, even love, our boy friends. We are not trying to seduce you, or have serious relationships with you. But Harry, you are one hot wizard."

"Dead sexy," Lavender agreed.

"And you have, well . . . you have this aura now. . . ." Parvati said.

"Aura?" Harry said doubtfully.

"I doubted it when they mentioned it to me a few weeks ago, too," Katie said, "but you do. Maybe it's some kind of side-affect from your power increase. You do know you're likely the most powerful wizard since Merlin, right?"

"So I've been told," Harry agreed. "So, what does this aura thing do?"

"It turns girls on," Lavender said frankly. Hermione blushed, but nodded.

"Huh?"

"It sexually stimulates us," Katie said. "Being this close to you for a few minutes is as good as fifteen minutes of foreplay with George."

Parvati smirked, "I'd say five minutes with Dean."

"Ten with Neville," Ginny added.

"Seamus doesn't even know what foreplay is," Lavender pouted.

"So. . . ."

"So, you turn us on, and it's probably been true since the very late summer," Hermione said. "I've done some research, and the results are interesting. . . ."

"Oh, God," Harry said, dropping his head to his hands.

"Girls who don't know you and who aren't closer to you than five feet for long stretches of time merely report that you seem unusually attractive."

"How thorough was your research?" Ginny asked.

"Bulstrode said, and I quote, 'he's pretty good looking for a skinny half-blood'."

"Okay," Ginny acknowledged. "Is it universal for age?"

"Oh, you all know perfectly well that the younger Gryffindors all have major crushes on Harry."

"That probably explains Colin, too," Lavender said with a smirk.

"If I ever catch him with his hand down my boxers again, I really will castrate him," Harry growled.

"Dumbledore could probably put it back again," Hermione pointed out.

"Maybe. Anyway, what would you want to do to. . . ." Suddenly Harry stopped and smiled. "Have you found out Draco's schedule yet?"

"We have," Ginny said. "Tracy and Daphne don't like him."

"Does he do anything special on any particular night? Preferably with some of the Slytherin boys?"

"Actually, he and most of the Slytherin boys play wizarding poker Wednesday nights," Ginny answered.

"Perfect. All Hermione has to do to start this is to. . . ."

That evening, Harry and Hermione found themselves alone in a classroom. "How's the project going?" Harry asked.

"Pretty well," Hermione said nervously. "I really shouldn't leave the others too long. . . ."

"You know what I want to ask," Harry said sternly.

Hermione sighed. "Luna and I noticed it when the three of us got back together at the cottage. Ginny and Tonks both noticed it in the last weeks at the villa. I'm sure it had nothing to do with either Luna or me falling in love with you, or each other."

"It might not have been noticeable," Harry pointed out.

Hermione shrugged and then said, "So what? Harry, what will it take for us to convince you that you deserve to be loved?"

Harry gave Hermione a twisted smile. "Erase the ten years I spent with the Dursleys, I guess."

Hermione kissed Harry's cheek. "I do have to get back, but I'll send Luna along to cheer you up."

Thursday, Halloween, 1996

The Halloween feast was in full swing. Lavender leaned over and whispered to Hermione for the fifth time, "When will it start?"

Hermione replied, "Take a good look."

Lavender glanced over her shoulder, and noticed that Malfoy was looking rather nervous. Then she noticed why.

About a third of the Slytherin boys were giving Draco very intense, even smoldering, looks. As Lavender peeked, she saw two actually blow Draco kisses. "What the devil did you do?" she hissed at Hermione.

"We did," Hermione reminded Lavender. "We made a special Compulsion Potion, remember? And keyed it to Malfoy. Katie, Ginny, and their crew planted it in the Slytherins' food before the poker game."

"But what does it compel them to do? I forgot to ask."

"This one only affects males. The person it's keyed to will draw them to him if they had any contact with him over the previous twenty-four hours. Since they were playing cards, his sweat would have spread to at least some of the other Slytherins from those cards. Sooner or



later, one of the boys will break, and then they'll all jump Malfoy. Since I just used that hair Ginny got for me, they either have to touch his skin or hair, and then they'll slowly come out of. . . . H'mmm, figures that Goyle would break first."

Turning, Lavender saw that Goyle had turned and grabbed Draco in a bear hug, and was French kissing the shocked and struggling smaller teen very deeply. Fourteen other male Slytherins, some literally climbing over the table, were rushing to show their affection to Malfoy as well.

After a moment's shock, where the only sounds were Draco's muffled shouting for help and the animal grunts of the horny Slytherins, the great hall, especially the Slytherins and the staff table, erupted into shouts, and even some screams.

Over the shouts, Ron's voice was heard for a few seconds, "Don't let'em kiss you, Malfoy! Protect your virtue!"

The feast devolved into chaos. Katie organized the prefects of the other three Houses to move those students out of the hall, while the staff tried to deal with the Slytherin boys.

"That was a lot better than a troll," Ron commented.

"Or a petrified cat, a slashed portrait, a Tri-wizard tournament, or High Inquisitors," Harry agreed.

"I wonder which Slytherin had it in for Malfoy," Neville asked with glee.

"Hard to tell," Harry answered, keeping himself between Dumbledore and the Gryffindor girls the whole way out of the hall. Just in case.

Friday, November 1, 1996

"Good morning," Dumbledore stated at 7:45 the next morning. "Last night, Mister Malfoy and a number of the other Slytherin boys were pranked. Someone, or more likely a group of someones, used a very complicated and dangerous potion, an arcane type of compulsion potion, on them. Fortunately, while the Slytherins were extraordinarily embarrassed, no one was injured." Dumbledore glared at the assembled students, with special attention to the unaffected upper year Slytherins as well as the Gryffindors. "I take it no one wishes to confess?"

Silence.

"I thought not. Since there can be no penalties directed at the guilty parties, a more general punishment must be exacted. To make up for the mostly lost Hogsmeade weekend, we were going to have another this weekend." A collective groan spread through the students. "The Sunday portion of the visit is canceled. The affected students will be allowed to leave at Nine. The rest of the eligible students may leave at Ten. Everyone will be required to return by Four."

Now the students cheered.

That afternoon, an owl flitted into a small cabin high in the Welsh mountains. A shaking hand took the letter off and read it. Voldemort looked at the news, and called in a weak voice, "Wormtail!"

"Master?"

Voldemort tore off the code name on the letter. "Give this note to Julian. Tell him to think of anything, short term or long term, but he should do something."

"Yes, Master." Wormtail started his return to Grimmauld Place. Voldemort laid back, shivering.

A little before 10:00 pm, nineteen people gathered in front of a small room in the outer precincts of the castle (the twelve participants, two observers representing the O.W.L. testers, four observers from the Department of Mysteries, and Moody). Moody took his place guarding the outside of the room, while the other eighteen went in.

"Does anyone have a recommendation on seating?" Dumbledore asked. "Miss Lovegood?" he went on, forestalling Trelawney.

Luna moved to a seat. "To my right, Professor Marchbanks, Professor Dumbledore, Ron, Harry, Neville, Ginny, Hermione, Professor Lupin, Dora Tonks, Professor Trelawney, ending with Sir Nicholas on my left, materialized as well as he can be. The observers may be against the opposite wall."

"Very well," Dumbledore said, "let us begin."

## Chapter XXX

### The Seance

"Does anyone have a recommendation on seating?" Dumbledore asked. "Miss Lovegood?" he went on, forestalling Trelawney.

Luna moved to a seat near the back of the room. "From my right, Professor Marchbanks, Professor Dumbledore, Ron, Harry, Neville, Ginny, Hermione, Professor Lupin, Dora Tonks, Professor Trelawney, ending with Sir Nicholas on my left, materialized as well as he can be. The observers may be against the wall opposite."

"Very well," Dumbledore said, "let us begin."

Everyone took their places. "And the significance of this seating?" Griselda Marchbanks inquired as she sat.

"I shall not just be working through my own Gift, but yours, Professor Dumbledore's, and Professor Trelawney's, as well as Sir Nicholas' condition. Hermione is likely to remain the most alert of the others."

"Oh. A mundane aura, I presume?"

"Only in this respect," Luna said with a tender smile, which modified Hermione's glower a little.

"Of course." Marchbanks smiled at Hermione. "I remember you from the O.W.L.s, and after all my time on the testing team, that takes quite a lot. Your type of mental brilliance rarely mixes well with the Gift."

Hermione managed a smile at that.

"Should Sirius Black partially manifest, Hermione will be the only speaker unless he addresses someone else," Luna reminded them. "If she does not see him, remember, the order is Ginny, Remus, Tonks, Harry, Ron. The observers are to be totally silent no matter what. We want the maximum concentration on the connections."

Everyone nodded. "Please join hands," Luna directed. They all did so, although Nick's were inside Luna's and Trelawney's hands as much as he was holding them. "If you have any positive feelings towards Sirius Black, please think of them. If you don't, just think of his name."

Luna began a chant the Sibyl had taught her in one of the ancient languages of that alien world. Only Sirius' name was recognizable to most of the others. After nearly two minutes, half the candles in the seance room went out, and the others dimmed.

After another minute, a breeze stirred inside the room. Hermione remembered Luna saying to her that the temperature of any breeze would say a lot about the condition of the spirit.

At first, the breeze was cold with fear, and then it blew hot with anger. Within seconds, however, it settled down to a comforting, warm breeze, with only some small hits of those cold and hot elements.

Hermione felt Remus squeeze her hand. Her eyes darted around, and she saw a slight glow behind Luna's right shoulder. Ginny squeezed her other hand.

"Sirius?" Hermione whispered.

The table shook for a moment.

"Sirius," Hermione said softly, "will please you talk with us? It's Hermione Granger." She paused. "Remus is here, and would like to talk with you." The table shook a little.

"Nymphadora is here, too, and so is Harry." The table moved a little at Tonks' name, but after Harry's, the table jumped up with a loud knock, and came down with a thud.

Hermione went on as Luna had instructed her. "Answer with one knock for yes, two for no, three if you're unsure. Are you Sirius Black?"

-KNOCK-

"Can you speak with us?"

-KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK-

"Will you communicate with us this way, until you can speak?"

-KNOCK-

"You don't know morse code, do you?"

-KNOCK KNOCK-

'That's too bad,' Hermione thought. "Do you have any reason to think you might be pressed for time for this visit?"

After a slight hesitation -KNOCK KNOCK-

Hermione gave a slight sigh of relief. "Do you recall the events in the Department of Mysteries?"

-KNOCK-

"Do you remember falling through the Veil?"

-KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK-

"Do you remember dueling Bellatrix Lestrange?"

-KNOCK-

"Do you remember anything in the Department of Mysteries after that?"

There was a slight pause, and then -KNOCK KNOCK-

"Do you realize that we are holding a seance to contact you?"

There was another hesitation, and then -KNOCK-

"You do know that this means we therefore have reason to believe that you're, well, dead?"

The pause was even longer, but then somewhat soft -KNOCK-

"I'm sorry, Sirius. Sirius, do you know most of the people here?"

-KNOCK-

"Do you blame anyone that you know here for your death?"

Again, there was a hesitation, then -KNOCK KNOCK-

"It sounds like you're not certain. Do you blame me in any way?"

-KNOCK KNOCK-

"Do you blame Remus at all?"

-KNOCK KNOCK-

"Professor Dumbledore?"

Here there was a hesitation, then -KNOCK KNOCK-

"Harry?"

The table shook with Sirius' furious answer -**KNOCK KNOCK**-

Hermione smiled. It was easy to imagine Sirius pounding the table. "Shall we try and manifest you further, so that you may speak? You seemingly can't fully manifest by yourself, but there are at least three mediums willing to let you speak through them, if you wish."

-KNOCK-

There was a pause, and then Luna jerked slightly. Each person at the table jumped as they felt Sirius' spirit move through them, colder than Nick had ever been. Even Nick had jumped. Each person jumped again, as Sirius again made the circle, but this time, he stayed inside Professor Trelawney.

After several seconds, she spoke. Her voice was not quite hers, and not quite Sirius', but a mixture of both, although the cadence was pure Sirius.

"This seemed to be the most suitable body, at least for me," Sirius said. Trelawney's eyes went open. "It's very odd to see again. How long has it been? For some of you, it seems to have been several months, for others, about a year."

"You were killed in early June," Hermione said, "and today is the First of November."

"How odd." Sirius shrugged Trelawney's shoulders. "I don't really remember much of anything in between, except being upset. Does anyone know why?"

When Hermione looked out of her depth, Dumbledore answered, although he did not have much to say. "Death is largely a mystery, of course. From what little we know, I would say you were not ready to move fully on because you were so angry when you were pushed through the Veil, yet those pushed through the Veil are said to go fully into death. I know that doesn't explain much."

"No," Sirius retorted, "it doesn't. Still, how often do we get full answers from you? even though it seems this one was all you know? Tell me, are you ever going to tell Trelawney here that she's made two genuine, full prophecies? With her limited gift, that would probably thrill her. You've kept all of us in the dark unnecessarily more often than not. I know, you weren't really responsible for my getting killed, but if you had let me do anything for eleven months, maybe I wouldn't have been both so eager to go and so rusty I was careless!"

Sirius's eyes moved over to Tonks and Remus, smiling as he passed over Harry. "Moony, it's about time you let yourself go a little. Dora, he's a good man. Ron, Ginny, it's good to see you again."

Sirius winked at Hermione. "I always knew you were smart and cute, but I always thought you were wound a little too tight. Glad you've broken out. I know I approve of your choices, even if most other people wouldn't, or at least wouldn't admit they were just jealous." He nodded towards Luna. "She's a nice one, too."

Sirius looked now just at Harry, and Trelawney's face, which had had Sirius' jaunty expression for a moment, fell. "Harry . . . Harry, I'm sorry."

"For what?" Harry croaked.

"For lots of things," Sirius admitted. "First, and most importantly, for being stupid enough to go after Wormtail instead of going straight to Dumbledore and telling him what happened fifteen years ago. For making my revenge more important to my duty to you."

"Sirius. . . ."

"No, Harry!" Sirius took a deep breath. "My . . . it feels . . . it feels as if my ego has just fallen away! That I can see myself clearly for the first time." He made a face, which looked even odder on Trelawney's face than it would have on Sirius'. "I don't like it much, but I guess it's a good thing."

Sirius smiled very sardonically. "It would be interesting to see old Snape go through something like this. Anyway, Harry . . . I'm sorry. If I had done my duty, you would have grown up with a very different life."

He glared at Dumbledore. "You still would have wanted to keep Harry stashed away at the Dursleys, but I would have fought you. You know, there were a few times when I wondered if you knew I was innocent, and you put me away just to get your hands on Harry."

"I didn't," Dumbledore said. "I must admit, I have often wondered since Harry discovered your innocence if I accepted your guilt too easily exactly because of that. If so, I am sorry. I hope I did not."

"I accept your apology." He turned back to Harry. "Secondly, Molly was partially right. I did sometimes confuse you with James, and that was very wrong of me."

"I forgive you," Harry said softly, gripping Ron and Neville's hands painfully tight. They gritted their teeth and held on.

"Moony here properly told me off a few times about things like that," Sirius admitted. "I should have listened." He sighed. "I should have learned, always listen to Moony. There's a lesson for all of you. Don't always obey Moony, but take his advice seriously. Anyway, there weren't all that many good things, really good things, that happened in my life. One was James, one was Remus, and the other was you, Harry. I let James down. I let you down." He glanced at Remus. "I'm sorry if I let you down, too."

"I forgive you," Remus said.

"I got some impressions from all of you as I flickered through you. Just so you know, I approve of what you did to Wormtail, since you couldn't break my will. Did you have to give him my bike, though? I mean. . . ."

"A grandfathered-in flying cycle? Do you know how valuable it was?" Remus asked. "It was practically priceless. In the end, we had to leave him sixty Galleons and twelve Knuts in actual cash."

"I know," Sirius said. "I just hate to think of anyone in that group touching it."

"Touching it, yes, flying it, no," Remus said.

"What do you mean?"

"I kept the instructions, and the key."

Sirius smiled. "And even though it can operate by magic, the owner must take possession using the key. Brilliant."

Remus shrugged.

"I could stay longer, but I think I should let some other people talk," Sirius said. "Think of it as my last gift. Harry . . . Harry, I do love you."

"I miss you, and love you," Harry said very softly.

Trelawney slumped forward, and then straightened back up. Her posture was less tense than it had been when Sirius had possessed her, but it was just as assured.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry stared. Remus blinked, and said, "Prongs?"

"Hi, Moony. I must say, you've done a decent job keeping an eye on Harry over the last few years, all things considered. If he wasn't already feeling so guilty about it, I'd certainly have something to say to Padfoot about some of his choices." James sighed. "I guess I should apologize, too. I should have listened to Lils, and let Dumbledore here be the secret keeper. Padfoot and I thought we knew better than everyone, and then we out-smarted ourselves on top of that."

James looked at Harry more directly. "So, you're the most powerful wizard since Merlin, huh?"

"So they tell me," Harry said.

"Well, you are, for the moment. You are, in part because that scar created some very odd effects. It duplicated some of Voldemort's powers, which you will never lose. It acts as a conduit, drawing on some of the positive emotions of your friends and channeling it into power, connecting you directly to ambient magic, and all those other good things, as well all the bad that you've suffered. Do you know what that means?"

"No," Harry said.

"It means, once Voldemort is dead, and I have every confidence you'll win, some of that extra power will fade, because those conduits will be closed. You'll still have a lot of it, but it won't be quite as strong. Your power will be more on the level of Dumbledore, which is still of course very strong. The more you use it now, the more you'll retain. Remember that."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

"Ah, the attitude of a sixteen year old. I understand you have some inkling of how insufferable I could be at around your age. Try not to imitate me too much."

"I'll try," Harry replied.

"I grant you, you have a lot more to be insufferable about than I did," James said, with glances at Luna and Hermione, "and you've done better than I did at containing it."

"Thank you . . . Dad."

James smiled. "Well, like Padfoot, I'd really like to stay longer, but I won't. I love you, son."

"Love you, Dad," Harry murmured, knowing James could likely hear him, even though he was already gone from Trelawney's body. Neville and Ron were still holding Harry's hands, trying to give him the strength that he needed.

Luna straightened up. "Harry. . . ."

Harry looked at his lover, shocked. "Mum?"

"Yes, baby." Harry blushed. Lily laughed. "Sorry," she said. "Time means little to me now, so in many ways, even though I know you're nearly an adult, you're still fifteen months to me, too."



"I understand," Harry replied, while thinking, "This just got weirder."

"James and I are too far gone to stay for any real amount of time. It was good of Sirius to give up his time for us and help us come here. I just wanted to say to Hermione that while her parents could not make the journey, they do send their love." Lily closed her eyes and grimaced.

"Let me guess," Harry said, "Aunt Petunia doesn't."

"I regret to say Petunia, Vernon, and Dudley never arrived here," Lily said. "That was their choice in life and they are paying for their choices. Now, there is one other last one here with a short message."

Luna's head went down for a second, and then she had a more normal expression on her face. Professor Trelawney, however, was looking at her with affection. "My darling Moonchild," she said softly.

Luna was shocked. "Mummy?"

"Yes, darling. I wish I could stay and talk with you. Write your father, and tell him I love both of you. I'm so sorry that I made a mistake that day. I hope someone has my notes. I was on the right track. . . ." she trailed off, and suddenly all the candles came back on.

"This ceremony," Luna said sadly, "is over."

Everyone was very thoughtful as they left.

Saturday, November 2, 1996

It was a cold, windy morning, and one lone student was wandering near the train platform rather than in town.

"What's wrong? No place else to go?"

Colin Creevy looked up. "Oh . . . hello."

"Hi. Nothing better to do on a Hogsmeade weekend?"

"No, not really. Is there going to be a train?"

"No," the man said, a little sad. "The train service mostly ended, except for the Hogwarts Express, in the early Seventies. That was before they put that . . . car park on the other side of town, for the people who prefer Muggle transport over long-range apparation or the floo. Still, there used to be a full station here. Some of us would come here to be together, outside of House discipline, since it was empty but warm. We came together as friends, comrades across House-lines, until they pulled it down, which was after I left Hogwarts, I'm glad to say."

"Really?" Colin asked eagerly. He knew the code phrase, and obviously this good looking stranger did, too.

"Really." The man looked at Colin. "You know what I mean?"

"I do." Colin wondered how old some of the passwords were. "Archery."

The man smiled. "Arrow." This was a recognition code that many of the student homosexuals used.

"I'm Colin."

The man smiled. "My name is Julian."

"You're looking better this afternoon," Ginny said to Colin.

"I'm feeling a lot better, thanks," Colin replied. "Did you two have a good day?"

"Lots of shopping, no attacks, and lots of time to shop -- so yes, it was a pretty good day," Ginny said. Neville, loaded down with her bags, just rolled his eyes. Ginny asked, "What did you do?"

Colin shrugged. "I just wandered around." He looked around. "Harry didn't come in?"

"Yeah, he, Luna, and Hermione just went to the Three Broom Sticks and hung around, in case there was trouble. They're coming along last."

"That makes sense."

"Well?" Voldemort demanded. "Did you find anything out from your worthless brat of a cousin?"

"No, Master. He refused contact and told me the next time he will hex me and head for the nearest teacher. I did meet an interesting young man, however."

"Why would I care about your predilections?"

"The student in question is a Fifth year Gryffindor, with a long crush on Potter. I'm sure I can arrange to meet with him during the next Hogsmeade visit, if you would care to make his acquaintance."

Voldemort leered. "Perhaps. What is the boy's name?"

"Colin Creevy."

"Would any have any suspicions? I take it he would not be of willing use?"

"No, Master. He is Muggle-born, and up to the start of torture, he would probably think it a glorious thing to sacrifice himself for his beloved. And Moody is going to start trying to teach them resistance to the Imperius."

"There are ways around that, except for the most determined and powerful. Yes, a perfect tool, then, if an unwilling one."

Harry, Luna, and Hermione were walking a short way behind the last of the other students, hand-in-hand with Harry in the middle.

"How are you feeling?" Hermione asked. Harry had been avoiding talking about the seance since it had ended, saying he had wanted to think about it. He had been so preoccupied in the pub that Hermione hoped he had thought enough about it.

"I'm still not sure," Harry answered. "Better, on the whole, I think."

"You think?" Hermione asked gently.

"Yes, I think so. It's sort of like . . . having a scar reopened, so that it will heal cleaner."

Hermione and Luna both wrinkled their noses.

"Well, you asked!" Harry said.

"True," Hermione asked.

"I'm glad they all came," Harry said thoughtfully. "It was good to hear them." Harry made as to go on, but stopped.

"Go ahead," Luna said in a gentle tone. "You realized something. You can tell us anything, my love."

"We won't be judgmental," Hermione agreed as she glanced around, making certain no one could overhear.

"There was one thing Sirius said," Harry said slowly, "and afterwards, I was so glad he said it. I never realized how much I had wondered. . . ."

"What it would have been like if Sirius had raised you?" Hermione asked, equally gently.

"Yes," Harry said, with a great weight of emotion on that one word.

"I'm sure Professor Lupin would have helped him," Luna said. "If so, it would have been a fairly responsible, if boisterous upbringing."

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "If it had just been Sirius, you probably would have been a half-tamed savage."

"I probably would have been a lot more like my father," Harry agreed soberly, "an arrogant princeling. Oh, nothing like Malfoy, or at least not as bad as he used to be, but I would have been spoiled." He grinned. "I imagine I would have yelled a lot at Snape, and there would have been a riot when those two confronted each other."

"True," Hermione said. "Still, if Remus had had a nearly equal share in raising you, you wouldn't have been too bad."

"No, not too bad," Harry agreed. "God, I feel so guilty for saying that."

"It's not disloyal to his memory to remember him accurately," Luna said. "If you had just been raised by Sirius, you would have been arrogant and spoiled, but you still would have that innate sense of justness and fairness that would have made you tolerable. After all, if it survived the Dursleys it would easily survive Sirius' spoiling. If Professor Lupin had somehow been allowed to raise you alone, you would have been more bookish, and perhaps almost as shy as you have been. A Harry Potter raised by Professor Lupin and Sirius would have been an excellent balance."

"I know it's selfish," Hermione said, "but since we've ended up together this way, it's hard to imagine anything better, even if you had to suffer so much along the way."

"Good point," Harry said. "It's time to move on with our lives, isn't it?"

## **Chapter XXXI**

The middle and end of November meant the first pair of Quidditch games. The first game, on the 16th, was between Slytherin and Gryffindor. The second, on the 30th, was therefore between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

For those who thought of such things over the summer, the pre-term favorites had been Ravenclaw and Slytherin, both teams having all returning players. With the Weasley twins leaving, Crabbe and Goyle had a chance to become the dominant Beaters. The Slytherin Chasers and Keeper were also thought to be slightly better than the Ravenclaws, although most would have picked Cho over Malfoy as a Seeker.

Since Montague and Crabbe were now gone, however, Slytherin needed a new Chaser and a new Beater. Malfoy, the new Captain, chose a Second year girl as the new Chaser, while Millicent Bulstrode took Crabbe's place. Ravenclaw then became the pre-season favorite.

While Hufflepuff needed to replace a Chaser and a Beater, the Gryffindors not only needed to replace two Chasers, neither of the Beaters were terribly interested in playing again. Since they were not all that good, no one tried terribly hard to talk them out of it.

Ron, having seen Ginny and Neville play while they were combat training, had no trouble accepting Ginny as one Chaser and convincing Katie and McGonagall that Neville would make a good Beater. In tryouts, Third year Natalie Macdonald came out on top of the Chasers, while the Fifth year boy's prefect, William Lloyd, took the second Beater slot.

Katie Bell had quickly shown in the first game that she would be the dominant Chaser of the year, with Ginny not far behind. Natalie showed that Gryffindor had some hope for the future. While Goyle was even stronger than Neville, and Millicent was stronger than William, the two Gryffindors were slightly better flyers, evening things out.

The game ended when the Snitch appeared almost next to Harry's right hand. Gryffindor won 300-90, after seventy-five minutes of play. Ravenclaw had a slightly harder time with Hufflepuff the following week. When Cho had finally out-faked the Hufflepuff Seeker, Ravenclaw had won 270-120 after three hours of play.

Other than the Quidditch matches, life at Hogwarts went on in a very low-keyed fashion. Snape was still trying to track down who might have had access to the specialized compulsion spell. He had never heard of it, and as far as he could determine it was not mentioned in the Forbidden Section of the library.

This displeased him, because if it had been there then two of the more likely candidates would have been Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood, who were both known to somehow wrangle more passes than usual for the Forbidden Section.

Dumbledore of course knew that this was something Harry could have easily learned from the Dragons, or even from the mysterious cache of books he had read over the summer. The others in his group could have found it in the Dumbledore villa as well. Harry had merely sworn, when directly asked, that he had never made such a potion, and would say no more. Dumbledore would not, of course, use Legilimency on students he suspected Harry might have told without further evidence. He kept an even closer eye than usual on Harry and the people around him, however.

Nothing had been heard from Voldemort or his remaining Death Eaters. The house in Grimmauld Place was still hidden, although everyone who knew about it suspected Dumbledore had some way of monitoring it on some level.

Harry was very happy by mid-November and on into December. He, Luna, and Hermione were still sleeping in the Gryffindor common room, and even though all they could do was sleep, all three liked it a great deal. The DA was making some real progress, although Harry had some serious doubts about how effective most of the students would be in a real fight.

He was in no hurry to see them tested, however.

Alastor Moody had a different idea.

He had taught Harry just about every trick he knew, although Harry still needed to learn how to do many of them more naturally. Because of his handicaps, Moody did not really pose a real challenge to Harry. Neither did Remus nor even Tonks, although any two of the three of them could take Harry more than half the time.

The DA had continued to meet every Sunday, sometimes in the late afternoon, other times right after dinner. Remus was usually nearby or with the group, and Moody and Tonks made a number of appearances as well. Before the start of the meeting on December 1, Moody approached Harry with a challenge: to meet a mystery challenger the following Sunday.

Harry had reluctantly taken up the challenge. Moody, to Harry's annoyance, had announced the challenge to the DA at the end of the meeting.

Many of the DA members spent the next week speculating on whom the 'mystery duelist' would be. Two Gryffindor Fourth years even started a betting book Monday afternoon on whom Moody was bringing in.

For the first time since July, Harry felt annoyed with Moody. He did not like being put on the spot like this.

When Harry asked Moody why he was setting this up, and putting so much pressure on him, Moody simply reminded Harry, "You can't always know you're the top dog in the yard, Harry. Sometime, you're going to have to face opponents you know little about. Better to face a few under controlled situations before facing people trying to kill you. After what you did to Dolohov and Lestrage, nearly every Death Eater will hex first and brag second."

Harry could not really argue with that, although he really wished that he could.

Tuesday, December 3, 1996

Minerva McGonagall surveyed her Sixth year N.E.W.T. class as they made their way into class. She was not pleased with them. Not because they were doing poorly. Her N.E.W.T.

classes did not do poorly. Ever. No, she was unhappy because two students were doing far too well.

The class had spent most of the first two months learning the theory they would need over the next two years. There had been few surprises there. No, the surprises had started in late October, when the students had started practicing chameleon spells.

Most students had progressed as expected. They could all easily transform their partners into solid colors to match a solidly colored background with some ease. After four weeks, only two could perfectly match their partners to any background no matter how complex. More surprising, they could already fully animate the spell, so that the person could move, which normally occurred only after months, if not a year, of practice.

More surprising had been the previous week. To show the students where the chameleon spell led, she had ended the class by discussing the Disillusionment spell. Few fully qualified wizards or witches could totally disillusion another person. Fewer could disillusion themselves.

Potter and Granger could already do both.

It was aggravating, especially to the other students, who were still struggling with their basic chameleon spells. It did, however, solidify McGonagall's determination to give the pair a rare chance.

Transfiguration got out early, which surprised everyone. It was nearly unprecedented, even though it was only five minutes early. When Harry and Hermione were asked to stay back, the other students left them with Professor McGonagall with looks of sympathy (or, in Malfoy's case, a slight sneer).

"This summer," McGonagall said as soon as they were alone, "I consulted with the Headmaster. He agreed I could offer any of you animagus training if I felt you were up to it. If you two would be interested, we can start the preparations."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, shocked.

"I realize this is a surprise, but do you have any interest? It is quite alright if you do not."

"Professor . . . has Professor Dumbledore mentioned this since early August?" Hermione asked.

"No, but I do NOT believe I need any special permission, Miss Granger."

"I realize that," Hermione temporized, embarrassed.

"What is the difficulty?" McGonagall demanded.

While Hermione looked for the words, Harry decided to simply take action. Hermione's eyes went wide. McGonagall frowned and turned around to see what Harry was up to, and found herself face-to-muzzle with a Kodiak bear. Even sitting on his haunches, Harry's maw was slightly above McGonagall's head.

"What is the meaning of this?!" McGonagall demanded in a shrill voice as she backed up a step. She turned to Hermione, and saw the largest green parrot she had ever seen.

"Animagi! Animagi!" the parrot shrieked.

"What!? When!? How!?"

Harry transformed back. "All six of us underwent the procedure this summer," Harry said. "We had assumed Professor Dumbledore would have told you."

"Well, he didn't!" McGonagall snapped. She instantly calmed down. "I apologize. Could you please transform again, Potter?"

Harry did so, and started to amble around the room.

McGonagall turned to Hermione. "Can you fly, Miss Granger?"

Hermione took off and flew around the room. "I see," McGonagall said as Hermione landed. "Well done, both of you. I shall speak with you and your friends later. Now, off you go."

"I wonder what she'll say to the Headmaster," Hermione pondered as they walked down the corridor.

"I think we'll know what she'll say," Harry replied, "we just don't know how she'll put it."

"It's difficult to understand why the Headmaster didn't inform Professor McGonagall!"

"Just another of his games, I guess," Harry said. "Sometimes, I swear, he makes Moody seem trusting and informative. Remember, he obviously didn't. . . ."

"Didn't what? Oh, good morning, Mister Filch."

"Shouldn't you two be in class?" the caretaker demanded.

"No, we don't have any more classes this morning," Hermione stated.

"Oh . . . well then, you can give me a hand. You're a prefect. Come see the mess someone got into! You can fill out the bloody report. Maybe someone will pay attention to you!" Hermione rolled her eyes so that only Harry could see it, and followed the cranky caretaker, leaving Harry alone in the large intersection of two corridors.

Harry was about to go back to the common room. He had thirty pages he needed to read while the Transfiguration lesson was fresh in his mind. He stopped, though, because something was not right. It only took a moment for him to realize it was somewhat similar to the feeling he had had back in July, when Moody had been following him and Luna under disillusionment and aversion spells.



Harry quickly realized that there was no one in the area that he could see. He had grown used to the feel of having disillusioned people nearby over the previous week. He decided that, most likely, someone was under an invisibility cloak.

The feeling was coming down from the corridor to his left, so he and Hermione had not been followed. The feeling was lessening; probably the person was retreating slowly because Harry had been standing there, listening, for nearly a minute and whomever it was was worried Harry had detected them.

Harry faced down the corridor and breathed deeply. While in his normal form, he had nothing like the olfactory acuity of the bear (said to perhaps be 100,000 times more acute than human smell). His sense of smell had, however, had improved a great deal. As Harry moved slowly down the corridor sniffing, he quickly detected a whiff of perfume.

Harry projected a curtain of dark blue smoke right in front of him, and then moved it ten feet in front of him. It would be broken by any object it passed over, including anyone in an invisibility cloak. Harry began walking quickly down the corridor. He heard someone stumble as she turned and ran.

Harry could not run with the smoke curtain, it would not hold in place if he did. Harry still walked until the next intersection, which was with a main corridor, with a set of stairs. The woman under the cloak could have gone any of five different directions.

Harry decided he should at least mention it to Dumbledore, and, unless Dumbledore told him otherwise, to his friends, Remus, Tonks, and Moody.

Dumbledore seemed mildly interested in the invisibility cloak, and in Harry's guess as to who might have been wearing it. He did not discourage Harry from mentioning the event to anyone. Harry thought about mentioning the incident with Professor McGonagall as well, but decided that there was no good reason to forewarn the Headmaster.

Harry therefore swung by Tonks' small office and told her what had happened. He then went on to the small suite under the seats of the great lecture hall. He was not surprised to find that Hermione had gone there to study instead of heading back to the common room. They decided to spend some intimate time together before reviewing the morning's Transfiguration assignment.

Saturday, December 7, 1996

Dumbledore had announced the night before that Saturday would be a Hogsmeade day. Most of the students were enthused by the idea of some Christmas shopping and a day out of the castle. They started the day at 9:30, and it would conclude at 3:30, so it was a bit shorter than usual. To help insure safety, all the students would have to leave and return together.

Harry had not been thrilled by the idea of another day in Hogsmeade, but of course went to make certain he provided any protection needed.

Harry was still upset that he had failed to destroy Voldemort during the first outing in Hogsmeade the previous October. Had he caught Voldemort with a third power burst, he might have ended the nightmare. He was determined to take care of Voldemort, should he show himself again.

Still, there were practical considerations. Harry, Ron, and Neville broke off from the girls to do their Christmas shopping. Harry, of course, had the most shopping to do. Along with presents for his three close friends and two lovers, he also needed gifts for Mr. Lovegood, Moody, all the Weasleys, Remus, Tonks, and, he had realized that morning, all the girls in the HPSN.

Since Ron and Neville were with him, Harry deputized Hermione to get their presents. Harry arranged with the various shopkeepers to deliver the other presents to the castle over the next week.

"Are you getting Luna and Hermione the HPSN gifts, too?" Ron asked as they left the small jewelry store. He was getting each girl a charm bracelet, with an 'HPSN' gold charm.

"Of course," Harry answered. "In part because it would seem strange to the other girls for me not to, and in part because it was their idea to form the silly thing."

"I'm surprised no one has tweaked onto you," Neville said, as they stood, trying to decide where to go next.

"Well, no one has let on," Harry allowed. "I'm sure someone has caught on and just hasn't said anything."

"So long as no one catches Hermione and Luna snogging, they probably won't catch on," Ron said softly. "Until then, everyone will just think you're just casually dating the two of them. Most people think Hermione's so possessive they don't think it's serious."

"I've overheard a few of the younger Ravenclaws wonder if Luna isn't serious, but is too passive to push Hermione away," Neville said.

"Well, I can see why they think so," Ron said. "I can see Hermione still wants to boss everyone around. Luna is just really good at putting her in her place without hurting her feelings."

"You might be right," Harry said hopefully.

"Alert," Ron whispered, meaning someone was approaching from his direction, other than the three girls.

"Hi, Dean! Seamus!" Harry said, turning.

"Good morning," Dean said.

"Where are your better halves?" Ron teased.

"Shopping, of course," Seamus answered.

"Of course."

"Say, Harry," Dean said slowly, "would you want to know what Moody has planned for you tomorrow night?"

"Sure," Harry answered. "Just because he wants to surprise me doesn't mean I want to be surprised."

"How did you find out?" Ron asked.

"Well, that's why I'm slightly torn about this," Dean admitted. Ron and Neville looked puzzled.

Harry stared at Dean for a moment, wondering why as well. Then he realized the answer. "Moody got your uncle to come?"

"Yeah," Dean admitted.

"Isn't he supposed to be one of the top aurors?" Neville asked.

"He's supposed to be about the toughest auror in Britain," Ron said. "He was even a hit-wizard for a while. Moody's not going easy by picking him."

"No, he's not," Dean said. "But, since Uncle Kingsley knows who he's fighting, I thought you should, too."

"Thanks, Dean, I appreciate that."

Dean gave Harry a sly smile. "You know, Harry, he told me this summer he figured he could take you at least nine out of ten times, maybe nineteen out of twenty."

"I'm sure he's good, but he's not that good," Harry said. "In the type of combat we'll likely do, I doubt he'll do better than three out of five."

While talking, the five had not really moved far from in front of the jewelry store door. "Excuse us, Potter. You're blocking the way."

The group looked up and saw Malfoy and Goyle. Ron opened his mouth, but Harry signaled him to be quiet. "Sorry," Harry said, taking a step back.

"Thank you," Malfoy said politely, and the pair went into the store.

"What was that all about?" Ron asked.

"As badly as Malfoy and I get along, you two are worse," Harry said. "He hasn't bugged us directly yet, has he?"

"No," Ron admitted, "not directly. Alright, fair enough. Where to next?"

The others shrugged. "Any suggestions?" Seamus asked.

"Let's just check on Zonko's," Ron said. "The twins are curious to see what he might be up to."

"It looks like everyone has invested in the local economy," Hermione said as the six friends sat down in the Three Broomsticks.

"Huh?" Ginny, Neville, and Ron all said.

"Everyone seems to have bought a lot of stuff," Hermione clarified.

"Oh," Ron said, drinking his second butterbeer.

"Are you alright, Ron?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged.

"You can trust us," Hermione said.

"I know. I just don't like talking about . . . things."

"Shall I tell them, Ron?" Luna asked.

Ron gawped at her.

"I am a Seer," Luna said simply. "While I have not yet made a prophecy, I do See deeply inside people. I do not know the details, but I do See what troubles you."

"Go ahead," Ron grumbled, standing. "I'll get us another round."

As Ron walked away, Luna said, "Ron is slightly depressed. As the holidays approach, he regrets not being with little Sirius. He also thought he would have found a girlfriend by now. Since we all seem so happy, it makes him feel even a little lower."

"That makes sense," Hermione said.

"We can start thinking about girls for him over the break," Ginny suggested.

Luna frowned, puzzled. "For some reason, I feel that might not be necessary, but I can't explain why."

By 3:25, all the students had gathered in front of the Three Broomsticks. Harry and his friends were guarding the front of the group, waiting for Professor Sinistra and Hagrid to complete the roll call. At that point, the sextet would lead the group back to the school.

"Hi, Colin," Neville said.

"Hi," Colin responded. "Harry, may I talk with you for a moment?"

As Harry started to turn, he heard Luna scream, "Harry! Watch out!" and, strangely, Malfoy shouting, "Potter! Back off!"

Harry instinctively moved back towards Luna, but as he tried to figure out what they meant, he felt a searing pain in his left side. Looking down, he saw Colin twisting a knife up under his skin. Screams, and shouts of "Stupify!" rang in Harry's ears as he collapsed into Ron's arms.

As Harry started to black out, he heard Luna say, "That knife! It was poisoned!" Then, blackness surrounding him, Harry heard:

**"AVADA KEDARVA!"**

## **Chapter XXXII**

Harry woke up in great pain. His entire left side, including his leg, was in agony. His right side would have really bothered him, if the left side had not been so much worse. His head felt like it had been split open.

Harry opened his eyes, and quickly closed them as the room spun. He was scared, because he had not been able to move his eyes or anything on his left side at all. Harry went back to sleep, only knowing he was back in the Infirmary.

When Harry woke up again, the lights were more subdued, and the pains in his right side were gone, as was the pain in his left leg. His left arm and left side were still burning, and he had a fearsome headache, although these were nothing like what he woken up with earlier.

Harry next realized that his left arm and side were somewhat paralyzed, while he only had limited movement in his head and especially his eyes. Still, his slight movements attracted some attention.

"Good evening, Harry," Dumbledore said softly.

Harry tried to speak, but was unable to.

"Don't worry. Your partial paralysis will pass over the next thirty to sixty hours or so. The potion you need to take is rather specialized, but it does work. You need to rest as much as possible. For now, I will just say that it is late Sunday night, a little before midnight in fact. Your five friends are much better off than you are. So, let me help you drink your potion. The poison will most likely take twenty-four to twenty-seven more days to work its way out of your system. If so, you will be on this potion for up to twenty-eight more days."

Dumbledore lifted Harry into his arms, and helped Harry drink a beaker of a warm, sweetish, watery, milky potion. Warmth flooded Harry, and he drifted off to sleep. Dumbledore looked at Harry sadly, and then left to arrange to have security wizards hired to patrol the grounds. It was a simple idea he had put off too long.

Monday, December 9, 1996

When Harry next fully woke up just before dawn, he was glad Dobby was waiting to help him. The unpleasantness with the bedpans concluded, Dobby helped Harry drink another breaker of the potion. Harry fell back asleep for a few hours.

When Harry woke up just before 9:00, he saw Dumbledore sitting and waiting for him. Harry drank down yet another beaker of the potion, but this time, it did not put him immediately to sleep.

"I hope you find the potion palatable," Dumbledore said. "I regret to tell you that this is the only sustenance you are allowed for approximately a week. Any other food or drink, other than water, would simply be indigestible."

Harry still felt too weak to argue, so he managed a one shoulder shrug.

"You must take at least one beaker every six hours. We will try and get you to take one every ninety minutes or so, if you feel up to it. It will heal you faster that way."

Harry nodded.

"I suppose you would like to know what happened?"

Harry nodded again.

Dumbledore laid Harry back onto the bed and then sat back. "It seems both sides underestimated each other to some degree. We had thought that all active supporters of Voldemort were gone from the castle. Obviously, we were wrong. Since we gave at least a day's notice of the last two Saturdays in Hogsmeade, we should have kept an eye on the owlery. Word was sent to Voldemort the first time, and to one of his agents the second."

Seeing Harry was listening, Dumbledore went on. "Voldemort sent the agent that Saturday in November. He is a very personable young man by the name of Julian Malfoy." Harry reacted slightly to the name. "You know of him?"

Harry managed to mutter, "Cousin . . . Mrs. Weasley. . . ."

"So he is. His grandmother was a Prewitt, I believe. We believe he is the agent who planted the portkey targets at your Aunt's and arranged the surveillance on Miss Granger's house. Last month, he isolated a rather depressed and lonely young man that day in Hogsmeade, and seduced him."

Harry thought about that a moment. "Colin?"

"Yes, Mister Creevy. Therefore, when the day in Hogsmeade was announced Friday, Mister Creevy sent a school owl to Julian Malfoy, whom he knew as Julian Commodore."

Harry was glad Colin at least had not knowingly consorted with a Malfoy.

"Expecting a romantic assignation, Mister Creevy accompanied Julian to a house which had been under surveillance, as it belongs to the Malfoy family. Before you ask, young Draco will not have access to the house until his seventeenth birthday. The guard was put under the Imperius sometime after he had checked in Saturday morning, just before the students arrived. Mister Creevy had his mind ransacked, and then was put under the Imperius by Voldemort himself."

"Didn't feel him," Harry muttered.

"No," Dumbledore agreed. "Still, you had not sensed him last October, either. In any event, Mister Creevy was mentally attacked after being softened by the Cruciatius. After all the

necessary information was taken, he was hit by the Cruciatius again, and finally put under the Imperius for several hours."

Seeing Harry was still alert, Dumbledore went on. "Alastor found out last week that Mister Creevy is moderately susceptible to the Imperius Curse. Still, Voldemort obviously wanted to make certain he could get Mister Creevy close enough to you to kill you. Just before he struck, three things happened. First, Mister Malfoy saw Mister Creevy approach you and pull the knife. Just as Mister Malfoy saw that, Miss Lovegood caught a flash of the internal struggles Mister Creevy was undergoing. He was trying to fight the Curse, albeit unsuccessfully. Then both Mister Malfoy and Miss Lovegood screamed at you. You turned slightly, and Mister Creevy was able to fight the Curse just enough so that the blade did not follow your movement. Therefore, instead of striking you under the ribs right under your heart, which would have either been instantly fatal if your heart had actually been hit or nearly instantaneous no matter what due to the poison, the knife hit the ribs on your left side and slid under the muscles. Had the knife not been poisoned, it would have been an incredibly painful wound, but nothing Madam Pomfrey could not have fixed in a few days."

"Unfortunately, the knife was poisoned. Miss Lovegood managed to pick that up and announce it. Miss Granger therefore put you into a magical stasis, so that the poison would not spread. Had she not done so, you still would have died by early Saturday evening. As it was, it took us until Saturday evening to analyze the poison and learn the antidote. We brought you out of the stasis late Sunday morning, washed the wound with the antidote and managed to get you to swallow a dose. You woke up for a few moments an hour or so later. Your wound will be healed by tomorrow, although it may leave a slight scar, although a long one."

Harry shrugged at that information.

"Why don't you rest some more?" Dumbledore suggested. "I'll tell you more when you wake up again and are ready."

Harry nodded, and let himself fall asleep.

Harry was vaguely aware of being partially woken and dosed with the potion at least twice more. When he woke up the third time, he was more alert. He thought he heard several girls giggling, and then he heard a door shut. He realized that he was no longer out in the Infirmary proper but in one of the small private rooms, and that the door's opening was likely what woke him up.

"Nice to see you awake," Remus said, sitting down.

"Nice to be awake," Harry said. He tried to move, and pain shot through him. "Well, maybe."

"I understand." Remus leaned forward and slightly ruffled Harry's hair. "You had us scared."

"I'm not surprised," Harry said. "I'm thirsty, is there. . . ?"



Remus leaned back and poured Harry some cold water, and then helped sit him up so that he could drink it.

"Thanks," Harry said as he was settled back down. "Much better than that potion."

"You don't like it?"

"It's okay, but it makes me a bit sleepy, and I really think I need to brush my teeth afterwards. It leaves a sort of film. . . ."

"I understand," Remus said. "It is a milk-based potion, after all. Dobby has been cleaning up for you."

"The Headmaster promised to tell me more of what happened," Harry pointed out.

"I know," Remus said. "He was here most of the time, but Fudge showed up again half an hour ago. You need to take your potion again in about ten minutes. If the Headmaster is back by then, he'll explain. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until you wake up again."

"Remus. . . ."

"I know. If he hasn't told you everything by tomorrow morning, I promise Moody or I will."

"I heard the Killing Curse."

Remus paused. "I promise, Harry."

"Alright." Harry paused a moment, thinking of what he could get an answer to. "Was Kingsley disappointed I couldn't beat him last night?"

Remus smiled ruefully. "So, you found out, huh? I think he was anxious to test you. Maybe he'll come back after Christmas."

"I guess I'll have to spend Christmas here," Harry said in a slightly depressed tone.

"I'm afraid so," Remus agreed. "Dan Lovegood already mentioned that. He and the Weasleys will be here."

Harry sighed.

"What is it?" Remus asked.

"Three attacks," Harry said.

"What three attacks?"

"The one down at the station, Voldemort in October, and Saturday. Three attacks, and I only properly responded to one," Harry said. "Not good."

"Well, two were very stealthy," Remus hedged. "Those are very difficult to defend against."

"I know. That's still no excuse." Harry looked up. "Why haven't Hermione and Luna been to see me?"

"They're both alright," Remus said. "They should be here tomorrow."

"Why did Malfoy shout?" Harry asked. "Do you know?" At that moment there was a knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey came in with another beaker of Harry's potion.

Harry sighed and drank it down. At least it tasted decent, unlike the other potions he had been subjected to. "How am I supposed to last a month if I fall asleep every time I drink this?" Harry asked as he handed the beaker back.

"Oh, as the poison weakens, you'll stay more alert," Pomfrey assured him.

"That's good, anyway."

Remus laid Harry back. "As for Draco, if Draco is learning anything from the last year of his life, it's that victory is more important than mere revenge. So, he seems to have sat down, and thought about what he REALLY wants. I don't know what that is, but it obviously includes keeping you alive, at least for now."

When Harry next woke up, he had to have the assistance of Dobby again. This time Harry found the elf's enthusiasm a bit more difficult to deal with, but he had little choice. When he woke up a while later, he found Dumbledore sitting and waiting for him.

"More partial answers?" Harry asked soon after opening his eyes.

"If you fall asleep again, yes," Dumbledore replied. "In which case, I shall do my best to sit here until I can answer most of your questions. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, you had just been struck down and Miss Granger had put you into stasis. To finish off what happened to you directly before taking up another thread, Miss Granger and Mister Longbottom took you into the Three Broomsticks and tried to persuade Madam Pomfrey to open the floo connection between the pub and the Infirmary. When that did not work, they made contact with Professor Snape, and managed to persuade him to do so, although it took a trip to the pub to convince him. He had Miss Granger bring you back to Hogwarts and then followed, closing the connection behind him."

"Neville. . . ."

"We will get to that, Harry. Miss Granger had removed the knife -- in a very professional manner, I might add -- but since Miss Lovegood had said it was poisoned, she had retained it. Madam Pomfrey made certain your stasis was well-formed and Professor Snape and Miss Granger analyzed the poison and made the necessary preliminary steps for your potion. There is some effort involved with the making of the potion, and Miss Granger is handling that, while Professor Snape supervises its making. That is why Miss Granger has not been by to visit yet."

"Go on."

"When Miss Lovegood realized what was happening, she shouted one of the alarms. She then strove to break the connection between Mister Creevy and Voldemort. Only a very powerful Legilimens or a fully-trained Seer should ever attempt such direct intervention."

"And Luna isn't either of those."

"No, she is not," Dumbledore agreed. "However, she is a moderately decent Legilimens and a very powerful and moderately well-trained natural Seer. She broke the connection and then confronted Voldemort directly in his mind. Her powerful feelings of love drove him into a rapid retreat, but the brief but intense battle weakened her, and she passed out. She is in that private room you found under the lecture room, and Miss Weasley and Winky are looking after her. She should be fine by tomorrow."

"That's good to know," Harry said.

"Now, before we go on to other events, let me say that we again had a number of aurors hidden around Hogsmeade. At the same time, Professor Flitwick and myself made our way down to the village to escort the students back. We were just close enough to observe what was happening but still too far away to directly assist anyone. At the moment you were attacked, sixty dementors attacked that end of the village. Filius and I were therefore engaged in driving them off, destroying several. Four aurors were attacking another group of dementors attempting to attack the center of town, while the others first secured the far end of town and quickly worked their way to the Three Broomsticks. Of the hundred and seventeen dementors that attacked, we destroyed seventy-two of them over a half hour battle. Voldemort committed no other forces. No one was Kissed, although I must admit our supply of chocolate is much depleted. On the positive side, we have since learned that the remaining dementors have deserted Voldemort, at least for the moment. Our best estimate is that Voldemort only has thirty Death Eaters and a handful of other followers."

"That's good to know, but you're still hiding things from me," Harry said.

"I am giving you as much information as I can, given your condition," Dumbledore replied. "You will get it all, just in this piecemeal fashion." A knock came on the door.

"More potion?" Harry asked.

"More potion, and then rest. After that, more answers."

"Good evening, Harry."

Harry sighed.

"How are you feeling?"

"Well, I moved my fingers a little, and my eyes feel better."

"That's good to hear."

"Does that mean I can hear the rest of what happened?"

"Well, we have twenty minutes or so before you drink your potion, so we may try," Dumbledore said. "It turns out, there were still at least two active Voldemort supporters amongst the students. One Slytherin, and one Hufflepuff."

Harry's eyes went further open for a moment. Finally, he said, "I take it the Slytherin wasn't Malfoy."

"No, no it was not. Neither was it Mister Goyle."

Harry shrugged. "That's not surprising. It was pretty surprising that Crabbe acted last September without Malfoy being involved."

"True," Dumbledore admitted reluctantly. "Actually, it was Miss Parkinson."

"Pansy Parkinson used a Killing Curse?" Harry asked. "That's hard to believe. I mean, I thought that was her perfume I smelled on the woman under the invisibility cloak and she's pretty vile in some ways, but I thought she was pretty loyal to Malfoy."

"That is what Professor Snape said as well. I should point out that she did not use the Killing Curse, but rather used stunners to try and protect the Hufflepuff who did."

"Would that have been a Sixth year Hufflepuff?" When Dumbledore nodded, Harry asked, "Zach Smith?"

Dumbledore sighed and nodded. "Yes. Several students, including the Weasleys, Mister Longbottom, and Mister Thomas, stunned Mister Creevy. When he saw that you were not immediately killed, Mister Smith tried to use the Killing Curse on you. He obviously did not know that the knife was poisoned. You collapsed just at the right time. Unfortunately, the Curse killed a Third year Slytherin, George Blank. Mister Thomas sent a stunner at Mister Smith, who ducked. Miss Parkinson stunned both Mister Thomas and Mister Malfoy. Miss Bulstrode knocked Miss Parkinson out with what I've been told was a very well-executed right cross to the jaw. By then, Mister Smith had been hit by at least twenty stunners."

"Did he survive?" Harry asked. Enough stunners could kill, if they hit in a short enough time span.

"No, he did not. Mister Creevy barely survived, and will not be in any condition to even be questioned again until tomorrow. Miss Parkinson is under arrest, and is still being questioned."

"Was anyone else killed?" Harry asked.

"No. We were most fortunate, although you had us worried for quite a while."

"I take it Voldemort and this other Malfoy got away?"

"They did. Hopefully Mister Creevy will be able to inform us if he met Mister Malfoy anywhere other than at the Malfoy Hogsmeade residence."

"He's in a lot of trouble, isn't he?"

"Yes, although not for the attack on you. He was, after all, both under the Imperius and trying to fight it."

"Then what for? For being homosexual?"

"Homosexual acts, by themselves, are not illegal or even seriously frowned upon by wizarding society in general, although some people strenuously disapprove. However, you should know perfectly well that Mister Creevy is underage. The age differential alone makes their actions illegal. In addition, Mister Creevy was breaking a number of school rules, which you should also know perfectly well. Students are not to have contacts with adults in the wizarding world unrelated to you without parental permission. You are not. . . ."

"I know them, sir," Harry broke in tiredly.

"So," Dumbledore went on, "Mister Creevy will at a minimum lose all Hogsmeade privileges. Minister Fudge would like to have him tried for attempted murder."

"Fudge is a fu . . . err, idiot."

"He is," Dumbledore agreed. "However, if you wish to press charges, Mister Creevy would have to be tried."

Harry shook his head. "Unless Luna tells me she was mistaken about the Imperius, no, I won't do it."

"Fair enough," Dumbledore acknowledged.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. Madam Pomfrey came in, saying, "Headmaster, Miss Lovegood woke up for a few minutes again. She should be well-healed tomorrow. She can visit Mister Potter here at some point tomorrow afternoon or evening, and return to classes Wednesday."

The Headmaster said, "Excellent," while Harry smiled.

"Here's the latest batch, Mister Potter," Pomfrey said.

"Latest batch?"

"Almost every dose must be made separately," she said. "Now, drink it down."

## **Chapter XXXIII**

Overnight, Harry was still awakened every ninety minutes to take his potion. Since he fell back asleep nearly instantly almost every time, Harry did not feel up to complaining.

Once, however, he woke up to someone stroking his hair. Harry knew the touch instantly. "I love you, 'Mione," he mumbled.

"That's good," she answered, ignoring his use of a disliked nickname. "I love you, too."

"How's Luna?"

"She's sleeping normally," Hermione answered, the relief evident in her voice. "She should wake up in the morning, without any real aftereffects."

Harry finally opened his eyes. "You look almost as bad as I feel," he said honestly.

Hermione's mouth quirked a little. She did indeed look exhausted, and had dark smudges under her eyes. "Thanks," she said.

"Sorry. Why are you here in the middle of the night? Up worrying?"

"No," Hermione answered. "I've been up working. This is a special potion. It starts to deteriorate four hours after it's made. At the same time, this is a witch's brew."

Harry managed to look impressed. Witch's brews were high N.E.W.T. level potions that only witches could make, and even then usually only under special conditions. "And you're making it?"

"I have been," Hermione acknowledged. "Only witches who are in a loving relationship with the afflicted person, or witches who are virgins not experiencing their period can make this one." Her smile widened. "Lust and crushes don't count. People are speculating which condition applies to me."

"You need some rest," Harry said as Hermione helped him sit up.

"I'm going to bed after you take this, my love," Hermione told him. "Susan and Katie are working on the next batch."

"Darn, now my secret marriages will be out," Harry said after he drank the potion.

"I'll alert Skeeter," Hermione said gravely. She kissed Harry gently.

"Stay with me," Harry murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Stay with me," Harry repeated softly. "Your touch makes me feel stronger, not to mention it makes me feel a lot better."

Hermione settled Harry back into the bed, although off to the side. She slipped off her shoes and then slipped under the covers. "I love you, Harry, but this will cause talk."

"As long as you don't snog Luna in public, everyone will think we're all just dating as friends," Harry said. He sighed. "I actually do feel better every time you touch me."

"Then neither of us will care about our reputations," Hermione said. "Good night, my love." She snuggled into Harry's arms.

"Good night, beloved," Harry muttered, and he went back to sleep until it was time to wake him up yet again.

Tuesday, December 10, 1996

When Harry awoke to daylight (having taken the potion once before), he was glad to see Hermione was still cuddled with him. Professor Dumbledore was again sitting in the chair.

"Good morning, Harry."

"Good morning, Professor," Harry said softly but cheerfully.

"You're remarkably better this morning." Harry smiled and nodded towards Hermione. "I see," the Headmaster said. "Your connections to Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood are remarkably powerful."

"I believe they are," Harry agreed.

Hermione stretched and opened her eyes. Seeing the Headmaster, she blushed.

"No need to be embarrassed," Dumbledore said. "I think you shall have to explain the potion to Harry, and then go back to Gryffindor or your study to sleep some more. Miss Lovegood will have to contribute to the potion. I believe it is your contributions to the potion which have brought Harry along so fast as it is."

Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Normally, you should still be barely coherent." Dumbledore stood. "Miss Lovegood will be along early this afternoon." He nodded and left.

"What was he talking about?" Harry asked.

Hermione turned around and hugged him. "The major ingredient to the potion could be seen as somewhat . . . unusual."

"And what's that?"

"Well, it's breast milk," Hermione said.

"Huh?"

Hermione flashed her left breast at Harry. "Breast milk. It needs to come from twelve women. One of them must have been a lactating mother of some standing, and at least six must be virgins."

Harry looked puzzled. "How. . . ?"

"Oh, there are various magical and Muggle ways to get a woman to lactate, Harry. While a number of girls and all the HPSN, other than Luna, who was out of it, and of course Bonnie, who's too young, wanted to contribute, some were worried that lactating would cause a little premature sagging in our boobs if they did it for the whole month. They all decided not to contribute more than a week at a time. I'll just keep doing it, and Luna will take over when one of the other girls stops. It's obviously helping more than anticipated"

"You're. . . ."

"Harry, I'd give you my life's blood. What's giving you some milk? It's a little inconvenient, but it's not a big deal."

"Who else? Or shouldn't I know?"

"Believe it or not, the main reason we can give you so much is Millicent."

"Millicent!"

Hermione nodded. "She's huge, and even though quantity of milk doesn't always match the size of the breasts, it does in her case. She gives as much as any four other girls."

"Wow!"

Hermione nodded her agreement. "She, Susan, Padma, Katie, Su Li, and believe it or not, Marietta, are the current virgins."

"Su Li and Marietta? I am surprised," Harry agreed. "And the others?"

"Myself, Ginny, Parvati, Lavender, and Cho," Hermione said.

"Cho, too? Why?"

"They were very apologetic, as were Corner and Cornfoot. I think Smith was partially behind their attitudes. Those three were friends long before Hogwarts. This is Cho's way of apologizing."

"Wow." Harry suddenly shook his head violently.

"What's wrong?"

"Sorry," Harry said, embarrassed.

"Ah," Hermione said with a leer, "thinking of us donating, huh?"



Harry nodded. Hermione moved her hand slightly under the blanket and smiled. "Well, it's good to know everything is in good working order. We'll have to put off testing for at least a week or so, though."

Harry blushed deeper and Hermione removed her hand from his penis.

Hermione rolled out of bed and kissed Harry's forehead. "I'll come see you tonight, and I'll let Luna know how you're doing. If you're good, I'll let you watch me donate."

Harry squirmed a little from embarrassment, but he smiled at the idea. Then he frowned. "You left one girl out," Harry said.

"I was wondering if you'd ask. You'll never guess who the nursing mother is."

"Then I won't try," Harry said.

"Rora," Hermione said simply. Seeing Harry's surprise, she went on, "The custom back on her world is to let children nurse as long as they want before totally weaning them, and most children usually stop between the ages of three and four. Little Sirius is about thirty-four months, and he came through with her. They're staying at the Burrow, and she sends the milk along a few times a day."

"Is she going to stay?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione said. "One of the Dumbledore cousins is taking her as a concubine when she returns. She will keep her freedom, of course, and some of Sirius' money if Sirius stays here. They're talking about him staying, that is the Weasleys, Rora, Ron, and Professor Dumbledore."

"Is Ron disappointed that she won't be staying?"

"A little, but he really wasn't in love with her," Hermione pointed out.

Madam Pomfrey knocked on the door and came in with Harry's potion. "You need to drink this and go back to sleep," she ordered before turning on Hermione. "You had better get some additional sleep, too. You need to go back to classes starting tomorrow."

Harry woke up when he felt a pair of arms entwine around his neck. "Luna?"

"Yes?"

Harry said nothing, and hugged her tightly.

"What's wrong, my love?" Luna asked.

"I've been inside that monster's head," Harry reminded her.

"It was . . . disgusting," Luna admitted. "Still, I had to free Colin, and I wanted to show him that there were more people to fear than just you and Professor Dumbledore."

"Is he?" Harry asked.

"You drove Riddle out of your head last June in large part because of the power of your feelings for Sirius Black, and in part because of your raw power. I don't have half as much pure power as you do, but as much as you loved Sirius, our love for each other and for Hermione burns far hotter." Luna's face took on the first truly nasty look Harry had ever seen on it. "I burnt the bastard. If it had been the three of us, we would have burned him to ashes."

"I hope he won't come after you," Harry said.

"He won't," Luna said, "although he may send his minions after any of us. I told him as he ran away that you would catch up to him sooner or later. When he threatened me, I laughed at him. 'Imagine,' I said, 'what your followers would say when they learn you had to run away from a fifteen-year-old girl'. He escaped at that point."

"You're as crazy as I am," Harry said, shaking his head.

"I know," Luna replied with a smile. "Now, Ron wanted to see you, but wasn't allowed."

"He wants to talk about Sirius, doesn't he?"

Luna nodded. "He's going to stay in our world. Mrs. Weasley will be raising him for the next few years."

"Rora doesn't mind? I mean, not only is he her son, but isn't he the key to her freedom?"

"Sirius was already spending most of every day with magical children," Luna pointed out to Harry. "Rora went from a general maid to working with magical children as a paid nurse maid once Sirius was a year old. A few of the magical families operate something similar to our pre-schools for magical children born from Muggles and Squibs, to get them used to magic. She'll go back to working with them, and trying to have more magical children with her new protector."

Harry winced. "I can imagine what Hermione thinks of that," he said.

"I'm sure you can. Rora doesn't have to, as Hermione already lectured her on other possibilities." Luna stopped for a moment, then went on, "It was actually quite reasonable. She coached it terms and tones which were not condescending. Still, they all entailed Rora's staying here."

"This would be a more alien world for her than hers was for us," Harry mused.

"Exactly. She would be more out of place in our magical world than any Squib could be, and in most ways she would be at least three or four hundred years behind Muggle technology. A toddler like Sirius can easily adapt, but Rora's twenty-two. She could do it, of course, if she really wanted to, but she doesn't."

"Because she doesn't love Ron."

"She doesn't," Luna agreed. "She loves Sirius, and believes he will have a better life here. I don't think she really thought about leaving him here until she met Mrs. Weasley."

Now Harry frowned. "I hope she didn't force Rora into giving Sirius up."

"I didn't pick any of that up when I talked with her. She's spending most of her time at the Burrow, and shipping her milk here, but both she and Mrs. Weasley were here this morning."

Harry nodded. He trusted Luna's empathic powers. He moved onto a different topic. "I'm surprised she agreed to come here for a year."

"A month . . . oh, you mean that there will be nearly a year passed in her world when she returns?"

"Exactly."

"She owes a lot to the Dumbledores, and her future protector was going on a six month journey for advanced alchemy training."

"Ah, that makes sense. Could you ask Remus if there's anything I can do for her?"

"Why can't you ask him?" Luna asked.

"Because I'm going to fall back to sleep soon, and I might forget."

"Then of course I will. Oh, to get back on topic, Ron wondered if you would stand as Sirius' godfather, now that he's here."

"Of course," Harry said. "And his godmother?"

"Hermione and I are sharing the honor. We'll make a quick visit to the church at Ottery St. Catchpole over Christmas."

"Oh, I'm sure Professor Moody will like that!"

"He's been ranting since early this morning. I'm sure he's actually having a grand time already, planning all the security." At that point there was a sharp knock on the door, and Madam Pomfrey came in with Harry's potion.

After she left, Harry settled himself back into the pillow. "Are you donating?"

"Not yet," Luna admitted. "It's too bad that you're a leg man who is already dating two women."

"Why?"

"Because all the current donors, except Rora, Hermione, and Millicent, are rotating off this Saturday. Still, you can't eat anything for a few days after that. The suggested diet, once you can digest anything other than the potion, is breast milk for three days, and then other dairy products for four days. You could get the milk direct."

Harry blushed, but said, "Somehow, I don't think that would have been allowed, no matter what."

"Perhaps not. Still, I shall make certain I begin lactating by Friday evening, even though I don't start donating to the potion pool until Saturday night. I shall make certain you get the second drink." She kissed Harry gently.

"Hermione has dibs?" Harry teased as he sank back to sleep.

"It seemed fair."

Harry did not return to classes the rest of December, although Hermione made certain he kept up with his readings and assignments. After the middle of his second week in the Infirmary room, Harry started to have visitors other than Dumbledore, Moody, and his seven companions in Ruchak. Harry made certain that he thanked each of the girls who had donated to his potion, or who was on the volunteer list for the rest the time the potion would be needed. He had also ordered charm bracelets for the donors who were not in the HPSN, and each donor would get a pair of pearls set as a charm.

All of the HPSN (other than young Bonnie) were on the donor list for at least a few days, and eighteen other girls and Tonks had volunteered as well. All the donor girls (other than Hermione and Luna) were to some greater or lesser degree embarrassed when they visited, as was Harry. Harry had been most embarrassed by Bonnie's lament that she had not been allowed to donate. He was glad he was able to make his peace with Cho, Marietta, and the rest of Cho's group, who were all donating for up to a week each. They had all apologized to Luna as well, although that was in part because of Luna's attack on Voldemort. (Luna's attack, breaking off the Imperius Charm on Colin, had been released to The Daily Prophet by Minister Fudge. It certainly created a fair amount of respect for the once-outcast Ravenclaw.)

Millicent Bulstrode had been the most embarrassed donor. While she, Draco, and Gregory Goyle were not fully abjuring their previous beliefs, all three had come out against the Dark Lord and his tactics. Millicent had confessed that she and 'Greg' were now a couple, and that Greg was most anxious for the need for Millicent's contribution to the potion to be ended, as that would mark the end of her virginity as well.

While Draco had not visited Harry, he had visited Dumbledore. Draco told the Headmaster everything he knew of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, including his own torture the previous August and Julian's attempt to contact him in November.

Rora had also visited, and seemed very pleased that Harry would become her son's godfather. Dumbledore had found a young witch who was planning on ending her nursing around Christmas, which would allow Rora to return to Ruchak more than a week early.

Colin had also been allowed to visit Harry. The teen had been even more embarrassed than any two of the donors combined.

Between Millicent's huge output, the emotional ties to Luna and Hermione (and the lesser ties to some of the other girls), and his own immense magical power, Harry was recovering more

quickly than expected. However, he was forced to rest more than he wanted to. By December 21 (the first day of the winter break), Harry still was not allowed to use active magic, but had physically recovered for the most part except for having a very delicate digestion. He had been quite happy to get off of a pure dairy diet and onto other soft foods and then 'real' food. He had also been doing isometric exercises for a week. He had lost very little muscle mass, and was back on his way regaining his tone. He was glad to have the magical cane he had been given back in Ruchak, since he did tire more easily than he would admit to.

Monday, December 23, 1996

The baptism of Sirius Arthur Weasley was held in private that morning in the small Saxon church in Ottery St. Catchpole. The entire Weasley family was present. Even Percy was present, in part as a Ministry representative, since young Sirius was from another world and the Ministry had to provide altered birth records. He was also there because Penny had made her feelings very clear when her sister had told her the truth about Percy's disagreements with his family. Their marriage had nearly broken up, and it was under that threat that Percy had finally apologized to his family.

All the Weasleys were happy, other than Percy, who was both ashamed of his own conduct and more than a little censorious of Ron (Percy was so ashamed of his brother's behavior that he was making certain that the information did not leak to the press). Penny, on the other hand, provided an appropriate gift despite Percy's grumbling. Bill had brought Fleur, and they announced their wedding date for the next summer. George had brought Katie. Other than that, the non-Weasleys were Rora, Harry, Luna, Hermione, Tonks, Remus, Dumbledore, Mr. Lovegood, and Moody.

Rora watched the ceremony with a combination of anxiety and stoicism. Despite the presence of a dark wizard, she believed that this world would give her son more opportunities than her own. She loved her son, but was resolved to do what was best for her first born.

The christening party moved back to the Burrow after the baptism was over. Rora's eyes rarely left her son all morning. Young Sirius had clung to her skirts for the first four days they had been present. For the next week, he had found refuge there only when some new Weasley had shown up. She had expected Sirius to be holding on to her all day on this day.

Sirius had not, however. To the dismay of Mrs. Weasley, Ron, and Hermione, Sirius had not only stayed away from Rora, but them as well. Instead, Sirius had latched onto Harry's trousers at the church after the service. Harry had finally given up trying to move around, and he was not yet strong enough to carry Sirius around for long. Harry therefore spent the rest of the morning and lunch seated in Mr. Weasley's chair, with Sirius seated on his lap.

Rora smiled as she watched Harry and Sirius splitting a grilled ham and cheese sandwich and a bowl of chicken broth. The whole group, except for Percy, smiled as Sirius solemnly offered Ron his crusts when Ron asked his mother if there was anything else to eat. Ron gravely took and ate the crusts, and gently kissed his son's red hair. At that point, even Percy gave in and smiled.

Rora was a bit startled when she realized that the Seer was standing beside her. "Please don't worry," Luna said. "We will give Sirius all the love and comforts he could need, without spoiling him."

"I know," Rora said. "It's still hard to leave him here, even if it's for the best."

Luna hugged the older woman, who said, "Harold will be a fine father for your children."

"He will be," Luna agreed.

## **Chapter XXXIV**

Wednesday, Christmas, 1996

Harry woke up early Christmas morning feeling better than he had at any point since the assassination attempt. He still needed up to a two-hour nap every afternoon, but beyond that, he could put up the pretense of being back to his usual self. He had spent the previous two nights back on the transfigured sofa in the Gryffindor common room, with Hermione and Luna, although now without any chaperons.

Millicent, Katie, Slytherin Sixth year Tracy Davis, and three Ravenclaw Fourth years were staying to provide Harry the virgin milk for his potion, while Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Daphne Greengrass, and Tonks were supplying the rest. Since Voldemort and his forces had been quiescent since the assassination attempt, nearly every other student had gone home for the holidays. Only Millicent, Tracy, Daphne, Blaise, Draco, and Greg Goyle were in Slytherin, while Luna and the three donating Fourth years were the only Ravenclaws. Katie, Ron, Neville, and Ginny were the only students staying in the Gryffindor dorms. Bonnie More was staying with her cousin, a Fourth year Hufflepuff, and they were the only people in Hufflepuff over the holidays while their parents vacationed together in Switzerland.

As usual, Harry was on the left side of the bed while Luna was in the middle. He therefore easily slipped out, put on his dressing gown, and made his way to the boy's toilets. Ron was already there.

"Neville awake?" Harry asked with a yawn.

"Not yet," Ron said. "Let's get dressed and wake him up. All the presents are downstairs." With so few students present, most of the staff had also made plans for the holidays. Madam Pince, and Professors Dumbledore, Trelawney, Snape, Moody, and Hagrid were there, as were Remus and Tonks. In addition, all the students were to open their presents together, after breakfast.

"When is everyone coming over?" Harry asked. The Weasleys, plus Rora and Sirius, were coming over at some point.

"They're coming for the feast," Ron said in a slightly excited voice. "At least Sirius will have our presents to open." He frowned. "Will the Leech and her cousin be there?"

"Well," Harry said patiently, "Bonnie might be. I'll talk to them if they show up."

"Well, they would probably do anything for you," Ron agreed. Bonnie and Carlotta were both members of the HPSN, Carlotta having just finished a three day donation.

"They both miss their little brothers," Harry said. "I thought they might like playing with Sirius. As long as they never say he's your son, why not?"

"You're right," Ron agreed. "Let's get things moving."

"You're going to be the type of father who wakes the kiddies up Christmas morning, if they don't get up on their own, aren't you?" Harry teased.

"I suppose I am," Ron agreed again.

"Are you okay?"

Ron shrugged. "I'm still getting used to the idea that Sirius is going to be around. I like it, but it's a lot of responsibility, even if Mum is going to be shouldering most of it for the next year and a half." He sighed. "I don't know what I'll do after that."

"The way you played in that first game, I still think you have a chance at Quidditch."

"And who will look after Sirius?"

"Your Mum, just like she would if you were going to a Ministry job every day."

"I suppose," Ron said, dispiritedly.

"It will work out. Besides, Bill and Charlie owe you big time."

Ron frowned. "Why is that?"

"Your mum shouldn't be asking them about grandchildren as often," Harry pointed out.

"Good point."

The seventeen students gathered in the small room behind the great hall before breakfast. The eleven girls all enjoyed their charm bracelets. Millicent laughed heartily when she realized that her pair of pearls were far larger than the other donors'. Draco was quite shocked when he realized that Harry, Luna, and Hermione had clubbed together and given both him and Goyle refills for their broom servicing kits. He was further shamed when he saw that Goyle and Bulstrode had gotten all the Gryffindors small presents. No one said anything, and for once Draco covered up his embarrassment by turning on his charm instead of his sarcasm. He especially admired Harry's cane.

Draco further redeemed himself at the feast. He had made his decision to some degree weeks before. That afternoon he formalized that decision. At the start of the feast, in front of the students, the staff, and the visiting Weasley family, Draco stood. "Friends and allies," Draco said firmly, "let us drink to the health of us all, to the health of Professor Dumbledore and Harry Potter, and to the victory over the darkness that threatens our entire world, no matter what our beliefs."

Yes, Draco still disliked Harry Potter and most of what he stood for. He had decided, however, that the Dark Lord was worse. He hoped that, by making the gesture now, Dumbledore would be able to keep the Dark Lord well away from him the following summer.

After dinner, the extended Weasley family (including Tonks and a very tired Remus, just back from his transformation) and the Gryffindors went up to the Gryffindor common room. Harry took Bonnie and Carlotta aside, and they agreed not to say anything about Sirius or his



ancestry. Harry did have to give them a rough idea of how Ron, not quite seventeen, had managed to have a son nearly three with a woman in her early twenties.

Sirius had stayed very close to his mother from the moment he had arrived at Hogwarts, through the feast, and on the long trip up to the common room. He had been conserving his energy. The very odd twins, whom he had learned quickly not to trust over the previous weeks, had promised him presents this afternoon. He had only believed them because both his Grandmother and Grandfather had assured him it was true.

It appeared, however, that some of the adults had some gifts to exchange first. A very odd creature had come and given most of the people, including Sirius, presents of socks, and some had given the Dobby creature socks in return. Then, everyone but Grandfather and the two older girls that Sirius did not know opened gifts from Grandmother. Sirius thought his maroon jumper was nice enough, it did match Father's, but he was no more thrilled by the jumper than he had been by the socks.

Uncle Harry had then given Aunt Hermione and Aunt Luna reddish gold rings with pretty green stones. The twins had made fun of Uncle Harry's indecision, whatever that meant. Uncle Remus had then gotten down on one knee and given Aunt Dora a gold ring with a smaller, sparkling stone, and everyone but his mother and he had congratulated Uncle Remus and hugged Aunt Dora. Sirius was not certain what was going on, but everyone at least seemed happy, especially Aunt Dora.

Meanwhile, everyone had been giving Mother gifts of clothes as well. Mother had seemed pleased. Sirius was wondering if this Christmas thing was only about clothes and rings.

Uncle Harry then banged his cane on the stone floor. "I understand we have here a young man who has never received Christmas presents before. You all know that's something I understand. While you all also know how much I love my Weasley jumpers. . . ." Everyone clapped and cheered, "and the Headmaster and Dobby both agree that there are few gifts that can beat a good pair of socks. . . ." Everyone laughed. "Still, I think young Sirius here might like some of the other things we have in store for him."

Everyone now moved into a large circle, and they were all looking at Sirius. He leaned back against his mother. His father was on one said of him, between his mother and Uncle Harry, while his grandmother and grandfather were on the other.

"Who goes first?" Uncle Harry asked. "I should go last."

"Here," Uncle Bill said. "This is from your Uncle Percy and Aunt Penny. They couldn't be here today." He handed Sirius a largish flat package. Sirius tore it open, and found a book.

"A Wizard's First Primer," Grandmother said. "That's good. The old one fell apart when Ginny was using it."

"Here you go, Sirius," Uncle Charlie said.

Sirius tore one package apart, and contemplated a small pair of dragon hide boots. He nodded -- more clothes -- and then tore the big oblong package apart, and found a stuffed dragon about a third the size of himself. Sirius immediately hugged it and smiled at his Uncle. "Thank you!" he said.

"Here, these are from Fleur and me," Bill said, handing Sirius three packages. The largest was a winter jacket, the smallest was a pair of gloves. These he gave to his Grandmother. The third was a scarf with colored bands that moved. He thanked Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur, and handed that over to Grandmother as well.

Aunt Luna and Aunt Hermione then gave him a large set of books, some of which were all pictures and some of which had both writing and pictures. They both promised to read him the stories later, starting with something called Green Eggs and Ham. Uncle Remus and Aunt Dora gave him a large set of magical building blocks, which looked like real fun, and more clothes. Grandmother and Grandfather, and to his disappointment Father, also gave him clothing, but at least Father had given him some chocolate frogs, as well. Aunt Ginny and Uncle Neville then had given him a stuffed dog (almost as nice as the dragon) and, of course, more clothes.

Uncle Fred and Uncle George had then approached with a large box. "Fred and George Weasley!" Grandmother stated in a firm, warning tone, "if there's anything inappropriate for a three-year-old. . . ."

"What? Us? No!" Fred said.

Everyone gave the pair the eye.

"Some things look a little inappropriate," George admitted, "but none of it is." They helped Sirius unwrap the box. Most of the box contained self-igniting sparklers and other small fireworks. They showed Sirius how they worked, and showed Grandmother that he could not really hurt himself with them.

Uncle Harry gave Sirius a special low-light long-lasting nightlight candle and a teddy bear nearly as big as Sirius himself. As Sirius hugged the bear, and the dragon and the dog, Uncle Harry said, "I also set up some accounts at Gringotts. One will pay for his schooling, and another will pay his guardians a thousand Galleons a year until he's nineteen. At nineteen, he'll get twenty thousand Galleons, and he'll get another fifty thousand when he turns twenty-one."

Rora leaned over Ron and hugged Harry.

Sirius continued to play with his stuffed animals.

Thursday, Boxing Day, 1996

Harry opened a tired eye to see who was gently poking him. He was not terribly surprised to see it was Dobby. "Whazzit?" Harry muttered.

Dobby frowned as he puzzled that out, and then said, "Headmaster wishes to see Harry Potter as soon as possible."

"Time izzit?"

"It is a little passed Six, Harry Potter."

Harry sighed and sat up. "Thank you, Dobby."

"Here is your potion, Harry Potter."

Harry sighed again. "Thank you, Dobby."

Less than half an hour later, Harry had managed to get himself to the Headmaster's Office. He really was not very surprised to see a very tired looking Kingsley Shacklebolt was also there.

Harry greeted the two men, stroked Fawkes for a moment, and then sat down heavily. "What did Voldemort do now?" he asked wearily.

"Death Eaters attacked a Muggle religious group that was camping in the Welsh mountains," Kingsley told him.

"Camping? In the winter?"

Kingsley shrugged. "It was something to do with their Christmas devotions, retreating from the world, you know. They arrived the morning before Christmas, and they were to leave New Year's Day. Almost two hundred of them were slaughtered."

Harry closed his eyes with pain, but then got a puzzled look on his face. "Are there any magical families near the camp ground?"

"No, no there's not," Kingsley answered thoughtfully. "There are some old caves above the camp ground that were used by Celtic and even pre-Celtic mystics millennia ago. They still have strong Distraction and Muggle-repelling charms on. . . ." He looked at Harry and the Dumbledore. "Are you two thinking what I'm thinking?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed, it is very possible Voldemort or some of the Death Eaters have been using those caves."

Kingsley frowned. "I should have thought of it; it's so obvious."

"If they were or are in use, then Voldemort no doubt added some very powerful distraction charms to the old ones," Dumbledore stated. "You might wish to write the information down as you investigate. It will prevent the teams from becoming disoriented if you get close to his hideouts."

"Good idea," Kingsley said. He turned back to Harry. "In any event, the murder of the Muggles was a diversion. About two hours ago, Voldemort led the Death Eaters on an attack on the Minister's home. There was a pitched battle. Nine aurors, the Minister, his wife, and their house elf were all killed. Nine Death Eaters were killed as well."

Harry frowned. "Why would Voldemort want Fudge dead? He still wasn't very effective. I don't understand."

"Cornelius was going to be ousted some time next month," Dumbledore admitted. "Voldemort most likely decided that since Cornelius was going to be gone anyway, he should have him killed to show he still can strike nearly anyone, anywhere."

"And Fudge did many foolish things," Kingsley added. "One part of his foolishness was a belief in his own importance and his own power. He refused any real protections. He was much more vulnerable than he should have been."

"True," Dumbledore admitted. He looked at Harry.

"Let me guess, you wanted me to know as soon as possible, because the papers will start saying I need to hunt down Voldemort."

"Exactly," Dumbledore stated. "You are in no shape to be hunting down anyone, and shouldn't even think about it until after your next birthday."

"Considering the amount of time I spent in Rushak, I'm really of age now," Harry pointed out.

"You are," Dumbledore agreed. "However, it could take until around the end of the spring term before you are any stronger than you were at the time of the attack on you. You will likely need July at the least to be ready."

"Yes, sir," Harry said unhappily.

"With your permission, we will start an unobtrusive campaign once those suggestions of your hunting down Voldemort surface. We will be suggesting that it is a sign of Voldemort's cowardice that he cannot wait until you reach your majority, let alone pass your N.E.W.T.s, before taking you on. It is an extreme long-shot, but we may be able to get Voldemort to issue you a challenge, which could at least keep the open attacks down."

"How likely is it to work?" Harry asked, curious but obviously not thinking highly of the plan.

"It almost assuredly would not keep Voldemort off for the year and a half it would take for you to complete your N.E.W.T.s," Dumbledore said sadly. "However, as I said, there is a slim chance it will buy us seven months."

"Fine. Go ahead," Harry agreed.

"Excuse us, would you please, Kingsley? I need a quick word with Harry, and then we may continue."

"Of course," the auror said. He got up and went out to the landing. Harry looked warily at Dumbledore.

"I hope you will not be troubled with nightmares over these horrendous developments," Dumbledore said.

"I haven't had a real nightmare down in the common room," Harry said cautiously.

"That is good, but as much as you enjoy the arrangement, it really is not a good signal to the rest of the students," Dumbledore went on dispassionately. "By the time the students return on

the Fifth, you will have had the full four-week potion regimen. The antagonistic forces in Ravenclaw seem to have made their peace with Miss Lovegood. I really do believe it will then be time for her to return to her proper House."

Harry wanted to protest, but it died away in his throat when he saw how serious Dumbledore was.

"You knew it was only temporary," Dumbledore reminded Harry. "In fact, I would have told you that Saturday night you were attacked that I thought Miss Lovegood should return to Ravenclaw the next evening. No, it is time for Miss Lovegood to return to Ravenclaw, and incidentally, for you and Miss Granger to return to your regular rooms. If the nightmares truly return, we may reconsider our policy. Since you and Miss Granger are of age in reality, and Miss Lovegood is close, I shall continue to turn a blind eye to that little apartment you set up. I do not want any of you to sleep there at night, especially not at the same time. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry answered, disappointed and a little embarrassed.

"Your friends are no doubt at breakfast by now. You should probably go join them." Harry nodded and left, as Kingsley came back in to plan with Dumbledore.

Neither Hermione nor Luna were happy with the news that they were to soon resume their normal sleeping arrangements. Both were, of course, even more concerned about the events of the previous night and the proposed plan to put Harry forward to fight Voldemort early the next August.

The attacks on the Muggles and Fudge had not made The Morning Prophet. Because of how few students were present, they were all eating at the same table. Harry had to tell the story three times, and then he allowed Hermione to retell it twice more.

"The attacks are really irrelevant," Draco said as the group discussed the attacks.

"How can you say that?" Hermione demanded. "Over two hundred people died!"

"This isn't about the value of the life of a Muggle," Draco said coldly. "If you only think in those terms, then you can never fight effectively. You'd just waste your time trying to defend Muggles while the Dark Lord plots. There are too many of them to defend."

"You'd just as soon they were all dead anyway," Ron snarled.

"No, I wouldn't," Draco replied with a sneer. "I admit, until I started the Magical Business class, I had no idea how intertwined our world was with the economy of the Muggle world. So no, I wouldn't want all the Muggles killed. Our standard of living would go back to the so-called Dark Ages."

Several students expressed their shock.

"Is that all their lives mean to you, Draco?" Harry asked.

"Tell me, Harry," Draco demanded, putting a sneer on Harry's name, "if several thousand Muggles died in some obscure part of the world, from a plague or an earthquake, or if they slaughtered each other over their own ethnic or religious disputes, you might all shake your heads, and do doubt Granger would take up a collection, but would you really care?"

"Of course I'd care!" Hermione said.

"Alright, I'll take you at your word. Tell me, would many other people really care? They might think it sad, or they might just shake their head and go on with their lives. If they had no interests and no friends or relations in that part of the world, why wouldn't they think mostly of their own concerns?"

"I suppose you're at least partially right," Hermione had to admit.

"Well, I have few interests and no friends or relatives in the Muggle world. I find worrying about the magical world more than enough for me." He stood. "You might all wish to consider your priorities. Care about Muggles, if you wish. Do not think that is what matters at this moment. Right now, what matters is the survival and freedom of our magical culture." He left.

## Chapter XXXV

Friday, December 27, 1996

Harry was sitting alone in the great hall a little after 11:00 am, working on more of his backlog of work and waiting for lunch. Largely thanks to Hermione, he had not fallen too far behind in his school work during the end of term. Still, he had plenty of work to do over the holiday. This morning, he was working to finish his Business homework.

Harry's attention was drawn to a single unknown owl flying into the great hall. It landed in front of him, and stuck its right leg at him.

Harry resisted the nearly automatic response to take the note. He did a quick revealing spell, which annoyed the bird but which showed that there were no spells on the note. Only then did Harry take the note and give the bird a treat from his pocket.

There were two sheets of paper. The first note was very short and was written in very poor penmanship: *The Master's Townhouse is at 12 Grimmauld Place.*

Instantly, Harry's memories of the Black House fleshed out in ways he had not been able to access since the previous summer.

The other note was longer, and much more neatly written: *Potter:*

*Please do not give or show this note to anyone other than the Headmaster. He will know what to do with it. At the time, I was sorry I was unable to meet you last summer, but now I am glad I missed you by a few days.*

Harry was not certain if the note was actually from Julian Malfoy or not, but he figured that was a problem for the Headmaster, not for him. Harry sighed and put his holiday work away. He needed to see the Headmaster.

"Well, Harry; I suppose you understand whom these notes suggest is behind this?"

Harry shrugged. "The first note would be from the Secret Keeper, probably Wormtail, to one of the Death Eaters. The second, the sender, would be Julian Malfoy." Harry did not want to mention it, but he thought the handwriting on the first note was a bit like Wormtail's in the Marauder's Map.

"Exactly." Dumbledore frowned. "I wonder if it is from him? Pettigrew might have tried to disguise his handwriting. Pettigrew is, by the way, the Secret Keeper."

Harry thought about that. "You know, sir, Muggle law enforcement have hand writing experts."

"So they do. I shall send these, along with some examples of Malfoy's and Pettigrew's writing, off for examination. That way we shall know if this was from Pettigrew, Malfoy, or some other Death Eater."

"You might want to photocopy the first note," Harry suggested. "After all, you may want to reveal the location to other people."

Dumbledore smiled. "Also very true. Well thought, Harry." Only the original would open the Fidelius Secret.

Harry merely sat and looked at the Headmaster. "Was there something else, Harry?"

"Yes, sir. First of all, did the aurors find Voldemort's mountain hideout?"

"Yes, they did. Late last night. Six Death Eaters and three others were captured. They were moving the last of Voldemort's supplies."

"You weren't going to mention it, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled warily. "They are still under interrogation, and I do not report to you, Harry. As one of the twins pointed out to me last summer, you are a field commander, I am the commander-in-chief."

"And you aren't going to let me in on the attack on Headquarters."

"I would prefer you not be in any pitched battles before your birthday," Dumbledore reminded Harry. "We haven't fully tested you magic since the attack, after all. If necessary, perhaps we will risk it as early as the Easter holiday, but I hope that will not be necessary."

"When is Easter this year?"

"The Thirtieth of March," Dumbledore replied.

"About ninety-three days," Harry said thoughtfully

"Not all that long a time," Dumbledore pointed out. "I want Voldemort defeated as much as anyone, Harry. Just remember, you are our only chance. If we had three or five or a dozen chances, and you were the best chance, it would still be difficult to send you to fight that soon."

"And?" Harry asked, seeing hidden layers to Dumbledore's thoughts, but unable to see what they were.

"And I am old, Harry. Tell me, does the name Vittorio Nebbiolo mean anything to you?"

Harry frowned. History of Magic had been one of his weakest subjects. "Didn't he have something to do with a new set of regulations for Muggle-Wizard interactions in the early 1800s?"

"True," Dumbledore agreed. "The Muggles in Europe had gone through a period called the Enlightenment, which was alas followed by the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, and the impact of their Industrial Revolution was starting to be felt then as well. Nebbiolo was the leader of a movement to rewrite the regulations. The reason why he was the leader was because he was the most powerful wizard of the period, at least in Europe. He defeated a very



powerful Dark Wizard in 1799, when he was just thirty, and he died helping to end the so-called Knight's War, or the First War of Grindelwald, in early 1918."

"So?"

"So, Voldemort is the most powerful Dark Wizard of the last thousand years, Harry. He has been far from the only one. In many ways Grindelwald, although personally less powerful, caused much greater harm than Voldemort has to date, but neither he nor Voldemort were all that unique. I am too old to lead, let alone fight, the next war, whenever that happens. It might be twenty years from now, it might be a hundred and twenty. If the latter, I shall be long gone."

Harry sighed. "And I won't be able to let it slide."

"It would be quite uncharacteristic of you," Dumbledore said. "Remember what your father said. You will lose some of your special power when you defeat Voldemort. How much depends on how much you exercise your powers before that event. Should you defeat Voldemort in March, I doubt if you will end up any more powerful than I. Meaning no disrespect, Harry, but even if you were to turn out more powerful than I ever was, you do not have as wide a range of magical knowledge, nor the interest in acquiring it."

"That's true," Harry admitted.

"So, while a battle at the end of March is possible, I would prefer to delay it at least until early August for a number of good reasons. Does knowing that make the wait easier or harder to bear?"

Harry thought hard about that. "A little easier, I think."

"Then I would apologize for not telling you about the cavern Voldemort was hiding in, except for the fact I was planning on telling you after dinner, when I shall inform Alastor and Remus."

"Oh. . . ." Harry said in a small voice.

"Do not let that bother you," Dumbledore went on, "I have kept information from you before. I cannot blame you for being suspicious at times."

"Thank you," Harry said drily.

"Was there anything else, Harry?"

Harry gestured at the notes. "Could these be a trap?"

Dumbledore nodded. "It is certainly possible. The timing suggests that either the attacks caused someone to decide to cover themselves, or that Voldemort hopes to lure us, and you, into Grimmauld Place for some reason. Another good reason not to rush in."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." Harry stood up, but halted. "Was there something else, sir?"

"I was just thinking, you have never inquired about how your lifting of the Dark Mark worked on Professor Snape."

"No, I haven't," Harry acknowledged. "You know, come to think of it, he and Mister Filch were two of the four members of the staff who never came to see me, and the other two sent me a card and a carrot."

"A carrot?"

"Hagrid said it was a sign of friendship, from a centaur."

"Ah."

"Even the other three House ghosts visited."

"Really?" Dumbledore asked, a bit surprised. "That is quite an honor."

"I guess," Harry said. "The Grey Lady didn't say anything, of course, but she smiled at Luna, Hermione and me. The Friar was rather . . . what was the term Hermione used. . . ? Oh, I remember, 'ribald'."

"No doubt," Dumbledore acknowledged.

"The Baron stopped by to tell me that Peeves was under strict orders never to bother me again, which I thought was very nice of him."

"Very," Dumbledore agreed. "Just in case you are curious, Professor Snape's scar does twinge on occasion, but it is still at worst basically dormant. I believe it is actually harmless, but it does not hurt to be on guard."

"That's good to hear, sir. I think I need to catch lunch before it's over."

"Very good, Harry." He hesitated, and then handed Harry the note disclosing 12 Grimmauld Place. "Please return this here tonight. I shall be showing it to several people at that time. You may then take it again, as long as you return it after dinner on New Year's night."

"Thank you, Professor."

After lunch, Harry took Hermione, Luna, and Ginny up to his dorm room, where Neville was waiting (Ron was at the Burrow until at least New Year's Eve). Harry explained to them what had happened, and showed them the note.

"Do you really think it could be Pettigrew?" Neville asked.

"I'd like to think so," Harry said, "but I rather doubt it. I'll see what Remus says tonight."

"I'm just glad the Headmaster is giving it back to you tonight, so you can show Ron when he gets back," Ginny said.

"True," Hermione agreed. "Even though he naturally made the choice to spend time with Sirius, he wouldn't be happy being left out of this."

"What do you think about it?" Harry asked Luna.

"If you mean the notes, I believe they are at least as likely to be a trap as they are a Death Eater betraying his Master. If you mean Ron, I agree with Hermione." She frowned. "I really don't believe Voldemort is going to confront you directly if he can help it. You damaged him far too easily last October."

"That's probably why the Order's intelligence indicates he has had a difficult time recruiting more Death Eaters," Hermione said. Harry gave her an inquiring look. Hermione shrugged. "I asked. You can't always wait for someone to volunteer the information."

"True," Harry said ruefully.

"So," Ginny said, "the biggest risk is someone walking up to Harry and stabbing him again."

"Or poisoning his pumpkin juice, or anything similar," Hermione agreed.

The five sat glumly. Finally, Neville asked, "Do you think we can at least rule out someone acting of their own total free will?"

"Probably, but not definitely," Hermione said.

"If Voldemort had someone in the school working for him, wouldn't he have sent someone in to kill me while I was so weak from the poison?" Harry asked.

"You were in a private room," Neville pointed out.

"How well guarded was it?" Harry asked.

"Nothing overly obvious," Hermione admitted.

"I think we can eliminate any girl Fourth year and above," Luna said thoughtfully. "I'm sure there must be several ways they could have volunteered to donate milk and then foul it enough to kill Harry by the second or third week."

"True," Hermione admitted. "I think we have to be more worried about an attack from someone under the Imperius than anything else."

"How long does someone stay under the Imperius?" Neville asked.

"Besides all the other factors, it depends on what the person cursed is asked to do," Ginny said. She had studied all the information on types of possession she could find over the last few years. "I bet Colin could have easily been made to kill most people. It was only because of his crush on Harry that he managed to fight it to the extent he did."

"Unless the person really dislikes me, I'd say three days would be the longest most people could be made to attack me in any way," Harry said. "You can keep someone doing their

everyday tasks, or have them just sitting around, like Crouch made his son do for all those years. Even then, you have to renew it every ten days or so."

"Going back to Colin, though," Ginny said thoughtfully, "I bet even now he could be made to drop some poison into Harry's goblet, thinking it was a love potion or something. And the same is true of about three-quarters of the female population of Hogwarts, myself included."

"And probably a tenth of the male population," Luna added.

"Even so, that couldn't last as long as a week," Harry said. "By then, I would hope someone would have noticed some odd behavior."

"So, what can we go about it?" Neville asked.

"I have been pondering that question," Dumbledore said from the doorway. "As I came to question what you might all be doing here, where witches, especially a witch from Ravenclaw, are not supposed to be, I came up with a possible solution. I am loath to employ it. Still, I shall ask you, and the staff, for their opinions. If you or they can come up with something less intrusive, I would much appreciate it."

"May I guess?" Luna asked.

"By all means."

"You, Professor Snape, and Harry can use Legilimency, and I can use my empathic abilities. Each student and staff member who has been absent over the break, even Ronald, would have to be scanned. So far as I know, there is no other sure way to detect someone under the Imperius."

"There are several potions, but in many ways those are even more intrusive," Dumbledore stated. "Professors McGonagall, Lupin, and Flitwick are accomplished enough in their resistance not to be tested. Believe it or not, so is Professor Moody."

"I thought he was under the Imperius for almost a year!" Ginny exclaimed.

"He was imprisoned," Dumbledore acknowledged. "However, he mostly stunned, not under the Imperius."

"That's good to know, anyway," Harry said. "It's going to be unpopular."

"True," Hermione said, "but if you do everyone, it should cause less trouble than if we were being selective in any way."

"Weren't any of the students immune, like Harry was?" Ginny asked.

"While there are a number of students with some resistance, including yourself, only Harry and Miss Lovegood are likely to fully resist Voldemort."

"No offense, but can you allow Harry to do any of the scanning?" Hermione asked. "Wouldn't that just open him to attack?"

Harry winced, but could not argue the point.

"That is an excellent point," Dumbledore agreed. "I regret to say that this means no more Hogsmeade weekends."

"The students will go stir-crazy," Ginny protested.

"Especially the Fifth and Seventh years," Dumbledore agreed. "Any suggestions?"

"Valentine's Day is a Friday," Ginny offered. "How about an informal dance?"

"What about a different type of feast, followed by a dance for those interested in the great hall, and some sort of party for the younger students?" Hermione modified.

"What sort of feast?" Dumbledore asked, curious.

"I've been talking to the elves," Hermione said, "and they all say that the way they generally enjoy expressing themselves the most is through cooking. They enjoy learning new dishes. There are all sorts of fun things they could cook that most Hogwarts students haven't tried: French and Italian and Greek and Indian and North African and. . . ."

"Yes, I understand the direction you're going in," Dumbledore said drily. He pondered for a few minutes. "Yes, those are good ideas. I shall ask a few people what they think, but I like those suggestions. Now, please go down to the common room at the least," Dumbledore instructed. "If you wish to, remember we can use more ideas on protecting Harry here once all the students return." He left the room with a swirl of his robes.

"You had a thought before the headmaster showed up," Luna said to Harry. "What was it?"

"I'm cleared to use magic again," Harry said. "How would you five like to test me for the next few days?"

Tuesday, December 31, 1996

"I thought Ron was coming back tonight," Harry grumbled as he took his seat at the single dining table.

"He was," Ginny agreed in a low voice, "but he's having fun playing with Sirius. He'll be back for lunch tomorrow."

Harry sighed. "I guess I can't begrudge him that," Harry had to admit.

At that moment, Dumbledore came into the great hall. "Good evening," he said. "For those of you interested in seeing in the New Year, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes have donated a fireworks display which we will start at midnight. We also have some non-alcoholic sparkling cider. If you are interested, bundle up and be out on the lawn near the lake at Eleven forty-five."

"This is nice," Hermione said, as she snuggled next to Harry's left side. She had crocheted an afghan in Gryffindor and Ravenclaw colors, and she, Harry, and Luna were sitting on a bench, wrapped in it. All the other students and staff were near by, except for Ginny and Neville, who were setting the fireworks off.

The bottles of cider were circulating, and shortly before midnight, everyone was ready. Dumbledore signaled the time, and the first magical fireworks shot up into the sky. As most of the students drank their toasts, Hermione, Harry, and Luna shared a three-way kiss.

If any of the students saw it, none ever mentioned it.

Wednesday, January 1, 1997

When the sextet sat down for lunch the next day, Tracy Davis sat down next to Ron, asking, "Do you mind?"

"No," Ron said, "go ahead."

"Was that little boy your younger brother, or a nephew," she asked Ron and Ginny.

"A cousin our parents adopted," Ginny said, before anyone else could say anything. "I must say, it came as a really surprise to everyone." Down the table, Malfoy rolled his eyes, but wisely said nothing. He had heard some interesting conversations, but kept those to himself.

"He's our godson," Hermione said proudly.

"What's his name?"

"Sirius," Harry said, seeing Malfoy wince at the name.

"Well, I must say, he was adorable," Tracy said. "And all of you were so nice to him. Who was the woman?"

"A Squib cousin," Ginny answered. "She had been taking care of him for a while." The conversation went on about Sirius in general terms.

During lunch, Tracy invited Ron to go ice skating. A small shallow off-shoot of the lake was used by the students for ice skating. Ron accepted, and the pair went off before most of the students were even finished. For once, Ron was not the last to leave the table.

"What just happened?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"For whatever reason, Tracy has always liked Weasley, err, Ron," Millicent said. "At least since the Yule Ball, and probably before. You can imagine how much chaff she has gotten for that over the years."

Most of the non-Slytherins grimaced at the thought.

"Since you and he were dancing around each other, and since some of us would have made her life a living hell before this year, she never approached him," Millicent went on. "Since you're involved with Harry here to some degree, she figured, why not?"

"Is she going to be bothered about it?" Harry asked.

"Not by anyone in our House," Draco answered. "I think it shows bad taste on her part, but then, I dated Pansy for three years. I won't bother them. Will you?"

"No," Harry said firmly. "I have to admit, I don't know her well enough to like or dislike her."

"She takes Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Runes, Arithmancy, and the Business course," Hermione said. "Her father's is an old Welsh wizarding family, her maternal grandmother was Muggle-born. Her father and paternal grandfather work in the co-op that makes butterbeer, and she has three younger siblings. The next oldest, a brother I think, starts next year."

The three remaining Slytherins at the table stared at her. "What?" Hermione asked. "I like knowing about the people around me. What's wrong with that?"

Draco shook his head. "I'm sure I know more about Davis the person than you do, but you know more about her background than I do."

"Hermione always pays attention," Harry said.

"Granger, you really are a know-it-all," Draco said in a slightly admiring voice.

"And a very cute one at that," Harry added. "Shall we go practice hexes some more?"

The group grimaced. Harry's power had made another jump after his recovery, and he was making short work of his friends and fellow students.

## **Chapter XXXVI**

Sunday, January 5, 1997

It took nearly an hour to check all of the students to see if they were under the Imperius Curse. It might have taken even longer, except that Dean, Lavender, and Parvati had noticed something was slightly off in Seamus' behavior soon after the trip started. Parvati had clued in Padma, and Padma had notified Remus and Tonks, who were on Platform duty in Hogsmeade. Dumbledore had freed Seamus from Voldemort's control within minutes of Seamus' entering the castle.

Padma had also carefully talked to several students she knew well after Parvati had clued her in to Seamus' behavior, and the likely reason behind it. She, Ernie, Justin, Terry, Susan, Hannah, and Mandy had then moved through the train, just talking with all the students. Three of the five students they had thought suspicious also were under the Imperius, while one was very angry at her boyfriend, and the fifth was coming down with dragon pox. As for the three actually under the Imperius, all were younger Gryffindors and all were freed of the Imperius even more easily than Seamus (since they were under the control of weaker wizards than Voldemort). None of the other students were under the Curse.

Aurors were quickly dispatched to their family homes.

The welcome back dinner was therefore a very chaotic affair. The announcement of the Valentine's activities made it even more so. Finally, well after 10:00 (far later than usual), the staff finally managed to get the students out of the great hall and on their way to their common rooms, if not to bed.

All the students save one.

"Potter! Didn't you hear the headmaster? Get out of here and off to your common room!"

Harry regarded Severus Snape with cool consideration for a few moments -- just long enough to make Snape hesitate between yelling or waiting a moment. At that point, Harry politely said, "Since I need to see the headmaster on an Order matter, rather than a school or personal matter, I'll just wait, Professor." Dumbledore was busy conferring with Remus and Tonks, who had come in through the teachers entrance as the students had moved out.

"And I am ordering you out!"

Harry slowly stood up, bringing his face to face with the Potions teacher. When Harry had first come to Hogwarts, Snape had loomed over him, and Snape had been pulling that trick on Harry ever since. Snape was still nearly three inches taller than Harry was, but Harry was no longer intimidated by Severus Snape.

Harry kept his voice polite, but said, "Order all you wish, Professor."

"How dare you!"

"I really suggest that you not touch your wand again, Professor."

"Are you threatening me, Potter?"



"Fingering your wand implies a threat against me," Harry said calmly.

Snape gritted his teeth, but before he could respond, Dumbledore had come up. "Is there a problem, Severus?"

"Potter. . . ."

"Mister Potter, Severus."

"MISTER Potter refuses to go to his common room."

"If I am to be the leader you want me to be," Harry reminded Dumbledore, "then unfortunately I have to be one of the people breaking the news to those students. I have to know what is going on."

"You are not a leader, Potter!" Snape, his nerves on edge from all the Legilimency he had performed that evening, nearly screamed. "You are nothing more than a tool!"

Harry said nothing. He merely looked at Dumbledore. The headmaster knew that if he sent Harry on his way, his influence over Harry would be over, and quite likely either Harry or Dumbledore would lose a great deal of influence with the students. Dumbledore did not want to break with Harry. All personal considerations aside, there was a great deal he had yet to teach Harry. "Severus, please attend to your common room."

"Headmaster! I MUST protest! Do not let this tool rise above his station!"

"At least this tool has some usefulness left," Harry stated. Harry would have been prepared to state that Snape was about the most pallid any person not a vampire could be. Nevertheless, Snape's face lost even more color, and he simply turned and left the hall.

"Harry, if you only knew how much Professor Snape has suffered. . . ." Here Dumbledore stopped and shook his head sadly.

"I am sure he has," Harry agreed, "but that's no excuse for his trying to make me suffer along with him."

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well, Harry."

"How bad is it, sir?"

"Very bad. All four families were massacred; tortured in unimaginable ways, especially the Muggles."

"I don't know the younger students very well. Are they all from Muggle and Half-blood families?"

"They were all the Gryffindor cases of a magical-Muggle relationship, other than Mister Thomas, and that is not widely known."

"Did . . . did any of the students witness any of it? They could have been Obliviated."

"No," Dumbledore said. "While physical pain makes the Imperius easier to apply, that kind of psychological stress can be counterproductive."

"Why didn't my scar even twinge?" Harry asked. "Are my shields that powerful?"

"In part, and I am certain Voldemort is being careful as well."

"When will the funerals be? Do you know yet?"

"No, I do not." Dumbledore seemed to hesitate.

Harry spoke up, "I need to at least go with Seamus. If they're all at the same time, then I can't be at all of them. Still, if the security can be arranged, I should go at least for Seamus, if not all of them."

"We shall see," Dumbledore agreed. They came up to the Gryffindor common room, where Professor McGonagall was waiting for them.

"I had hoped I would never have to do this again," McGonagall said. Seeing Harry's look, she added, "We had to do this too many times in the first war." She looked at Dumbledore. "Of course, you and Professor Dippet had to do this during the two wars with Grindelwald."

"True," Dumbledore agreed. "While the first time was in some ways the hardest, the subsequent ones have all been as difficult, if in different ways."

"I just hope I don't throw up," Harry said.

"If you do, try and regurgitate afterwards, in private," McGonagall said. "I usually do."

The three entered the common room. They were each glad to see that none of the four students were being shunned. Harry could see from the interplay of glances that Hermione and Colin had both had a few things to say to some of the students on the subject.

Seamus stood up shakily, and Lavender helped him to come over to Harry. Bonnie More brought her best friend, Deborah Vane, to Harry. Third year David Bowman came over, Natalie MacDonald holding his hand. Dennis Creevy guided his girl friend Julia Carson. Dumbledore quietly took a step back, forcing McGonagall to do the same. The Gryffindors wanted Harry, not them.

"Those monsters. . . ." Seamus said, tears in his eyes, "those monsters . . . killed our families, didn't they, Harry?"

"Yes, Seamus, I'm afraid they did."

Deborah and Julia buried their face in Bonnie's and Dennis' shoulders. David simply stood, unblinking, while Seamus grimaced in agony. Harry turned around and said to the two teachers, "I think they'll need to see you in the morning."

Dumbledore placed a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder, and then went and did the same for each grieving student, then he and Professor McGonagall left. A jerk of Harry's head set the common room into motion. Dean and Parvati guided Seamus and Lavender to a sofa.

Ginny helped Natalie sit David down, while Dennis helped Julia. Harry knelt and took Deborah and Bonnie into his arms. The three boys' prefects shooed all the other boys up to their dorms, while Katie and Hermione guided the girls out.

The common room was quiet, except for the sobbing.

A little after midnight, everyone was in bed except for Harry, Hermione, and Katie.

"But Professor Dumbledore said. . . ."

"I don't care, Harry," Katie stated. "We can't have you having any nightmares tonight. Now, both of you, take off your shoes and robes and get under those covers!"

"But. . . ." Hermione started to say.

"We shouldn't argue with the Head Girl," Harry teased. "It would set a bad precedent for next year."

"Ha ha," Hermione said, bending over and untying her shoes.

"Get some rest," Katie said, kissing Harry's forehead. "We're going to need your strength."

As the pair snuggled on the sofa, Hermione whispered, "I love you." Harry kissed her, and hugged her tight.

Harry was distracted from his dream of catching snitches by the sound of a crying girl. As Harry made his way towards the crying girl, he slowly became aware of the fact that this was no longer a normal dream.

As he thought that, Harry saw Voldemort, standing over a small, crying girl. The rest of the scene was pitch black. "I was wondering where you were keeping your thoughts," Harry said.

"It wasn't easy establishing contact," Voldemort admitted. "I have been trying all night, and it is nearly dawn. It was even more difficult than last year. That was difficult because I did not want you to know the messages were from me."

"Until the last one."

"Even then, I did not want you to know it was directly from me, willed by me as it were. So, this should have been easier. Congratulations on your improvements. Wait!" Voldemort warned, as it looked like Harry was about to flood him with the positive magic, like he had in Hogsmeade. "First, are you so certain you can safely do that while in this dream connection? Second, watch."

Voldemort moved his hand, and the scene brightened. They were in a small room, and Julian Malfoy was crouched over the crying girl, a long knife in his hand.

"You'll kill her anyway," Harry said.

"I swear my wizard's oath, Potter, that if you do not attack me first, she shall live, and be safely delivered to you later in the morning."

Harry hesitated.

"If I am injured, she will be killed. If I am killed, my follower can only escape the room by killing her. I shall keep my oaths I make tonight, Potter."

"Go on, then."

"Do you know who she is?"

"It doesn't matter who she is. She's a little girl. I don't care if she's a Muggle, a Pure-Blood, the only daughter of a wealthy family, or a poor orphan, like us."

That shot seemed to set Voldemort back for a moment, but just for a moment. "Actually, she is the last Mudblood."

"She's the what?"

"That Ministry you fight for is very incompetent."

"I don't fight for the Ministry, and if it's poorly run, people like Lucius Malfoy helped make it that way."

"True. In any event, they have a list of every magical child, including all the Mudbloods. All the Mudbloods too young to be in Hogwarts are dead, except for this one. Would you like to know her name? It's Rose Evans."

Harry blinked.

"Oh, I will not claim for certain she is related to your lovely mother, but as you can see, she does have auburn hair. Although you cannot see it, she does have brilliant green eyes, just like you and your mother."

"What do you want?"

"I don't suppose, if I promised to go away for two hundred years or so, you could restrain yourself from pursuing me?"

"No, I couldn't," Harry said.

"I didn't think so. In that case . . . no, no, I've changed my mind. I shall go with my alternative plan. Search if you wish, no one will find me, or my remaining followers. I swear, you shall not hear directly from me until just before midnight on the Thirtieth of June except in the unlikely event I am flushed from where I am going. The little girl will be portkeyed to the

gates of Hogwarts within a minute of your waking up. Go to the Old Man. Just be careful. I have lost confidence in one of my servants, and I do not want him in my final plan. I considered killing him if he could not kill you, but I have just decided you might like the rat . . . if you can find him. Goodbye, Harry."

"Harry!" Hermione hissed, shaking Harry's shoulders. She had obviously been trying to wake him up for several moments. "Wake up! Your scar is bleeding!"

"I'm not surprised," Harry said, although the scar did not really hurt. He sat up and started to pull on his shoes. "Quickly, run and get Ginny down here. I'll need her in her terrier form in a few minutes, so don't worry about her getting fully dressed. Now!"

"Right."

Harry hurried up the stairs to get the Marauders' Map, Ron, and Neville. The five students had just gotten downstairs when there was a light knock on the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Let Luna in," Harry said.

Hermione opened the portrait, and was not at all surprised to see Luna, dressed and ready for action.

"It was dangerous coming here," Harry told her. "Voldemort and I just had a talk. He claims he's going away until the end of June. He also claims he's murdered every Muggle-born child too young to be in Hogwarts but one. That one, he claims, he's portkeying to the gates. He also claims that Wormtail is in the castle. I need to speak with Dumbledore. Hermione, take the map. Luna, Neville, take her to Remus and Tonks, and tell them what I just said. Keep an eye on the map, in case Pettigrew is anywhere near you. Ron, Ginny, transform. If he comes near us in rat-form, you get him. If he becomes human, I'll get him. Let's go."

Harry and the two dogs were just coming down the main stairs to the entrance hall, when Harry saw a glint from a silver hand at the bottom of the stairs and heard an intake of breath behind him. He turned and yelled, "Expelliarmus!" Snape's wand came flying while Snape himself was hurled backwards into a suit of armor. Meanwhile, Harry had not waited to catch the wand. He had swirled around and yelled, "Expelliarmus!" a second time, which caught the slow-moving Pettigrew before he could get a curse off.

"Sic 'em!" Harry cried, as he caught a wand in both hands. He yelled up at Snape, "You idiot! Pettigrew is in the castle!"

Pettigrew had at first transformed back into Wormtail as he had flown against the inside castle wall. Snape had managed to crawl to the top of the stairs in time to see two dogs approaching a rat near the wall when he was stunned to see Potter transform into a bear larger than any bear he had ever imagined. The giant bear leapt down the stairs towards the dogs. Snape also saw that Potter had dropped two wands when he had transformed.

Dog!Ginny had snagged Wormtail's tail with her teeth, while dog!Ron had just missed biting the rat's head off. Wormtail transformed back into Pettigrew, shoving dog!Ron ten yards away

with his silver hand. Pettigrew was just reaching around to crush dog!Ginny's skull, since her teeth were still implanted deep in his buttocks, when he was run over by just over 1000 pounds of Kodiak bear.

Meanwhile, Snape had dragged himself down the stairs to the two wands. He considered several options, but then saw that Potter had just changed back. Potter lifted Pettigrew off the floor and threw him to the floor six feet away. Weasley was just standing, and he landed a quick kick into Pettigrew's gut. Ginny Weasley had even more accurate aim, and Snape and the two teen boys winced as her kick went home. Pettigrew screeched in agony and passed out.

Potter looked up and said, "Professor Snape, there is even more to this than Pettigrew. May we leave him with you while we finish going to the headmaster?"

"Aren't you worried what I might do to him?" Snape asked, standing and coming down the stairs.

"No," Harry said. "I really don't care what you do to him, since I doubt you'd let him go."

"Very true. Go."

The three went.

They met the other trio in front of the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office.

"We caught Wormtail!" Harry said.

"Great! Remus and Tonks are checking the gate."

"It seems you all have tales to tell," Dumbledore said, who had suddenly appeared before them. "Harry? Go ahead."

Harry started to explain what had happened. Just as he was getting started, Snape came along with a well-bound Pettigrew floating beside him. Tonks and Remus came from the other direction, and Remus was carrying a small form with him. Dumbledore therefore brought them all to his office, and sent for McGonagall and Pomfrey. Harry told his tale, only omitting his and Snape's run-in. Remus then brief told of finding the then-still crying young girl at the gates. She had fallen asleep on the way inside.

"We did perform revealing spells," Tonks added. "She seems genuine."

"Could Voldemort have really killed all the young Muggle-born in Britain, except her?" Hermione asked, tears in her eyes.

"If he somehow had the list of names, yes, and in Ireland and the smaller islands as well," Dumbledore said. "Nymphadora, could you please go to the Ministry and start inquiries?"

"Yes, sir."

Harry grabbed her wrist, but spoke to Dumbledore. "Could she be a cousin of mine, sir?"

"It is possible, but she would have to be at least a second cousin and more likely she is even a more distant relation than that. And, of course, she need not be a relation at all. Need I remind you, Evans is a common Welsh last name, now found throughout Muggle Britain?"

"No, sir. Still, if she is related, and there aren't any closer relatives. . . ."

"I understand, Harry."

"So do I," Tonks said, stroking Harry's cheek. Harry let go of her wrist. She hurried from the office.

"Now, before the aurors arrive, I think, Madam Pomfrey, we need to tuck the girl into bed, after a few more testing spells, and then I need to relieve Pettigrew of that dangerous prosthesis."

"That should be nasty," Madam Pomfrey said. "We should get started."

As the group dispersed, Snape held Harry back just a few steps past the gargoyle. "I was wrong earlier, but I still don't like you, Potter."

"I understand, sir," Harry replied. "I'm not in your class, and I don't intend to challenge your authority."

"I shall endeavor to do the same," Snape said, obviously disliking the taste of his own words. Still, as much as he disliked the Boy, Snape knew there was little else he could do.

Harry and Snape separated, and both were glad to do so.

## Chapter XXXVII

Saturday, January 11, 1997

Peter Pettigrew's trial had had to wait until the Wednesday, as Amelia Bones was not appointed as the new Minister until Tuesday afternoon. Little of what the trial revealed was really new to those 'in the know' -- Harry had, after all, included much of it in his 'letter' to The Quibbler the previous summer, and Sirius' magical will had been fully registered (and also printed in The Quibbler). Fudge's death allowed everyone in authority to heap the blame on Barty Crouch Senior and Fudge.

Pettigrew told everything he knew, but while the information on who the Death Eaters were, what atrocities had been committed, et cetera were well known to the Order and to the Ministry, they were new to many in the magical British community and it created an uproar. Had Fudge lived, he would have been ousted if not arrested.

Harry had had to appear briefly at the trial. The court had had only one question for him -- did he wish to appeal for Pettigrew's life (as Pettigrew's mother just had), or did he ask for Pettigrew to be put to death? Harry had said, "I spared his life once, in June, 1994. He immediately ran to his Master. He killed Cedric Diggory a year later. He has reneged on the Wizard's Debt he owed me. I cannot therefore ask for his life to be spared. Out of the friendship my father and godfather once had with him, I can only ask that his many crimes against me not be counted too much against him in his sentencing." He had worked hard on that statement, with help from Luna and Hermione.

Pettigrew had been put to death that very night. He had also left a will dated 1980, like all members of the Order. He had had nothing to leave at the time, but had still drawn up a will (like any member of the Order) leaving everything to James Potter. This meant that Harry had inherited 12 Grimmauld Place.

"I don't want it," Harry had said the next afternoon when informed of this. "Voldemort must have booby-trapped it anyway."

"Yes, he probably has," Dumbledore agreed. "It will take some time to assess it. With your permission, I will have a team of curse-breakers go through it to make certain nothing is likely to explode, and then we can take some time over any other traps. Was there anything you wanted from there?"

"No," Harry nearly snapped. He paused, and said, "Two things, though. If you ever want me to step into that house, get that portrait down. As for that elf . . . I don't care what you do with him, just keep him far away from me."

"The headmaster portrait was destroyed. I do not know if Mrs. Black's was as well or not. As for Kreacher . . . if he survived, we will figure out something."

"I would say to mount his head on the wall, but Hermione would never forgive me," Harry said.

"That is not the best reason, but it is acceptable," Dumbledore said.



That Saturday morning, Harry sat reviewing those thoughts as a number of people gathered in Dumbledore's office. Harry's group, most of the Order of Phoenix, and Minister Bones all listened while Harry told of his confrontation with Voldemort.

"And you believe he will be gone until the end of June?" Snape demanded when Harry was finished.

"Not really," Harry admitted. "You tell me; there is no reason to take him at his word, but he does like to appear to be keeping the form of wizarding traditions. What do you think?"

Snape frowned. "There is no way to know for certain, but I think he'll be back long before the end of June."

"I do not," Luna said.

"Who asked you?" Snape almost snarled.

"The headmaster, when he either invited me here or allowed me to come," Luna said simply. "Voldemort cannot be taken at his word, of course, and the Ministry should spend reasonable resources in tracking him. He is obviously somewhere. However, given his usual treatment of Harry on every occasion except for at the Ministry last June, he wants Harry to know that the blow is coming at his, not Harry's, choice."

Luna turned towards the headmaster. "Voldemort became the way he is, physically, through Dark Magic transformations, did he not?"

"In large part. His resurrection concentrated them somewhat."

"Then could he have more transformations in mind?" Dumbledore nodded. "Then I believe that's what will happen. He is planning his next major transformation on the evening of the Thirtieth of June. Harry will be forced to witness it, one way or another. Since he was remade with Harry's blood, that might even be a necessary part of the ritual."

"Most of what you're saying is likely pure nonsense," Snape said, "but I have to admit, that last part is not quite pure nonsense."

"There's still one thing that really puzzles me," Hermione said.

"Just the one?" Snape asked.

Hermione nodded. "Oh, there are things I don't understand. What confuses me is why he told Harry Pettigrew was in the castle. Pettigrew was on what he thought was a near-suicide mission to kill Harry or be left behind. It turns out, either Voldemort was going to leave him behind even if Pettigrew managed to kill Harry, or he planned all along to tell Harry and just pretended to change his mind about it."

"That's what made me think of Harry's blood," Luna said. "Voldemort could still have bits of his father's skeleton, but with Pettigrew -- who contributed flesh to the resurrection -- dead, he might have thought we would not think of Harry's blood."

"Convoluting, but logical," Snape said.

"I had thought that Pettigrew might have been the person who sent the two notes to Harry, revealing the Fidelius location, but he was not," Dumbledore said. "He did write the first note, as we thought, but claimed not to have written the second. All evidence, even from the Muggle handwriting experts, is that it was Julian Malfoy."

"Maybe he just got on Voldemort's nerves," Hestia Jones said from the back. "Look, except for Remus here, I knew Pettigrew best in the old days, and he was always a natural whinger. If Voldemort really was clearing out, what do all those who seem to have left with him have in common?" The estimate was that Voldemort still had taken twenty-three Death Eaters and Julian Malfoy with him, plus his pet snake.

Jones went on. "They are hard men, or they are really devoted men, or, in the case of the Julian Malfoy, he's a very smart man. Pettigrew was not stupid, but he was not all that smart. He was far from a fanatic, and he was in many ways soft as putty. He might not have dared to leave Pettigrew alone in Grimmauld Place or anyplace like that, or take him with him."

"Maybe," Ron said, "but I think he wanted Harry to kill Pettigrew."

"You're right, Ron," Hermione and Luna said together.

"Harry accidentally killed those two Death Eaters, Dolohov and LeStrange, last June," Hermione pointed out, "and he did destroy those dementors, but he has never set off to kill someone. That takes a bit of cold-blooded hate or hot rage, or at least determination. Voldemort probably hoped Harry would kill Pettigrew."

Luna agreed. "To kill in the heat of battle is one thing. It is different to set out to kill. To do so would weaken Harry." All the people thought that she meant that it would have weakened Harry morally. Those in the know also realized she meant that killing Pettigrew might have weakened Harry's powers. They had decided that it would likely be the actual act of killing Voldemort which would bring about the reduction of Harry's powers James had foretold.

"But I wouldn't," Harry said.

"He couldn't know that, my boy," Mr. Diggle said from a far corner. The little wizard turned to Dumbledore and asked, "And what about the young girl? Is she Harry's cousin?"

"A fairly distant one," Dumbledore answered. "Harry's great great grandfather was her great great great grandfather. Alas, her parents were Harry's closest maternal relatives, but not close enough for them to have raised Harry. We had thought all of Harry's family were only children for some generations, and we were right."

Dumbledore sighed and looked at Madam Bones. "Is there anything else, Minister?"

Madam Bones stood. "No, I have everything I need. We will put what pressure we can on the other Ministries and magical groups to be on the look-out for Voldemort and his followers. Beyond that, we hope to have a half-dozen new aurors and thirty new security people trained by the end of June, and we'll have ninety more guest aurors here and in Western Europe and the full backing of the European Ministries by then as well."

As the meeting broke up, Harry, Hermione, and Luna went over to Molly Weasley, who was regaling Ron, Ginny, and Neville with tales of Sirius. "Oh, Harry dear!" she broke off,

hugging him. "You'll be happy to know Rosie has settled in quite nicely." Since she had no closer relative than Harry that they could find, Harry had encouraged Mrs. Weasley to take guardianship until he could in a few years. "She's having a lot of fun playing with Sirius, and I'll start her home-schooling in a week or so." Rose was seven, going on eight. She had had an older brother (ten) and a younger one (three), both also marked for Hogwarts.

"No nightmares?" Harry asked.

"Not for the last two nights," Mrs. Weasley said. "She still stops playing every once in a while, of course, when she remembers, but she'll recover. I think she's naturally a very quiet child, but a very observant one."

"What does she think of magic?" Hermione asked,

"She likes it, of course," Molly said. "She does seem to miss television."

"There's not quite enough ambient magic around the Burrow to interfere with reception," Remus said, "if Arthur would hook up a magical power source."

"And promise not to take any television apart," Harry agreed. "If you keep good track of what she watched, I'd be happy to send three over."

"Why three, dear?"

"Well, you probably wouldn't want it in your sitting room," Harry said. "That means Rose's room. If she had one, it wouldn't be fair for Sirius not to have one." Everyone realized why Harry would want the two children treated equally. "And let's be honest," Harry said with a nod towards Mister Weasley, talking with Dung over on the other side of the room, "if the kids each have one, Mister Weasley will want one, or else he'll be their rooms all the time."

Molly could hardly argue with that, and admitted so with a rueful laugh. "You lot are coming for the Easter break, aren't you?" she asked afterwards.

"I don't think Luna and I could, Mum," Ginny said ruefully.

"O.W.L.s are very important," Molly agreed.

"I will, of course," Ron said. "I might be bringing a guest."

"Harry's not a guest!" Molly scolded.

"Now, but his new girl friend would be," Ginny teased.

"You'll have to tell her all about Sirius before you ask her," Molly warned. "And that means Professor Dumbledore would have to approve."

"Yes, Mum," Ron said.

"I'll come, unless Dumbledore has real problems about security," Harry said. "Hermione?" Harry asked.

Mrs. Weasley smiled encouragingly at Hermione, who said, "If Tracy comes, I'll come, too. If not, I'll stay here and coach Ginny and Luna."

"That sounds very responsible," Molly said. "Sirius and Rosie would be very happy if you all came." Rose had spent very little time with Harry, but had bonded with him to some degree.

"That reminds me," Harry said, "could you get them hands for the clock?"

"We put Sirius' up before Christmas, and already ordered Rosie's," Molly said, surprised Harry had even had to ask.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

"I do wish you lot would call me Molly or something else."

"Mother Weasley," Luna said, kissing Molly's cheek. Harry, Hermione, and Neville did the same in turn.

Molly blushed happily. "It will be nice having you with us over Easter," she said. She turned to Hermione. "Couldn't you coach Ginny and Luna at the Burrow?"

The six teens looked at each other, and gave in. They knew when they were beat. "Excellent," Molly said. "I'll get Professor Dumbledore thinking about security." She moved off.

"Well," Ginny muttered, "there'll be lots of affection, but no bouncy-bouncy."

After lunch, the students had to prepare for the funerals, which had been delayed. Since all the families had mixed between the magical and Muggle worlds to various degrees, the various Ministry offices concerned with Magical/Muggle relations had had to work out some protocols with the magical sides of the families.

Harry had hoped that the funerals would have been held at different times, since the families had been spread out too far (north-western Ireland, Surrey, Lancaster, and Glasgow) to have the funerals in a common place. For security reasons, the Ministry had decided to have them all at once. So, not only was all of Gryffindor attending one funeral or another, so were all the other Houses, even Slytherin. More than half was staff as well.

The sextet was a bit torn on which funeral to attend. Ginny and Luna finally decided to attend for the family of First year Deborah Vane, but Neville was going to Seamus', as was Ron from the beginning of the discussion (it was Tracy who had brought up the idea of the Slytherins in their First, Third, and Sixth years attending). The other four years of Slytherins had joined in once all the remaining Sixth years had agreed to go, even Malfoy. Bonnie had hoped Harry and Hermione would attend the funeral for Deborah Vane's family, but she understood when they decided they really should go support Seamus instead.

Harry did convince all the Second years to go to the Vane funeral. The Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh years split up between the four funerals.

"I'm glad we could all go with our Hogwarts' blazers," Ron said to Harry as he tied his tie. "Those Muggle suits wouldn't have expanded enough."

"If it was just a few of us going, we'd have gotten new suits," Harry stated.

"Seamus is coming," Neville said quietly from near the door.

Seamus came quietly in, guided a bit by Dean's hand on his shoulder. Seamus sat heavily on his bed. "I hate this," he said, not for the first time.

"I'm sorry you were picked out," Harry responded, also not for the first time.

"Yeah, well, I might want to try and blame you, but I can't," Seamus said. "I might as well blame myself. He just waltzed into my head and took over. I couldn't even put up a fight. Thank God I didn't actually hurt anyone while I was under." He looked up at Harry. "How do I get through this, Harry?"

"Keep your handkerchiefs handy and a firm grip on Lavender," Harry advised. "There shouldn't be any magical press there, but if there are, let Tonks or Hermione take care of them."

"I can't put this off any more, can I?"

"I'm afraid not, mate," Dean said. "Let's go."

There were two reporters from The Daily Prophet, but they came late and stayed well out of the way. Harry, Hermione, and Ron also kept well out of the spotlight. Hermione spent the time musing to herself on the viciousness of the human animal, and the strict splitting so many people indulged in, dividing humanity into 'us' and 'them'. It was so easy for too many people to kill 'them' -- always defining 'them' very differently, but treating 'them' so similarly. It was too easy to allow the 'extermination' of 'them'.

In Seamus' case, 'they' were his Muggle father and non-magical younger sister and his magical mother and much younger sister, who would have started at Hogwarts the next year. In Deborah Vane's case, it had been a magical father and Muggle mother, with three younger siblings, including an infant sister. David Bowman had also had a magical father and Muggle mother, while his non-magical older sister had been spared by minutes, as she had returned to University. Julia Carson's father had been magical, but her mother could have been considered a Squib since three of her grandparents had been magical and both her parents had been Squibs. Julia's three younger siblings had all been magical. The youngest had not quite been two.

At the height of the funeral mass (during the eulogies), Hermione glanced around. She saw only two sets of dry eyes amongst the Hogwarts students: Harry's and Malfoy's. Hermione

knew by now that it took a great deal to make Harry cry. She had kept an eye on Malfoy throughout their time in the church, not totally willing to trust him.

Malfoy had just looked uncomfortable when they had arrived and during the first portion of the services. Now, as Hermione watched, she saw Malfoy's eyes look and stare at the one place, she realized, he had been avoiding. He looked at Seamus' thirteen year old sister, lying in the open coffin. She was surprised to see a tear running down his cheek.

"What can I do for you, Granger?" Malfoy asked in a cracked voice as they waited for the immediate family and friends to leave before the burial of Seamus' father and youngest sister (the magical bodies had to be cremated, to prevent their being used for Dark Magic) and the other Muggles to leave. The wizards and witches not attending the burials or cremations would either apparate or portkey away.

"I saw you were upset towards the end. I didn't know but what you might want someone . . . nonjudgmental to talk to."

Draco gave her a twisted smile. "You're one of the most judgmental people I have ever known, Granger. But if you must know, and swear to keep it a secret, from anyone other than your two lovers. . . . Oh, don't act surprised. I am not stupid, and I don't care about your or Potter's love-lives anymore. Do you swear?"

"I swear," Hermione said, making a ritual sign to make it a binding oath.

"What would be almost the worst family secret one like mine could have?" Draco asked with a self-hating sneer.

Hermione could think of many possibilities, but put the clues together and made a guess. "Do you have a Squib sister?"

Draco shook his head. "Not any more. Mother and especially Father were certain her magic was just late-developing. That the odds would never catch up with us. To assure himself, Father finally bribed someone and got the list of all the magical children marked for this year's First year class at Hogwarts last Easter. That was probably the list that led the Dark . . . Lord Thingy to those Muggle-born children. Lucretia was not on the list. When I got home last summer, Mother told me Lucretia had died from 'some Muggle disease'. I wanted to believe her, of course, but I knew even then that Father had murdered her, probably on orders. Finnigan's sister looked quite a bit like her."

"I'm very sorry, Draco."

"I fought against believing it, even when the . . . Lord Thingy tortured me last summer. I wanted to believe we were right, but I couldn't tell myself that any more. I still believe families like mine should lead, but. . . ."

"But that's different from wanting me dead."

"It is," Draco agreed. "I don't want you dead, Granger, just in your pl. . . . Well, never mind that. I'd best take the next portkey. Weasley's about to make a scene."

Hermione turned around and saw that Ron was indeed trying to head in their direction, but was being restrained by Harry and Neville. She walked over. "Problem?"

"You tell us?" Ron snarled.

"Draco will never be likable," Hermione said, "But there's really no reason to hate him anymore. He's slowly trying to grow up. We can't trust him, but that doesn't mean we have to go after him."

"You and Luna come at it from different directions, but you are both too optimistic about human nature," Ron told her.

"Perhaps we are," Hermione said. "Somebody has to be."

## **Chapter XXXVIII**

As the students slowly started to recover from the funerals, life at Hogwarts finally returned to normal. Throughout January and early February, not a peep was heard from Voldemort nor was there any sign of any of his Death Eaters. Magical Law Enforcement around the world kept searching.

The DA was not only meeting every Sunday, it had split into two groups. This was necessary because every student Second year and above was now a member. The Second, Third, and Fourth years met slightly earlier on Sunday afternoons, primarily under the direction of Harry, Neville, and Ginny, assisted by numerous other Fifth years (who needed to practice for their O.W.L's). The full sextet trained the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh years, while Harry (more powerful than ever) coached his five friends.

Since it was still too cold and snowy to fly and too soon for most students to worry too much about O.W.L.s, N.E.W.T.s and other exams, many students' minds turned to the up-coming Valentine's dance. To the disappointment of a number of the girls, Dumbledore had refused to say if the dance would become an annual affair.

Students were asked to sign up for tables. There had to be at least four people to claim a table, and there could be as many as twenty. Hermione, for reasons really known only to herself, had decided to claim one of the twenty-person tables (although she expected to have just nineteen).

Hermione had quickly signed up herself, Harry, and Luna; Ginny and Neville, Parvati and Dean, Lavender and Seamus, Susan and Ernie, Hannah and Justin, and Padma and Anthony. She was not terribly surprised that Draco turned her down, although she was a bit disappointed. (Draco was taking a Fourth year Slytherin, and would be sharing a table with Millicent Bulstrode and Greg Goyle.) She was more than a little surprised that Ron turned her down. He was taking Tracy, and would be sharing a table for four with Daphne and Blaise.

Needless to say, this put Hermione into a huff. She had hoped all the Gryffindor Sixth years could be seated together. She convinced herself that she would not have minded if Ron was sitting at a larger table, but thought that since they had four seats and Ron was sitting at a table for four, he should be willing to fill them.

Harry quickly saw that Ron's main objection was Hermione's expectation. Try as they might, neither Harry nor Ginny could distract Hermione's continued campaign to bring Ron to the table (while they let Ron know they would have liked him to join them, they refused to pressure him). Not even Luna could do more than deflect Hermione for short periods. The disagreement between Ron and Hermione lasted most of an entire week (Friday through Wednesday), in part because of Hermione's single-mindedness and in part because Ron was enjoying egging her on, finally going so far as to tease her about S.P.E.W.

Those taunts, on the Wednesday night, had made most of the common room wince. Hermione had been researching and refining her opinions on elf rights (and the rights of goblins, centaurs, werewolves, vampires, giants, merpeople, etc, etc.) since her sojourn over the previous summer. She had not given up on any of her ideals, but had finally realized that she had to learn more and consider the opinions of those other beings. (Having been threatened by the centaurs had shocked Hermione nearly as much as learning that Dobby had been forced to



clean the Gryffindor common and girls' areas because of her actions. Having to deal with human slaves while keeping her opinions to herself in Rushak had made her think as well.)

The Gryffindor common room (as opposed to the Sixth year boys' room while Harry had been having his nightmares) had been a fairly quiet place so far that year. Weasley Wizard Wheezes were not uncommon, but compared to the intense testing of the year before, they were only a minor danger. The general noise level generated by the Weasley twins had also been fairly high. Harry was not snapping at people. Hermione and Ron had not engaged in one real argument from September 1 through the end of January.

Everyone agreed that the argument that last Wednesday of the month certainly was in their top ten fights of all time until the breaking point. Real connoisseurs, like Ginny and Seamus, rated it just in the top five. All the First and Second years had been chased out of the common room within fifteen minutes, Bonnie in tears, and that was before Ron had brought up S.P.E.W.

Harry sat in a chair in a corner, tired and worried. He was tired because every Monday through Friday evening from 7:15-8:15, Harry was sparring. Despite barely being recovered, he had quickly shown earlier that month that he could take any three students, even Ron, Ginny, and Neville. He could usually defeat any group of four as well. By now, he was taking on teams of four students or teams of three drawn from Professors McGonagall, Moody, and Flitwick, plus Remus and Tonks, and beating them three out of four times.

To Harry's disappointment, Professor Snape refused to join in. Kingsley Shacklebolt, observing one of the three professors versus Harry duels, withdrew his offer to face Harry alone. He did offer to try and bring of team of aurors and hit-wizards to make a try against Harry before the end of the term.

While Harry tried to distract himself with thoughts about taking on a hit-wizard team, after nearly an hour of the increasing acrimonious argument which had started at the S.P.E.W. reference, Ron then brought out his biggest weapon. He teased Hermione about her crush on 'Vicky'.

The blood had drained from Hermione's face, and Ron recognized the look that crossed her face as the same one she had had right before she had slapped Draco back in Third year. He took a nervous step back. Hermione then turned and fled up to her dorm.

Lavender and Parvati exchanged glances. Parvati ran after Hermione, while Lavender waited to see what happened next. Ginny, seeing Parvati leave, decided to stay.

Ron breathed a sigh of relief. Then it occurred to him that while teasing Hermione about 'Vicky' might have been a useful ultimate weapon over the year the two of them had sparred about dating, it might not be the best weapon to use while Hermione was in a relationship with Harry.

Ron slowly turned to look at the corner most of the students remaining in the common room were already looking towards.

"Ron," Harry said, in far too calm a voice, "if you and Hermione are going to take up squabbling in public again, perhaps that is one taunt you can stop using. You know perfectly well it's been over a year since she wrote to Viktor."

Several retorts formed in Ron's head. For once, Ron thought before he spoke and realized that saying any of them could easily estrange himself and Harry. "I suppose so," Ron said. "You know how we get when we argue, though."

"I know," Harry said, still in that very carefully controlled, calm, frightening voice. "It's really something both of you are going to have to learn not to give into, isn't it?"

Despite trying not to, Ron's eyes locked with Harry's. Suddenly, Ron remembered Harry's hyperventilation episode the previous summer. Harry nodded, and Ron realized that Harry had somehow projected the image past his rudimentary Occlumency shields. Harry was so calm because he was somehow isolating his emotions, at least in part because of an overuse of Occlumency, otherwise the fight between Hermione and himself could have set Harry hyperventilating like he had the previous summer. Ron also realized that, since Harry drew some of his strength from his relationships, he was now cut off from that power and support.

Ron flushed. "I'm sorry, Harry." He turned around. "I apologize, everyone, and I'm sure Hermione will tomorrow. Ginny, Lavender, please tell Hermione how sorry I am." He scowled. "But also please tell her, as I have tried to several times, I'm sitting where I'm sitting because they invited me long before I knew she was planning this big group." Ron walked out of the common room, up to the dorm.

Harry sat in the chair for several minutes, and then left the Gryffindor area. Neville followed him out.

Neville only caught up with Harry because he was standing on a stair landing, looking out the leaded glass panels.

"Harry?" Neville asked, concerned. His concern grew as Harry started to shiver. "Harry!" Neville drew the smaller teen into an embrace. Harry's shivering continued, although not as strong. It decreased more as Ginny silently joined Neville in hugging Harry.

"Remember last summer, that night after the last combat?" Ginny asked.

"I see," Neville said. "What should we do? It's better, but he's still shivering."

"Hermione is still too upset to help," Ginny said thoughtfully. "Run back to the common room and bring all the HPSN who are there, and come back yourself."

Neville hurried back to the common room, which was now mostly deserted. The only two HPSN members were Katie and Natalie, who were discussing Chaser tactics. Neville did not hesitate, but brought them and Colin (who had been restarting some homework) back to Harry. The five Gryffindors embraced Harry, and none of them were very surprised to have Luna join them after a few moments.

After about ten minutes, Harry moved and the six teens let him go. He thanked them shakily, kissed the girls goodnight, and Neville and Colin helped him up to his bed. Neville quietly told Ron what had happened and what he thought about Ron's behavior, mostly in words of

one syllable, many of them with just four letters. Ginny told Hermione in more gentle terms. Both Hermione and Ron resolved to try not to fight like that ever again.

Friday, January 31, 1997

Although he neither showed it nor really admitted it to himself, Draco Malfoy was a bit nervous. He had set up this meeting with Potter and his friends the previous Monday, but news of the Great Wednesday Night Fight (although not Harry's reaction afterwards) had spread throughout Hogwarts. Draco had, with some difficulty, held his tongue when he had learned that only Potter, Granger, and Longbottom were meeting with him. He accepted without a blink Potter's statement that something had 'come up' which prevented Weasley from attending. As much as he had disliked and even hated Granger and Potter over the years, Draco had found the Weasel the most consistently annoying.

"What can we do for you, Draco?" Harry asked, joining Draco at the Slytherin table well before dinner.

"Tell me, you two," Draco said with a nod to Harry and Hermione, "what do you think about the Magical Traditions course?"

"It's interesting," Harry allowed.

"Interesting?" Hermione exclaimed. "It's fascinating! I can hardly believe all the things we should have known years ago!"

"Now that's my point," Draco said. "Longbottom, you're taking both the Business and the 'Living with Muggles' course. What do you think?"

"I think I know where you're heading, Malfoy," Neville agreed. "If it is, I agree with you, strange as that sounds."

"I don't know where you're heading," Harry admitted.

"Look," Draco said, "I don't like Muggles. I don't like Muggle culture. On the other hand, we're outnumbered thousands to one. Where people like my father went wrong was not in hating Muggles but in thinking we can destroy them or do without them. People like Longbottom and me have to learn to live surrounded by Muggles, even if many of us don't like it and never will."

Draco took on an unfocused expression for a moment, then he went on. "Even though I can understand why none of you could like my father, I really think he was right about one thing. Even forgetting about blood, Muggle-born and half-blood students dilute our culture, our traditions."

"Well," Hermione snapped, "you won't have to worry about many Muggle-borns over the next ten years or so, will you?"

"No," Draco admitted, flushing, "but that short-term situation is not the point. Tell me, Granger, how many students are still around from our year?"

"Forty-eight."

"How would you divide us up, between those raised primarily in the Muggle world versus those raised primarily in the magical world?"

Hermione thought about that, and then answered, "Twenty-four are solidly in the magical world and an even dozen were totally in the Muggle world before coming here. The other twelve are sort of mixed." She shrugged, and said, "Let's say thirty to eighteen."

"Alright. I'd say twenty-seven to twenty-one, but either way is fine. How many of that eighteen or twenty-one are in the Magical Traditions class?"

"Six," Hermione stated.

"And there are six in the 'Living with Muggles' class," Malfoy said, "and six taking the Muggle Studies course. Now, if I were totally willing to leave a large chunk of my business in the hands of agents, I wouldn't have to really deal with the Muggle world at all. Can you live without contact with the magical world and still consider yourself a witch?"

"Of course not," Hermione agreed. "What you're saying is, two of the reasons people like you and your father hold your underlying beliefs against Muggles and the Muggle-born are one) the magical world is at such a huge numerical disadvantage and two) when members of the magical world interact with people of Muggle backgrounds, magical culture can be diluted."

"Exactly," Draco said. "I won't answer for you, Longbottom, but to me, being a wizard is more than having magical ability. It's also a way of life. It should mean something."

"I never thought of it that way," Harry admitted.

"I have," Neville said. "Obviously, I think everything your father did was wrong, but I do understand what you mean."

"So what do we do about it?" Hermione asked.

"There's one easy solution," Harry said. When Draco nodded and Hermione and Neville looked at him, Harry said, "We make the two culture courses mandatory, maybe even offer N.E.W.T.s for them."

"More than that," Draco said, "we have to move them back to Second year. Make every student take the course on the world they're less familiar with. Then people like me can continue on with Muggle Studies if they want, and people like you two can carry on with Wizarding Traditions if they want to. And you were right, there needs to be O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s for the magical course, just like the Muggle course."

"Like you would have taken Muggle Studies," Harry scoffed.

"Probably not," Draco agreed. "From my point of view, I want as many people like you and Granger to know about my world as possible. I'm just willing to make people like me to learn something about Muggles in return. I don't like it, but that's the politics of the situation."

"That makes sense, but why talk to us about it?" Harry asked.

"Would Dumbledore really listen to me?" Draco asked. "And, if he would listen, won't he be more likely to agree with me if you're with me?"

Hermione was writing furiously on a blank sheet of parchment. She read over it, and handed it to Draco. "What do you think of this?" she asked.

Draco read it over. "That's what I mean," Draco admitted, impressed.

"It's your idea," Hermione said. "Why don't you sign it first?"

Draco signed it and held it out to Harry, who read it and handed it to Neville. "I'll sign it," Harry said. Neville agreed as well, when he finished reading it over.

"Why don't I give you and Hermione ten minutes at the start of the DA meeting Sunday?" Harry suggested. "This might start bringing the British magical world together over time, after the war is over." He smiled evilly. "We should call this 'the Malfoy plan'."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Great. You'll win the war and be the hero of the magical world, and I'll probably be the last, unknown victim."

Harry frowned. "If I win the war and you don't make it, and this plan goes through, I promise you won't be unknown, Draco."

"Cold comfort," Draco muttered. Still, he appreciated the politics of the gesture. He wanted to be known as the Pure-Blood who had brought the worlds together, not Potter or Granger. It was the best solution for long-term influence he could hope for, other than a victory by Voldemort, which he did not want.

"There are still four seats open at our table for the dance," Hermione said. "You, Victoria, Gregory, and Millicent are all welcome."

Draco was about to refuse when he saw both Potter and Longbottom roll their eyes. Draco smiled. Sitting at their table, when Potter and Granger were likely to be at one end and so unlikely to talk to him too often, could be politically advantageous. In addition, it would certainly hack off the Weasel. "I need to talk with them," Draco said politely, "but I'll tentatively accept. I'll let you know by the end of dinner."

Harry looked around and saw that the early arrivals for dinner were just arriving. "Fine," Harry said, standing.

Needless to say, Draco came over during dinner to loudly announce his party's acceptance of Hermione's generous offer. Even though Ron had not thought about backing down, he scowled at the thought of Malfoy sitting at the same table as his friends. Catching Harry's eye, the-Boy-Who-Lived could only shrug helplessly.

Friday, February 14, 1997

Ron and Hermione had stayed somewhat distanced over the preceding two weeks, although neither was in any way hostile to each other. Neither wanted Harry to have a recurrence of the attack that had come after their last fight.

As usual, Harry was up early, leading a small number of runners through the castle. As they woke up, all the members of the HPSN and the milk donors outside of the group found an envelope from next to them, left by a house elf early in the morning. Each envelope had a Valentine's card and a new charm (a small heart-shaped ruby) inside. Four of the recipients also found small flat boxes. Ginny and Tonks both were given six carat emerald pendants on reddish-gold chains. Luna and Hermione were given twelve carat rubies on 18 carat white gold chains.

That was not all the jewelry Harry had purchased and had delivered. Each member of the DA and a number of others received a magical seal. The seal was in the form of a shield. The lower portion of the shield had a stylized DA. The center had a single phoenix feather. The top of the shield had the owner's initials. Most were a straight seal with a wooden handle. The sextet, Tonks, Remus, Moody, and Dumbledore all got seal rings.

Each seal would magically imprint itself onto warm wax, although the thinness of the designs would have prevented non-magical seals from leaving decent impressions. Only the owner could use the seal, and only by his or her free will. The owner could use the seal to prevent anyone other than one person from opening it (the recipient had to use their wand and truthfully announce their name as it was inscribed on the envelope), or use it so that only one or more of the other seals could undo the seal.

Most of the girls, third year and above (all the students younger than that and about a fifth of the other students were going to another large hall to eat and play games) retired to their dorms to dress by 3:30. Most of the boys did the same by 5:15.

Since Harry, Hermione, and Luna were technically going as 'friends', Hermione had suggested that Harry not bother with flowers. Harry of course was wise enough to ignore the suggestion. He conjured matching corsages of white orchids and pink tea roses. Harry was wearing a dress set of the multicolored dragon robes he had been given just before he had left Rushak.

"Most people will think Fred and George gave you those," Hermione teased.

"How else would anyone notice me with you next to me?" Harry teased back as they left the common room. Hermione was wearing robes that seemed a cross between form-fitting dark-green dress robes and a formal Muggle gown. Her coloring and the jewels Harry had given her were set off by the gown. Hermione rolled her eyes mockingly, and the pair strolled over to Ravenclaw to pick up Luna.

Luna's robes were such a dark green that it appeared almost black, and had more of a regency look. Each young woman linked an arm with Harry, and the trio went off to the ball.

"Granger!" Draco called politely up the table, "I think you must have thought of this menu! What are these dishes?"

"Didn't you ever travel in Europe?" Hermione asked back.

"A little in France," Draco said. "I recognize the French options" (French-style escargot or onion soup for the appetizer, coq au vin for the entree) "and the desserts. What's the rest of this?"

The larger Italian menu was a choice of Italian-style snails or 'Cozze Marinara o Mugnaia' (mussels steam in tomato broth or a white wine sauce) with the choices of Veal Scallopine Marie-Louise (veal topped with crabmeat in a light cream sauce with a touch of bearnaise), Veal Sorrentine (sauteed veal topped with eggplant, cheese, and tomato sauce), Chicken Valdostana (deboned breast of chicken stuffed with spinach and prosciutto), or Trout Venice (sauteed filet of trout, served with crabmeat and meunier sauce) as entrees. There was a Viennese menu (Chestnut soup Viennese and Wiener Schnitzel), and an Eastern European menu of borscht and perogies. There were also a Spanish Tapas menu, two vegan menus and an Indian vegetarian one, Cajun (seafood gumbo or crawfish etouffee, blackened redfish or catfish Cecilia), and Middle Eastern (stuffed grape leaves or hummus dip, Chicken Shawarma or roast goat).

"I say, Harry," Justin drawled when Hermione was away with most of the girls, "did Hermione really draw up the menu?"

"No, she just went over it, why?"

"It's just a little heavy on the veal offerings, so I was surprised."

Harry shrugged. "Notice she didn't order it. She tried to talk the elves into substituting, but they put up such a fuss she gave up."

"Ah. That sounds about right."

## **Chapter XXXIX**

The Valentine Dance and Party partially satisfied the students' desires for something different. Once it was over, they had to make the haul to the short Easter break, which started on March 22.

For the Fifth and Seventh years, O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were coming uncomfortably close. They knew that this period was their last decent shot at mastering any basics. The rest of the term would be devoted to learning any new material and mastering overviews of their subjects. Even Luna and Ginny, easily standing first and second on that year's material and first and third in all the reviews, were starting to get a trifle nervous. The Sixth years looked at the Fifth years with superior attitudes, and at the Seventh years with fear. Most of the younger students were not really cognizant of the upper year concerns.

On top of these academic activities, the DA continued to meet every Sunday. Harry was keeping the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh years behind an extra half hour. Even though the dementors had deserted Voldemort, Harry thought as many upper year students as possible should master the Patronus. He did not trust the dementors. Since the students were by now aware that extra credit could be gained on the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s with a Patronus, not one complained.

Quidditch practice had also started up for all Houses. Katie had tried to see if Harry had any interest in replacing her the following year, but he quickly turned her down. More surprising to everyone, Ron had turned her down as well. As much as he loved Quidditch, as much as he desired to shine, as much as he still secretly hoped for a Quidditch career, Ron had decided he had to really plan for a career, most likely in the Ministry. He had a son to take care of, and a girl friend he was slowly getting very serious with.

Ron therefore was putting more into his course work than he had at any time before at Hogwarts (other than the very end of the O.W.L. reviews). Ron stood first in the Ministry Prep course and very high in Care, Defense, Charms, and the 'Living with Muggles' course (Hermione put extra time in tutoring him in the last two). He was doing poorly in Divination, so he had swallowed his pride and had Luna tutor him. So, as much as Ron would like to have been the captain in his last year, he figured he had to put all his spare time into his classes, his practice as keeper, and of course his work helping Harry and doing his combat training.

Ron had suggested Ginny. She would have two years as captain, she had few clear career plans, and, Ron hoped, Voldemort would be taken care of before Ginny left Hogwarts. Ginny had little time to help Katie, but she managed to spare just enough so that she could get a feel for being captain.

Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Neville had thought they would have a little more free time than they had planned on the previous summer. They were scheduled for the spring Apparation class, but had of course been taught in Rushak.

Madam Hooch had not cared. She made them show up a week before the class started in mid-March, tested them rigorously, and then made them her assistants. They would also partially serve as security once the practical part of the class started in mid-April. Since it was not possible to apparate within the Hogwarts' grounds, the practical portion of the class was done just outside the gates, on the road to Hogsmeade.



There was no news on Voldemort or his twenty-four known followers. It was as if they had disappeared from the planet. Dumbledore and others with contacts in the parallel worlds found no signs of them on any of those worlds, either. No one in the 'know' had any doubt that Voldemort would be heard from on June 30. They simply could not believe he would stay quiet, or could stay hidden, until then.

Saturday, March 22, 1997

Harry had never taken the train, other than at the start or end of term. Although Harry had to admit he was not always aware of what most of the other students did, even he had noticed that few students usually left on the short Easter break. This year, there were no Seventh years leaving, and Luna and Ginny were the only two Fifth years. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Tracy, and Justin Finch-Fletchley were the only Sixth years. The numbers picked up for the Fourth years and under, but even then only forty-two of them were leaving.

Justin, who had made the trip every year except for the last one and the year he had been petrified, said that this was the largest group he had seen go. Ron speculated that having had no Hogsmeade weekends contributed to the higher number of Third and Fourth years leaving, which at least seemed plausible.

Also unusually, Remus, Tonks, and Moody were traveling with the train, for extra protection. Moody had some research to do in London that afternoon, while Luna, Hermione, Remus, and Tonks would be staying in the Lovegood cottage on the other side of Ottery St. Catchpole. The girls would spend of their days at the Burrow. All the teens would spend some time in the Lovegood cottage, tutoring Luna and Ginny for the O.W.L.s, since the Burrow again had two resident youngsters who loved playing loudly. Harry was not happy that he would likely be spending his nights at the Burrow, but could hardly argue the point with either Mrs. Weasley or Mister Lovegood.

Six members of the octet apparated to the Lovegood cottage from the train station. From there, Harry and Ginny apparated over to the Burrow with Tonks. Tonks stayed only long enough to make certain the house was secure, and popped back to the Lovegoods'.

Unfortunately for Tracy, she was just learning how to apparate. Therefore, she and Ron made their way through the crowded platform along with Bill, who had come to meet them and had just shrunk and pocketed their luggage.

"Why don't we floo?" Tracy asked, looked around the Muggle area between platforms 9 and 10. There were fireplaces set back onto Platform 9 3/4, and nearly all Pure Blood families and many others who were connected to the floo network used those. That was especially true for those who lived far outside of London.

"You know, I never thought to ask," Ron said. "We've just always done it this way."

"I did, too, for the longest while," Bill admitted. "At first, I thought it was because the Platform floo is the only tolled floo exit in Britain." He looked at Tracy. "In a large family, even a Sickle toll should be saved on."

Ron flushed from embarrassment, but Bill went on. "Then I realized that it cost a lot more to get here the Muggle way than it would by paying the toll. Then, one day, it hit me."

"What did?" Tracy asked. "Or I guess I should ask, what was the answer?"

"You do know what our father does, don't you?"

"I know he works in the Ministry, and was some kind of department head. Of course I know that he was just named Senior Secretary of the MLES and a Permanent Member of the Advisory Council by Minister Bones last month," she answered.

"Dad worked in the Misuse of Magical Artifacts Office," Ron said grumpily. "It's the smallest Office in the MLES."

"True," Bill agreed as they exited the station. "For whatever reason, as Pure-Blooded as Dad is, he has always been fascinated with Muggles and their technology. Still, he never got to actually mingle with Muggles very much. He never really learned how, very well. We made the trip the Muggle way, even though it cost so much in terms of time and money, because it allowed Dad to interact with Muggles, and allowed us to do the same."

"Oh . . . that makes sense," Tracy said, a bit of doubt in her voice.

"It does to Dad, anyway," Bill said with a smile. "Now, we're not going to have to do that." He suddenly got very serious. "I would have arranged for us to floo, but you do know that we're real targets in this war? That all of us, and therefore you by extension, are under threat?"

"I do," Tracy admitted. "That scares me more than a bit. Have you ever had a run-in with a dementor?"

"I was a field curse breaker in Egypt," Bill said, "I've run into just about everything, including dementors."

"Do you know about the attack in Hogsmeade last October?"

Bill nodded.

"A dementor was just starting to reach for me when Harry somehow destroyed them. I was so scared and so relieved, I started crying right there. I was three feet from a fate worse than death. I'm not likely to get any closer than that and survive. I've made my choices, just like you have. It just took me a bit longer."

"Fair enough," Bill agreed, leading them down into an Underground Station. "Anyway, we couldn't floo from the platform, because our floo is both password and blood protected. We couldn't really shout out the code word, and it takes a few hours to reset it. We're going to my flat, and we're flooing from there."

"Is Fleur coming?" Ron asked.

"She's already there," Bill said, rolling his eyes. "Her mum sent over a huge parchment of wedding suggestions. Fleur's talking them over with Mum." He leaned over to Ron as the first train came thundering to a halt. "She's obviously never done anything like this. Help her!"

Tracy's eyes were indeed very wide, at the small crowd, at the loud noise, and just about everything else. Ron put an arm around her, and led her into the train.

"Ginny, dear, may I speak with you?" Molly asked sweetly. Harry quickly fled up to Ron's room.

"Yes?" Ginny asked suspiciously.

"I had hoped SOMEONE would have told me SOMETHING about Ron's guest," Molly stated in a slightly offended tone. "Since no one has, tell me about her."

"Such as?"

"I never heard you or Ron mention her before. Is she a Fourth year? A Ravenclaw? A Hufflepuff?"

"Actually, she's a Sixth year Slytherin."

"WHAT!"

"Mum! I never thought you'd have any House prejudices!"

"I don't!" Mrs. Weasley stated firmly. "However, I have never heard a good word about any of the Slytherins in Ron's year."

"True," Ginny admitted. "She very quiet, very smart. She did go along with some of the harassment of Harry, especially during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, but Hermione said that she did the least. Her best friend and her best friend's boyfriend didn't do much either, and they're the Slytherin prefects for the year, replacing that Death Eating cow and Malfoy."

"What does the scion of the Malfoys have to say about it?"

"Well, nobody is bothering her about it," Ginny allowed.

"What's her background? I don't know any Davis family."

"Her family's been working in the butterbeer co-op for a few generations," Ginny answered simply.

Molly made a sound that was not quite a growl of dissatisfaction.

"Luna trusts her," Ginny said firmly, "and that means the rest of us do, too."

"What does she look like? What does she act like? Anything like. . . ." Molly lowered her voice, "Sirius' mother?"

"No, not at all. She's rather quiet, actually." Ginny frowned. "Remember when Hermione was trying to explain what Muggles thought Pixies and Brownies look like?"

Molly nodded.

"That's Tracy, right down to the hair cut. She's almost as short as I am, and a lot thinner, with light brown hair, hazel eyes, and, usually, a wide, bright smile. And, best of all. . . ."

"Yes?"

"She nursed a crush on Ron for two years."

"And learning about Sirius didn't dampen her crush?"

Ginny shrugged. "She wasn't happy about it. I believe she had some strong words about how slow their relationship was going to go."

"I should hope so!"

At that moment, two sets of feet came thundering down the stairs. "Aunt Ginny!" Sirius and Rosie cried and they leapt at her, knocking her to the ground.

"Children!" Molly scolded, "Your Aunt Ginny is **not** the twins. You shouldn't jump on anyone, and you certainly shouldn't **BOTH** jump on someone!" She smiled. "Other than the twins, of course."

"Sorry, Grandmum," they both said, "Sorry, Aunt Ginny."

"I take it your Uncle Harry woke the pair of you," Molly said with a sigh.

"He tried to be quiet!" Rosie said. "The ghoul heard him and threw some boxes."

"And that startled me, and I fell on the steps," Harry confessed, appearing. The two children ran to him, but were more careful than they had been with Ginny.

"No stick?" Sirius asked.

Harry looked confused for a moment, then said, "No, I don't need the walking stick. I'm better." To prove the point, Harry stood, picking Sirius up, tossing him into the air, and catching him with an easy motion.

"Don't frighten him, Harry," Molly warned.

"What, frighten a Weasley by flight?" Harry asked, exaggerating his shock at the very idea.

"Well," Molly allowed, "there's always a first time."

Rosie lifted her arms up, and Harry picked her up as well.

"Where's Daddy?" Sirius demanded.

"Your father, Uncle Bill, and your father's friend Tracy will be along soon," Ginny promised, relieving Harry of her nephew. "Let's get you cleaned up. I swear, you're just like your father and Uncle Fred. No one else can get dirty taking a nap!"

"I don't get dirty, 'cept when I wanna," Rosie stated, sticking her tongue out at Sirius as he was swept by. Sirius returned the salute.

"Actually, Charlie could, too," Molly commented, setting the dishes out on the enlarged table with a flick of her wand.

"What's cooking, Mother Weasley," Harry asked.

"Get away from that stove!" Molly ordered. "Rosie's hair is so long it could catch."

Harry scowled, but did as he was ordered. "Where's Mister Weasley?" Harry asked to distract himself, "and who all is coming?"

"Arthur should be here soon," Molly said with a nod at the clock. The hands for Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Ron were all on 'Traveling'. "Fleur is in the parlor. We've been going over some of her mother's wedding plans."

"It's still going to be at the chateaux, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"Of course!" Molly said. "I suppose the only wedding that might ever be here will be Ginny's."

Harry was glad that thread was snapped by the arrival of Arthur Weasley.

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A short time after the extended Weasley family sat down to dinner, two figures popped into existence in front of the gate to Hogwarts. Each had a hand on an empty beer bottle, which one placed next to the stone gate post.

"I still can't believe we're doing this," the older man growled.

"You don't have to," the younger one said. "I do thank you for making the portkey."

The older man made a face.

"Look," the younger one said, "do you really want to be on the run for the rest of your life?"

"No, but I don't want to be in Azkaban again, either, even if they don't allow any dementors back."

"That's why we're here, and not approaching a ministry official. Now, here are the new security guards."

"What do you two want?" a young wizard demanded.

"We would like to see the headmaster," the older wizard stated.

"You don't have an appointment," the young wizard demanded. The older stranger rolled his eyes.

"Look," the younger stranger said, "there are two of you. We'll give one of you two our wands. He can then go in and tell Professor Dumbledore that Julian Commodore and Augustus Castle would like to see him. I assure you, he will want to see us."

The young guard looked behind him to his backup, some ten meters away. The other guard nodded. The first held out his hand, and the two strangers handed over their wands. The first guard then retreated towards the castle. The second moved slightly back, keeping his wand out and his eye on them.

"Amateurs," the older wizard muttered. "I could have taken both of them. Merlin, even you could have taken either of them."

"I might have been able to at that," the younger man said equally softly. "And while I'm sure you could have taken both of these guards, if you haven't noticed, there are at least four more with wands pointed at us."

"There are?"

"There are. There could be others, too."

"Well then, I don't feel quite so foolish in giving up."

"Well, well, well, who have we here?" came a voice from behind them. The two men turned and saw it was Alastor Moody. "Augustus Rookwood and Julian Malfoy. Interesting."

"Mister Moody," the security guard said in a warning voice.

"Quite right, lad. I shall stand here, my hands in plain view, until back up arrives. These two already give up their wands?"

"Yes, sir. Carl took them into the castle with him. These two, the younger one said their names were Julian Commodore and Augustus Castle."

"Aye, the headmaster could identify them from those names," Moody agreed. "What's the story, Rookwood? Rats deserting the ship? You both seemed awfully enthusiastic for the cause last summer."

"We've both learned a lot about what 'the cause' actually meant," Julian said drily. "We're surrendering to bring information."

"You're surrendering because you hope to save your necks!"

"I've never killed anyone," Julian said, still using a mild tone of voice.

"No, you only led Death Eaters to their victims and buggered a fifteen year old."

"I assure you, he offered his arse to me."

Moody spat on the ground and then looked at Rookwood. "And I suppose you're going to claim full innocence, too."

"Well, you never convicted me of murder the first time, and I certainly haven't killed anyone since," Rookwood said simply.

"You must think have something important," Moody growled.

"We do," Julian said. "What we both have is important. What I alone have is nearly as important. I'm sure he has something unique as well."

"We'll see," Moody growled, seeing Dumbledore emerging from the castle with two of the security guards. "We'll just have to see."

## **Chapter XL**

Monday, March 24, 1997

Harry came jogging back to the Burrow after his morning run, foreshortened that morning because there had been a full moon at 4:45 that morning. Harry and Ron had both gotten up early and had run with Remus in their animagi forms until the sun had transformed Remus back to himself. Between the two animagi, the Wolfsbane, and the short time transformed, Remus was in good shape. Harry had run back from the Lovegoods (a short run for him) while Ron had stayed to have breakfast there.

Harry did his stretches, and took off his running trainers and put on his slippers. Molly did not want him tracking mud into the house again, even if he was now allowed to use magic to clean up after himself.

Coming into the kitchen, Harry was surprised to find it well-occupied. Normally at this time, only Molly Weasley would be in the kitchen. Arthur would have just left and the rest of the household would still be in bed.

This morning, however, Arthur was still in the kitchen, as was Albus Dumbledore and, to Harry's even greater surprise, Snape.

"Headmaster," Harry said, suspiciously, "Professor Snape."

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Please shower and dress, then we have something to discuss."

Harry came back down the stairs less than fifteen minutes later. "What's happened?" Harry asked, sitting down and looking over his bowl of porridge.

"There was an interesting development Saturday evening," Dumbledore said. "Augustus Rookwood and Julian Malfoy arrived at Hogwarts and surrendered themselves."

"Rookwood . . . isn't he Voldemort's tame Unspeakable?" Harry asked.

"He was, at least until last week," Snape said.

"He was at the fight at the Department of Mysteries," Harry said. "Malfoy is the one who let the Death Eaters into Privet Drive. Didn't he also have something to do with Hermione's parents being killed?"

"He did the surveillance on their house, if nothing else," Dumbledore said. He paused, and added, "He was also indirectly behind the attack on Miss Lovegood and Mister Longbottom."

"Indirectly?"

"Remember, Mister Malfoy said Montague thought they were going to play a prank on you?" Harry nodded. "That was not a 'pranking device', it was a Muggle bomb that would have killed Montague and his followers as well as you and yours."



"Draco was most fortunate not to have blown himself up disposing of it," Snape snarled.

Harry kept his eyes on Dumbledore. "And they came to Hogwarts, and surrendered to you?"

"They did."

"May I ask what kind of deal they got, and for what kind of information?"

Snape curled his lip a bit, but Dumbledore merely said, "While I cannot tell you everything, that is why I am here, Harry."

Harry smiled. "And when does some of this come out in The Daily Prophet?"

"Potter!" Snape protested angrily.

"On Friday," Dumbledore said calmly, which made Snape look at Dumbledore in surprise. The Weasleys were already in shock. It was clear this was all news to them.

"Both men were essentially given a form of probation and exile," Dumbledore went on. "Should they ever transgress the law, Wizarding or even Muggle, we can reinstate a full prosecution, with their signed confessions."

"Exile?"

"They both have to leave Europe for good, and the local magical authorities have been notified."

"I'm sure they both want to get as far away for Voldemort as possible," Harry said drily.

"They are both intelligent men, especially Malfoy," Dumbledore agreed.

"I don't suppose you could tell me where they're going?"

"No," Dumbledore said, "I do not think that would be wise." Rookwood had stashed away a small fortune decades before. While other Death Eaters had indulged in killing Muggles for fun, Rookwood had stolen from the Death Eaters' victims. He was heading for Bolivia. Julian Malfoy had built several trapdoors into the MHC, and would be taking nearly half a million Galleons with him to the Bahamas. The MHC would be bankrupt, with Muggle investigators taking it apart, within three months. Neither had mentioned their arrangements, of course.

"Well, I'm sure Malfoy at least took enough of Voldemort's money to live an easy life," Harry said bitterly.

"He probably has," Dumbledore agreed. "Auditors from both the Muggle and magical governments are already swarming all over the Marvolo Holding Company. Malfoy did tell me he spent most of his spare time in the autumn and early winter doing two things. One was helping Pettigrew lay traps in Grimmauld Place. The curse-breaking team is making very slow progress."

"I really don't want the place anyway," Harry said. "I wouldn't mind them getting Sirius' motorcycle out if they can, but that's about it. Am I paying for this team?"

"You are paying part of the costs," Dumbledore acknowledged.

"Then donate the house and contents to the Ministry or Gringotts or whoever, other than the motorcycle. They can use it for practice, and then do whatever they want to with the . . . thing." Harry had moderated his language, in deference to Mrs. Weasley and Professor Dumbledore.

"I'm certain Alastor can work something mutually agreeable," Mr. Weasley said.

"I agree," Dumbledore said. "I will see that you get the motorcycle, any of Sirius' personal effects, and all the books. I'm certain you, Miss Granger, and Miss Lovegood would want those. Now, I will fill Remus in on this later. Alastor already knows. The main reason the pair were let off easily is in part because they told us what Voldemort has planned for the night of the Thirtieth of June."

"A Dark ceremony?" Harry asked.

"Very Dark," Dumbledore agreed. "He has found a way to steal the life force and even some of the magical power of his followers. That is, in fact, the primary flaw in the ceremony. The victim must be a sworn follower. Unfortunately for Voldemort, Rookwood recognized the preparations. Malfoy did not, but was asked to take the Dark Mark."

"Which goes against most of what the Dark Lord claims he stands for," Snape put in.

"Indeed. That made Malfoy suspicious. He observed the others, and decided, correctly, that Rookwood knew what was happening and wished to flee, but did not dare to. Malfoy encouraged Rookwood, and the pair fled together. They also left notes behind to the others, telling them to flee for their lives."

"Now remember, Voldemort fled with twenty-three Death Eaters and Malfoy. Four had attempted to desert even before this, and were killed by Voldemort."

"Killed very slowly, of course," Snape reminded Harry and the Weasleys.

"This is what accounted for Rookwood's reluctance to act on his knowledge. As of an hour ago, at least twelve more of Voldemort's Death Eaters have fled. Six were killed, and three managed to surrender. We currently have no information on the other three."

"As best we can tell," Snape said, "the ritual needed at least a dozen followers to be sacrificed to be fully effective. If he tries it with six, it could fail, it could injure him, or it may just strengthen him slightly. Of course, there may be other followers about whom we know nothing, but it does not seem likely."

"Thank you for telling me," Harry said. "In the worst case scenario, I guess we'll find out in just over three months."

"There is one other thing," Dumbledore said. "Malfoy accounted for some of the money Voldemort spent over the last three weeks. However, he said Voldemort spent over two hundred thousand Galleons that he could not account for. He also took a hundred and fifty thousand British pounds, and spent it while they were passing through Afghanistan. Malfoy's impression, and that's all it was, is that while Voldemort was not planning on confronting you

directly before the end of June, both sets of money were going for just such a purpose." Molly made a small, shocked sound.

"Well," Harry said, "there's not much we can do if we have no idea what's going on, is there?"

"No, there is not," Dumbledore agreed. "Still, I thought you should know."

Harry smiled. "There's only one thing I can do."

"And that is?" Snape asked.

"Why, practice 'constant vigilance', of course!"

It warmed up enough that afternoon to allow Sirius and Rosie outside to play. Molly watched out the kitchen window, Fleur and Tonks were having tea with her. "It's difficult to believe they know the threat that's over Harry," Molly said.

Tonks stood up and looked out the window. She smiled at the sight. Remus was napping in the sun on a chaise-longue, covered by a heavy blanket. Ginny Weasley, in terrier form, was laying on his lap, surveying the scene. Hermione was in parrot form, perched above Remus' shoulder, doing the same. Neville was also in his animagus form, giving a ride to Rosie, with Tracy and Luna walking on either side of her, keeping her steady.

Harry and Ron were in their animagus forms as well. Sirius was taking a nap a top the world's largest living teddy bear, with Harry on his back and Sirius curled up on his chest. Ron was laying next to them.

"I bet you never thought you'd be happy seeing a grandchild in the arms of half a ton of bear," Tonks teased Molly.

"No, I have to admit I would have thought anyone crazy. Of course, I would have thought they were crazy if they said I have a three-year-old grandson by Ron before he left Hogwarts."

"We really are sorry," Tonks said, for at least the twenty-seventh time.

"I know," Molly said. "And I do still blame you and Remus and Dumbledore and even Harry a bit. I blame Arthur and myself, because I thought we had raised Ron better than this. Still, it was mostly Ron's fault."

"Is Sirius at all like your boys?" Fleur asked, in part to distract Molly.

"He's a bit like Bill and Percy," Molly said. "He likes to sit back and observe, and then get involved, like they do. The twins, well, as you can imagine, they were into everything from the time they started crawling."

Tonks and Fleur nodded their agreement.

"Charlie, Ron, and Ginny were always following their older brothers around, but Bill and to a lesser degree Percy studied the situations first, then got involved. Sirius does the same thing. I'm glad Rosie is older, it tends to get Sirius involved."

"Is she at all like Ginny?" Tonks asked.

"Not at all," Molly said. "Ginny ran after everyone, demanding that they pay attention and if they didn't, she had ways of getting their attention. Rosie is the most inquisitive child I have ever run into other than the twins, but she doesn't get into trouble like they did. If Arthur left some bit of Muggle nonsense on the floor, the twins would as like as not have it torn apart in twenty minutes. Rosie would study it and then quiz Arthur about it."

"Uh oh," Tonks said suddenly. Rosie had jumped off Neville and run over and leapt on Harry. "Good thing Harry is relatively tame."

The three women smiled, as Sirius squawked about being woken up. Soon, however, Harry was walking around on all fours, Rosie sitting on his back and Sirius sitting in front of her. "Harry is going to be a magnificent papa, is he not?" Fleur asked.

Molly looked out at Luna and Hermione, sniffed, and said, "I suppose he might," and went over to the counter to start work on meat pies. Tonks and Fleur looked at each other and shrugged, unconcerned.

Thursday, March 27, 1997

Dumbledore joined Harry for breakfast again, although this morning the pair ate alone. "I have learned more about the ceremony Voldemort intended to perform," Dumbledore offered.

"Does this mean he can't perform it?" Harry asked.

"That I do not know," Dumbledore admitted. "But what few accounts we can track down, he does need at least a dozen committed followers. At least three of his remaining six known followers tried to desert. One escaped to us, and we have no information on the other two. Of the early three escapees we had no information on, two were found, murdered, presumably by bounty hunters employed by Voldemort. Still, he may choose to try the ceremony any way, hoping to benefit to some smaller degree."

"Do you think he'll push the ceremony up at all?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. All the accounts are clear as to the timing, which is tied to the period at and just after the summer solstice. It is a long ceremony, and the preliminaries must start at the instant of the solstice itself."

"So there's nothing we can do until then?"

"There is nothing you can do until then," Dumbledore corrected, "other than to be careful. We are still hoping to track Voldemort down. At the very least, the escaped Death Eaters have helped us track down many of Voldemort's bolt holes."

"Are all the Death Eaters getting exile?" Harry asked, trying to keep the ice out of his voice."

"Actually, none are. They are getting lighter sentences than they deserve for surrendering, but they will spend at least twenty years in prison, for they are all murderers. Rookwood and Malfoy both contributed to many crimes, including murder and torture, but did not directly commit them."

"Rookwood must have killed someone to have been Marked," Harry pointed out.

"And he spent fourteen years in Azkaban, with the Dementors," Dumbledore returned.

"I understand, but that doesn't mean I like it very much," Harry stated. "You didn't see the . . . the . . . the glee in Malfoy's eyes as he held that knife to Rose's throat. He was hoping to hurt or kill her."

"I know, Harry. If that is truly part of Malfoy's nature, he will not be able to suppress it. The local Magical authorities will be keeping a close eye on him."

"I just hope some little girl, or considering what he did with Colin, some little boy, doesn't have to pay the price," Harry said, glad that made Dumbledore wince.

"If so, it will be no comfort to the child to know that had Rookwood and Malfoy stayed with Voldemort, many children would have been tortured to death in the reign of terror Voldemort would have initiated after the full ceremony."

"I know," Harry admitted. "I'm just glad I'm not the one who has to make those decisions."

"Just remember," Dumbledore said, "some day you almost certainly will be."

Harry gave Dumbledore a small twisted smile. "I think it would take me, Hermione, and Luna, all wrapped up into one, to be able to do that."

"Perhaps that is one reason the three of you are drawn together," Dumbledore suggested. Harry seemed rather dumbfounded by the suggestion.

Saturday, March 29, 1997

"Do you have to go, Daddy?" Sirius asked.

"I'm afraid so," Ron said. Even though Ron was kneeling on one knee, Sirius still had to look up into his father's eyes.

"When will you be back?"

"I'll be back for a few days in less than three months," Ron said, leaning forward to hug his son. "Hopefully, we'll be together for a while after that."

Rose had her arms around Harry's neck, listening. She twisted around and looked Harry in the eye. "Yes, I'll be back for a few days then, too," Harry said.

Luna and Hermione leaned over and kissed Rose on either cheek. "We'll all be back," Luna said. "If we're not here in late June, we'll be here in early July."

"I hope so," Rose said, uncertainly making her voice quiver. More kisses were exchanged and then Tracy flooded off to the Leaky Cauldron, where Alastor Moody was already waiting. The other teens, Remus, and Tonks disappeared.

Sirius went to his room (once Percy's), a pout on his face. Rose went to her room (once Bill's), a worried look on hers.

Tracy and Ginny were staying in the one spare room over the twins original store, while Ron and Neville were staying in what had been the twins' room, since the twins now slept at Gambol's. Hermione and Luna went to the Lovegoods' apartment over The Quibbler. Harry went with Moody to the apartment across the hallway, which Moody was renting.

"So, lad, can I trust you not to leave this floor tonight?" Moody asked his ward.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, "as long as there's enough food over in the Lovegoods' for tonight and tomorrow morning."

"What, you don't like my food?" Moody asked.

"The last I knew, all you had here was oatmeal, haggis, and firewhiskey."

"Well, I'm out of firewhiskey," Moody growled. "Didn't Molly send along enough food to feed an army?"

"She packed enough for an army, but Ron might have taken most of it," Harry pointed out.

"Fair enough," Moody allowed. "Go see if the lasses have enough food. If not, I'll take one of 'em shopping. If they have, I want none of you to leave."

"Good plan," Harry said.

Ron had indeed taken enough to feed his quartet enough for four meals (as opposed to the two needed), which still left more than enough food for the remaining trio. They were therefore happy to agree to stay in until Moody came for them early the next morning.

"Where's your father?" Harry asked Luna.

"Daddy's trying to track down one of the deserting Death Eaters," Luna said. "He might get an exclusive! He stopped by the cottage last night and told us. He won't be back while we're here."

"Really?" Harry asked with a slight leer in his voice.

"Really," Luna confirmed.

"What ever shall we do?" Harry asked.

"It has been some time since you brushed our hair," Hermione pointed out.

"Oh, is that all you'd like me to do?" Harry asked.

"No," Luna said, "that's where we'd like you to start."

The rest of the evening passed in a variety of pleasures, found in the shower and kitchen as well as in the pleasures of the bedroom. By 9:45, they were too sated to consider partaking in any more pleasure and not quite tired enough to consider going to sleep. They therefore dissected their vacation, their friends, their situations, and on and on.

At one point, Luna turned serious. By that point, all three were in bed and starting to seriously think about sleep. "Before we stop talking for the night, there is one thing I believe I need to mention."

"What's that?" Hermione asked tiredly. Harry just made an inquiring noise.

"Harry, this may be important. I should have mentioned it before, but I just wasn't certain how to bring it up."

"H'mm?" Harry asked. He started to pay more attention to what Luna was saying instead of how comfortable he was spooned against her.

"It was a feeling I received from Rose several times," Luna said. "I thought I might be imagining things the first few times, but I really felt it today."

"Felt what?" Harry asked, now mostly awake.

"It cannot really be described with words," Luna said.

"Well, what do you think it means?" Hermione asked.

"Well, if I did feel what I think I did, it would mean Rose is some sort of Seer," Luna said. "And if I felt it coming from her at her age, it would mean she has a lot more than a touch of the Gift. In fact, today . . . I think she might have had a flash of the future."

"When she wasn't certain if she'd see all of us in June or July?" Hermione asked.

Luna nodded. "It's very frightening, and something I'm glad the potion still mostly stops me from Seeing."

"What happens?" Harry asked.

"You never did pay attention in Divination, did you?" Luna asked, amusement in her voice. "You covered this at the end of your Fourth year."

Harry managed a shrug.

"Imagine this situation. Ten people are in a room. Their leader asks for five volunteers. The five step forward. To the person with the Gift, suddenly four of the five are in shadows. Two are in a little shadow, one in a deeper shadow, and one totally obscured. The one obscured is in the deepest danger. That doesn't mean that person is doomed; it doesn't mean the one left in full light is totally safe. It simply means at that moment, those are merely what the currents of probability show at that moment."

"So if we asked her. . . ."

"All she could say was who was in the greatest danger at that moment, and we would likely frighten her," Luna said. "And, for all we know, it might have been that Ron was in the greatest danger because he was thinking about his mother's meatloaf instead of thinking about apparating correctly."

"Is that likely?" Hermione asked.

"No," Luna admitted. "More likely, there will be some sort of attack. Still if we are all prepared, there would be a good chance for even the person in the greatest danger to avoid it. One more thing."

"Yes?" Harry asked.

"She was looking around when she said that," Luna pointed out. "She didn't seem to be looking at you or Hermione. The person most likely in danger was one of the rest of us."



## **Chapter XLI**

Every year, barring emergencies and Twi-Wizard Tournaments, the Hogwarts students played three sets of Quidditch games: two in November or early December; two in April; and two in late May or early June. The autumnal games had been Gryffindor/Slytherin (Gryffindor had won 300-90) and Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw (Ravenclaw had won 270-120). This year, Ravenclaw/Slytherin would be the first April game, and Gryffindor/Hufflepuff the second.

April was therefore a busy month for Harry. His Sundays were filled with the DA meetings and the Quidditch team was meeting for 10 hours a week. In addition, Harry was dueling three times a week, he was trying to spend time with Luna as well as Hermione, and he had all his regular running, workouts, and class work. On top of that, he was giving extra coaching to some of the Fifth years in Defense and Charms, and was still helping Madam Hooch with the Apparating class.

Harry was in fact so busy that he wound up skipping the Ravenclaw/Slytherin game. Luna went of course, along with Hermione. While Ravenclaw was struggling to a five hour 420-300 victory over Slytherin, Harry was engaged in a number of five on two duels -- Harry and Remus taking on various aurors and hit-wizards. Harry and Remus had managed to win nearly all of the fights. Harry had also taken three out of nine duels against three hit-wizards, to their amazement, but by the time he was finished, he was exhausted.

"I can't find Harry anywhere. I even looked in the Prefect's Bathroom, just in case Ron slipped him the password. Are you certain. . . ?"

"Dearest Hermione, I can assure you that no one could be hiding in our flat's bathroom, let alone Harry."

"Sorry, Luna." Hermione frowned. "Ron doesn't know; Dean doesn't know; Ginny doesn't know. Even Lavender doesn't know."

"Neville?"

"He was with Ginny all afternoon . . . in the Prefect's bathroom."

"Ah." Luna scrunched up her face in thought. "The map?"

"Harry keeps it locked up now, remember?"

"What? Oh, yes . . . that Third year. Did Harry ever find out how he found out about the map?"

"No, not that I know of." Hermione frowned. "Freddie's a lucky little punk. I should have docked him fifty points."

Luna smiled. "If that had happened over the last few years when my things were taken by my fellow Ravenclaws, we would have come in last place for the House Cup each time."

"Someone should have stood up to the Clique years ago," Hermione complained, not for the first time.

"Cho didn't start the group, she just inherited it," Luna reminded Hermione. "Cho has come around, and it's not like Freddie wasn't punished."

"True."

Luna frowned again. "Why did Harry turn him into a newt? How did Harry turn him into a newt for that matter? That's, excuse the phrase, post-N.E.W.T. transfiguration for most people."

"I don't know how he did it either," Hermione admitted. "As for why . . . just add that question to the list of Muggle references we'll have to go over some time when we have access to a VCR and a library."

"Oh . . . I remember now! We saw it last July. That was a very odd film, but funny."

"True, but I'm glad Harry saw it. He needs more humor in his life." Hermione looked over Luna's shoulder. "Ah. Maybe Dora knows where Harry is."

"I do, actually," Tonks said coming up to them. "Harry is soaking in Remus' bath tub. They've had a rough day."

"Where's Professor Lupin?" Hermione asked, formally since there were a few students wandering the corridors nearby.

"He's in the bath tub in my quarters," Tonks said with a smirk. The pair had adjoining quarters with a connecting inner door. "And Remus' password is?" Tonks asked, daring them to guess.

"It's always a magical creature. . . ."

"It's 'quintaped'," Luna said.

"Have fun," Tonks said. "I plan to."

Saturday, April 26, 1997

Hermione grimaced a little. The crowd was screaming around her, and she could not get close to Harry. Harry had pulled off a magnificent 84 degree dive from over 200 feet that had brought the crowd to its feet screaming. When he had pulled out of the dive at fifteen feet, he had been holding the Snitch. The game was over in nine minutes. Gryffindor had won 150 to 0. Hermione had learned to appreciate flying more over the previous summer, but it had not done anything to prepare her Harry's power dives.

Hermione looked at Luna a little enviously. Luna had not so much as peeped during Harry's dive. She had merely nodded with satisfaction when Harry held up the Snitch. Since Hermione could not get close to Harry, she pulled Luna from the crowd and they started to skirt around it. Sooner or later, they would all have to head back to the castle.

"How could you take Harry's dive so calmly?" Hermione asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" Luna asked, puzzled. "He wasn't following anyone, and no one was following him. There wasn't a Bludger or a flyer anywhere near him. What could happen? It's not like a group of dementors is likely to show up again."

"Remind me to tell you what happened in the middle of Harry's first game," Hermione said dryly. "It's amazing what can happen to Harry during a game."

It was over half an hour before the crowd started to break up. When Harry, the team, and their supporters finally were able to make their way back towards the castle, they were surprised to find the headmaster waiting for them.

Seeing the looks of fear on many of their faces, Dumbledore said, "No, nothing 'bad' has happened, children," he chided them. "I do need to speak with the head of the DA, however. I had hoped to catch a bit of the game, but I see I needed to be quicker."

Most of the students left, leaving Harry and his closest friends with Dumbledore. "I am sorry, but I must speak with Harry privately," Dumbledore said. The group moved off back towards the castle, while Dumbledore took Harry off towards Hagrid's.

"We're not meeting Hagrid's brother, are we?"

"No, he and the centaurs have learned to stay out of each other's territory, and we are meeting with Bane, the centaur."

"Oh, joy," Harry said, remembering his other run-ins with the proud and somewhat nasty centaur.

"He will speak with us, but not with Hermione," Dumbledore said. "Apparently, she offended him last year."

"What doesn't offend him?"

"Much does offend him," Dumbledore agreed. "Shall I tell you their greatest secret? I shall, if you swear never tell another in my lifetime without my permission."

"Alright," Harry said, "I promise."

"They are not just a proud race, they are a dying race, just as the giants are. I doubt any of your grandchildren will ever see a giant. Certainly not a giant's child. Perhaps not even your children will. As far as I know, only three have been born these last twenty years, although I suppose there might be more."

"If they're dying, why didn't they side with Voldemort?" Harry asked. "Didn't he promise them anything like a better life?" Harry knew the various Ministries never would.

"So far as we know, the few remain giants are living in reserves in the Urals," Dumbledore answered. "Those are trying to rebuild the species, but there are likely too few. Some giants are unaccounted for, but the best guess is that they have been killed."

"Best guess?"

"They have stayed away from the wizarding and Muggle worlds, with good reason," Dumbledore pointed out. "The same is true of the centaurs. Nearly half of all the centaurs now live in this forest, and it is no longer that large a forest. I am certain your great grand-children will see the last of the centaurs. Mountain and river trolls are likely to go the same way. There are only five thriving colonies of acromantulas left around the world."

"So some of the other intelligent magical species are dying out?"

"Exactly, and none are thriving, except for wizards, and we are only thriving because we are still arising from the Muggles. If that were not true, we would have died out in the Great Plague."

"Err . . . is that something I should remember learning in History of Magic? It sounds like I should."

Dumbledore sighed. "Alas, no. Tell me, how far back into history does that class go?"

Harry thought. "I don't remember anything being mentioned before Merlin, and not all that much before the founding of Hogwarts."

"Sad, but accurate. You do know there was magic before that?"

"Of course. We talk about Egyptian curses and Mummies in Defense. Hermione is studying cuneiform in Runes, and that's what, four thousand years ago or something like that?"

"Closer to five thousand, for both the earliest forms of hieroglyphs and cuneiform," Dumbledore agreed.

"And Luna has said that much of our wand lore comes from the Druids, so that at least two thousand years ago."

"Quite right. You obviously learned something in your Muggle school."

"That, and I was locked in Dudley's spare room, or at least trapped there, for several years. He had a lot of books, even if he never read any. I did."

"I see. In any event, between two thousand three hundred and two thousand two hundred years ago, a great plague swept through the magical world. It killed perhaps six or even seven tenths of the magical people on Earth, and killed off several magical beasts as well, although no one has ever found out why. In any case, about half the remaining members of the wizarding population fled to the parallel wolds, which had been visited for some time. All of the Romans, the other Italians, and Etruscans who fled, for example, went to Rushak, while other European and Mediterranean groups to other nearby lands. If the Muggle-born did not exist, and some of us had not reproduced with Muggles, we would also have died out on this world."

"That sounds a lot more important than patent arguments about the collapsable cauldron," Harry pointed out.

"I agree," Dumbledore said. "Again, please do not repeat this to another student, but I thought Professor Binns had an overly narrow focus when I was a First year student. Unfortunately, even though he is a poor teacher, he does live, in a manner of speaking, to teach. He just won't move on."

"Oh. . . ."

"In any event, we have strayed from my point. Bane is a proud being, yet he clearly sees that his kind will be gone soon. It is often difficult for even the most philosophic being to face his own mortality, let alone his entire species."

"I suppose," Harry agreed.

"Why aren't you with your other friends, celebrating?" Draco asked.

"Because I've been thinking about something that you told me at the funerals in January." Draco scowled. "No, not that, precisely," Hermione went on. "What did you mean about 'the odds'?"

Draco looked confused for a moment, and then smiled a cold smile. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"The odds of giving birth to a Squib. You don't know, and you're wondering." Hermione's blush confirmed his guess. "For all your liberal views, you wouldn't want to give birth to a Squib any more than I would want to sire one."

"No," Hermione admitted. "I would love the child just as much, but I do love the magical world, Draco. Give me credit for that, if nothing else."

"It's good to know you have some sense," Draco replied. "Can you get us to see Dumbledore?"

"He took Harry away after the match."

"Would you trust Professor Snape?"

Hermione thought about that. "If he can back up his claims. I won't believe propaganda."

"Fair enough."

Harry and the Headmaster were well into the woods now. They went on for another ten minutes before coming to a clearing, where Bane was waiting for them. Harry saw there were three dead bodies, filled with arrows, and a long gray tube on the ground.

"Greetings to the one wizard we may almost trust," Bane said. "Greetings also to the one who strives to move the stars onto less likely paths."

Harry said nothing, only nodding. Dumbledore, however, greeted Bane in a very friendly way. "I see you found some things of interest under the stars," he concluded.

"We did, and we thought you might wish to see the results of the trespass. What is that infernal thing?"

"I am not exactly certain," Dumbledore said, "but it is a Muggle weapon. It is a small, shoulder-held missile launcher. I do not know which type. I take it they were heading towards the Quidditch pitch?"

"At least in that general direction," Bane agreed. "There were six of them. We kept their leader for you. Please dispose of the missile and take the leader away."

"And these? And the other two?" Dumbledore asked.

"The five will make a fine neighborly offering to Aragog and her children. She will not live much longer, and we need to remind her and the Princess of our friendship." Bane smiled nastily. "Perhaps you should consider doing the same."

"I am certain you are correct," Dumbledore said. "I know you did not seize these six for us, but we do thank you, and for leaving the leader for us." Dumbledore bowed.

Bane bowed back, and then looked at Harry. "Do you thank us, Harry Potter?"

"Thank you," Harry said, imitating Dumbledore's bow. "Live in peace."

"I had many doubts you could alter the probable course of fate, Harry Potter. You have not yet succeeded in doing so." He hesitated, and then said, "May you succeed, and live in peace."

Bane gestured, and two young centaurs carried another body into the clearing, this one barely breathing. After dropping it, each centaur took one of the dead bodies back with them. Bane said nothing, but left, dragging the last dead body with him.

"Those other assassins aren't dead yet, are they?" Harry asked.

"I don't know, and I doubt if we would want to know," Dumbledore said.

"Let me guess," Snape said with one of his usual sneers, "Gryffindor is so liberal that no one tells you these facts of magical life."

"I haven't heard about it from any of my friends in Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, either," Hermione pointed out.

"Then I think I know of a topic I must raise in the next staff meeting," Snape said coldly. "Very well. There are accurate statistics, drawn from a ten-year study across all of Western Europe in the late 1800s, and supplemented by several studies throughout Europe and North America since then." Snape shook his head, and said, "The statistics are worse than those like the Headmaster had hoped for, but not nearly as bad as many of the old families had claimed."

Snape wrote out a piece of parchment. "This will allow you to get the studies out of the Forbidden Section, so you may verify what I am going to tell you. You will note when you read the forwards that Dumbledore was part of the commissions that studied this."

Snape handed her the permission slip, and gestured for the pair to sit. They did so.

"We still do not know exactly how magic is transmitted," Snape stated. "Yes, it is likely genetic and possibly even trackable through Muggle methods at some point in the future. We aren't there yet. Right now, all we have is the somewhat crude method of statistical data. I presume you know that actuarial data can never really predict what will happen in any particular case?"

"Yes, it only points to the overall average, and can sometimes point out influencing matters."

"Very good. First of all, no matter how Pure-Blooded the family, the odds of any child of that family are one out of sixteen."

"Even the Weasleys?" Hermione asked.

"Even the Weasleys, at least in theory," Snape admitted. "They seem to have beaten the odds, so far. The odds of two pure Muggles producing a true wizard, or witch in your case, seem to be over two thousand to one. However, many so-called Muggle-borns are believed to have Squibs somewhere in their background. And, especially in the past, many children thought to be Muggle-born were actually the result of . . . unsanctioned relationships between wizards and Muggles."

"That would make some sense," Hermione agreed.

"I believe you would better accept this information from the headmaster, and he knows all the details," Snape continued. "I believe he is out of the castle at the moment. Come to the teacher's table after dinner. I know you will be tempted, but do not check those books out until after you discuss it with the headmaster, unless he or I tell you that you may. Understand?"

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said reluctantly.

"May I remind you, I shall know when you use that," Snape said to her, pointing at the slip. "I have not had occasion to ever give you permission to raid the Forbidden Section before. However, do this as I command, and I will be open for granting permissions for **specific** research requests. In case you did not know, there are books available only to faculty, or to those students who are granted permission by all **four** Heads of House. I believe the

headmaster is going to again suggest we grant you access to some of those works. This is your test, Miss Granger. I cannot be more open than this."

"I appreciate that, Professor. Thank you."

After she left, Malfoy turned to his Head of House. "She's going to be disappointed, isn't she?"

"To a degree. Do not underestimate her, however. She has many failings, but she does value truth above all things."

"Come now, Miss Granger, surely you are not surprised."

"What? Why wouldn't I be surprised to learn that there is some basis to Pure Blood bigotry?"

"I am sorry, Miss Granger. You so often know so much, I had thought you had some knowledge of the Muggle laws of genetics and heredity. Or has your friendship with the always-redheaded Weasleys made you think we were above such laws?"

"You mean the always-redheaded-and-magical Weasleys," Hermione pointed out.

"What?"

"Ron said that all Weasleys have been magical for a thousand years."

"I assure you that is not true, although I grant you it has been almost six hundred years since a male Squib was born to the Weasleys. Of course, that was also the only non-redheaded Weasley boy on record as well, and so the suspicion is the wife might have been. . . ."

"Been busy outside the house?"

"Exactly. However, while that is an exception, the rare female Weasleys sometimes have different colored hair, and have the same proportion of Squibs as everyone else. There is obviously some sort of enchantment there, although what it is has likely been lost through time."

"In any event," he continued, "the passing on of magical ability generally follows the same genetic laws as any other trait, although we have no idea of exactly how they work. As Professor Snape informed you, all we have are the gross statistics."

"What are they, especially for me?" Hermione asked.

"They are different for you," Dumbledore agreed. "Roughly speaking, for a Squib and a Muggle, they would have a nine out of ten, or .9, chance of having a non-Magical child. Two Squibs would have a seven out of ten, or .7, chance of having a non-Magical child. A . . ."

"Professor, I can read all that. What are my chances with Harry? What are Luna's?"



Dumbledore sighed. "I believe you know that two Pure Bloods would have a one in sixteen, or a .0625 chance of having a non-Magical child. While Harry had two magical parents, one was Muggle-born. You and Harry would have a one out of six chance of having a non-Magical child, which would be . . . .167. Miss Lovegood and Mister Potter would have about a one in ten chance."

".1."

"Exactly. And yet, the Clearwaters and the Creevys, two families as Muggle as Muggles could be, each had all magical children, and the Malfoys, as Pure as any Pure Blooded family in Britain, had two children, and one had no real magic."

"You knew?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Alas, I do know that sad story. Read the studies, Hermione. They proved that the differences between the incidence of Squibs between Pure Bloods and the Muggle-born were only a third what anecdotal evidence claimed. And really, would you disown a non-Magical child?"

"Of course not," Hermione said, "but still, I needed to know. I would think we all should."

## **Chapter XLII**

It was a glorious Friday afternoon in late May. The Apparation class made its way outside and towards the road to Hogsmeade. There were forty-two Sixth year students and three Seventh years in the class, and this was their final class.

About half the class was in a good mood, as they had picked up on apparation easily. The other half was a bit more tentative, but still more assured than such classes usually were. Madam Hooch had decided to ask for student volunteers to help the following year. Having Potter, Granger, Weasley, and Longbottom there to help out had made all the difference.

Harry looked down the road. He, Neville, and Ron would apparate down a quarter mile, and act as security. Two of the security wizards were usually with them, but they were investigating a small fire in the Forbidden Forest, in the opposite direction.

Harry thought of those missing wizards as he looked down towards a hill he would have to apparate behind. He caught movement behind the bushes on this hill. "Everyone!" Harry ordered, "Drop!"

At that moment, twelve hexes flew into the group, hitting six of the students. "Neville, shield!" Harry commanded.

"What are your orders?" Ron asked.

"I have shields up, and an anti-disapparation ward over them," Harry replied. "That means I can't go on offence. We can't afford to apparate behind my ward, because they might have reinforcements on the other side of the hill."

"Right."

"Neville and I will keep our shields up. Get Hermione over to the right to guard from that direction, then see if Madam Hooch can take some people and escort them and anyone injured back into the castle. If she does, pick six people who weren't hurt and we'll take them out. Try Ernie and Justin first. And send Dean, Susan, and Malfoy up if they're not hurt."

"Right."

Ron scooted away.

"Harry, three of them are creeping up on us," Neville warned.

"I see them. Let 'em crawl. We'll take them out first."

"What did you want, Potter?" Malfoy asked, coming up beside Harry. "I take it that's your shield that's flaring from all those hexes?"

"Mine and Neville's at the moment. Hermione will guard the group from the right. Neville has the left. I can just barely do three things. First is the shield, second is the anti-disapparation ward. If you'll let me tap into your magic, I can lay down an anti-portkey ward, too."

"What will that do to me?"

"It will make you dizzy, and if they over-run the attack group, you'll get you easily."

"You mean if they over-run you, they'll get me."

"Yes."

Malfoy hesitated. "What else?"

"You won't be able to do anything but breathe and think, unless I stop, I'm knocked out, or I'm killed."

"Why me?"

"Because other than Hermione, you have the strongest version of the right kind of magic, and I need Hermione on the right flank."

"How do you know that?"

"I can read magic." Seeing the look on Malfoy's face, Harry added. "Yes, it's something new. Just believe me. Now decide."

Malfoy hesitated again. "Alright. Go ahead."

A few seconds after Harry had the anti-portkey ward up, Ron scooted back with Ernie, Justin, Dean, Susan, Blaise, Anthony, and Hannah in tow. "Dean, take eight or nine people and follow Ron and his group. Lay down fire as Ron directs. Ron will be taking his group out to flank the attackers while I'm defending and you're taking them on head on."

"Right."

"Go, and hurry back."

"Right," Dean said, leaving.

"Ron, as soon as Dean gets back, get going. They're trying to apparate out, and they've tried to portkey as well. Pretty soon, their only options will be to attack head on or run for it."

"I'm ready."

"Susan, split whoever is left into helping anyone hurt and into another group ready to cover any retreat, in case we need it."

"Right." Susan left.

"Did anyone run?" Harry asked.

"No. Tracy, Daphne, Millicent, and Goyle went with Madam Hooch, taking the . . . well, the injured."

"Who were?"

"Su Li, Megan Jones, Mandy Brocklehurst, Terry Boot, and Sally-Ann Perks. They were all alive."

"Good."

"Here comes Dean," Ron said. "Let's go!"

Dean had Morag McDougal, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, Padma, Michael Corner, Stephen Cornfoot, and Kevin Entwhistle with him. The two groups moved forward.

Harry could feel the attackers trying time after time to disappear. He was surprised that none had splinched themselves. Harry was a bit frustrated, since he would have preferred to take on the attackers himself. Harry steeled himself; he knew quite well that this was the best way to handle the attack. This was not about his ego.

Harry was therefore able to hold his shield and wards. He was also able to tolerate the slight whimpering of Draco, in a fetal position on the ground. "Hold on, Draco," Harry said, "Ron, Hannah, and Ernie are laying down hexes, and the rest of his group are beyond my shield. Dean's group already has taken at three of them out."

Draco moaned a bit.

"It hurts a little, doesn't it? That's your magic, streaming out of you. It's a good thing it's Friday. It might take a day or two for your power to return in full, but don't worry, it will fully return."

"Does it . . . hurt you?" Draco asked through gritted teeth.

"It's more like a painful stress and strain, not a sharp pain," Harry replied. "Ah, Blaise and Justin have them out-flanked." He paused for nearly two minutes, and then raised the wards.

"I think you should ask someone else if there's a next time," Draco said from the ground.

"It didn't hurt as much as one second of the Cruciatius," Harry pointed out.

"How do you know?" Draco snarled.

"Voldemort used it on me the night he was brought back," Harry answered simply.

"Well, there's something I wish I didn't share with you," Draco admitted as he stood up. "Shall we see if we know any of them?"

"Let's." He turned around. "Neville! Find out where the staff is! Hermione, come on! The rest of you! Stay here, just in case it's a trap!"

"Were you hexed, Draco?" Hermione asked as they set out.

"No," Draco said, almost with a snarl.

"I was borrowing some of Draco's power to lay down the anti-portkey ward," Harry said. "Since we don't really share any connections, it hurt him a lot more than it would you."

"Oh, that makes sense."

Hermione was going to say more, but Harry held up his hand. "Did you hear or feel something?" Harry asked.

"No. . . ."

Harry turned back to where Ron, Dean, and their groups were bringing the captured attackers towards them. Ron was hurrying them along.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Ron acknowledged. "It's a sort of vibration in the ground."

Harry's eyes went wide. "Get everyone inside the wards, NOW!"

"What is it?" Hermione asked as Ron jumped to obey.

"Who's the fastest runner we have?" Harry asked.

"Probably Dean or Blaise," Hermione said.

"I'm fast," Draco said.

"Can you sprint to Hagrid's?" Harry asked.

"I don't know if I can do a flat out sprint, but I can run it," Draco said. "Why?"

"Run and tell Hagrid we're about to be visited by some of his relatives."

Draco frowned, and then for the first time he felt the ground tremble, like Harry and Ron already had. "Giants?"

"Giants. Run!" Draco sprinted off.

"Has anyone learned any of the giant dialects in Runes and Languages?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione answered. "That's a Seventh year subject."

"Get behind the wards, Hermione," Harry said.

"I am not leaving you, Harry," Hermione stated.

"Hermione, you don't have the power to face a giant. I do. And, if I can't stand them down, I will apparate to behind them and attack from the back. We need all the firepower we can get at the ward boundaries."

"Be careful," Hermione said after a second's hesitation, before running.

Harry turned around, and caught a glimpse of what looked at first like a moving treetop. A moment later, the fuzzy treetop resolved itself into a misshapen head. With two steps, the

giant stood atop the hill, less than two hundred meters away from Harry's somewhat forward position. The Hogwarts' wards started a bit less than fifty meters behind him.

Four other giants, slightly smaller than the first, stepped to the top of the hill as well, filling the space and crushing the bushes. The four giants on the wings looked at the center one, who was the tallest. Harry decided that one was likely the chief of the war party, the Gurg.

The four giants kept looking at their Gurg. Harry looked at the Gurg. The Gurg looked at Harry. Harry was not about to attack first. While he knew he was in great potential danger, he knew it was possible that these five giants turning up after an attack was a coincidence. Not a highly probable one, but still a possible one. It would not do to attack first until Harry was certain.

The Gurg grunted something. One of the giants started to look around, turning around and bending over the backside of the hill. Then the giant straightened up and threw a rock slightly larger than Harry's head straight at Harry.

Harry flicked his wand and the rock exploded. While that was happening, the other three supporting giants had also picked up rocks, and flung them.

Harry easily destroyed the projectiles. Then, he simply stood there, staring at the Gurg.

Then the Gurg started to laugh.

It was far from a pleasant sound, and Harry saw that the other four giants did not join in. The Gurg stepped down off the hill in three careful strides, and the other giants followed, but only after picking up more large rocks.

The Gurg slowed after a hundred meters, and stopped thirty meters in front of Harry. The other four were in a 'V' behind him. "Who you, little wizard?" the Gurg yelled.

For some reason, Harry was tempted to yell back 'Jack', but instead amplified his voice and said, "I am Harry Potter. Why are you here, Gurg of the giants?" Closer, Harry saw that the Gurg and three of the giants were male. The Gurg was some 23 feet tall, the other three about 20-21 feet. The fourth was a female, and seemed younger than the males. She was about 18 feet tall.

Harry had never seen a female giant, and he saw she looked a bit more human than the male giants or Hagrid's brother. Harry had wondered how Hagrid's father, a rather shortish wizard, could have brought himself to have 'relations' with a female giant. While Harry did not think this one in any way attractive, at least he now understood how it could be possible.

The Gurg pointed at himself. "Gurg, Gwsloop tribe." He spread his arms. "All Gwsloop tribe." He pointed at each of the other giants. "Brother, sons, daughter." Harry understood that to mean that this small family group was now the entire Gwsloop tribe, and that because they were closely related, they would be the end of it.

"Daughter no fight," the Gurg said. The female made a noise, and the Gurg clubbed her to the ground with a fist to the back of her reddish-haired skull. "Daughter no fight. Gwsloop win, take Grawp for daughter. Gwsloop lose, you take daughter for Grawp."

Harry understood, but had to point out, "Do you really think you have any chance of winning?"

The Gurg laughed, and held his right hand in the air, his thumb and forefinger close together. "Little wizard."

Harry gestured behind him. "Am I the only wizard here?"

"No," the Gurg admitted. "Gwsloop no mates. Gwsloop soon gone. Gwsloop lose, Gwsloop gone. Gwsloop win, Gwsloop gone. Gwsloop accept evil wizard transport. Gwsloop fight. Daughter have little Grawp."

"That can happen anyway, even if we don't fight," Harry called out.

"Deal with evil wizard, Gwsloop fight."

"I don't want to hurt you," Harry said.

The four male giants laughed. "Little wizard," the Gurg finally said, "only a Jack can hurt giant. You a Jack, little wizard? Try and stun giant, little wizard, and show us you a Jack!"

Harry blinked at that. Then he gathered all his power, all his will, and drew what power he could from his friends and allies. "STUPIFY!" The next-largest giant blinked, and then collapsed.

"Jack?" the Gurg asked in amazement. "If little wizard stun us, little wizard may claim Kerburna."

"What?"

The Gurg pointed at the female giant, "Not what. Who. Kerburna."

"I thought she was for Grawp," Harry said, a note of panic in his voice.

"That up to Jack, if you Jack. Stun sons and me or die, little wizard."

So Harry did, although it took two stunners to stun the Gurg.

Harry looked at the fallen giants, barely able to keep his wand in his hand, he was so tired. It was only when Kerburna knelt next to Harry that he even realized she was moving.

"Jack hurt giants?" she boomed.

Harry almost answered her with his voice still amplified. He negated the charm and looked up at her, ignoring the crowd gathering around him.

"No, I didn't hurt them."

"Well done, Harry," Dumbledore said from beside him.

"I think we found Grawp a girlfriend, sir," Harry said. "Can Hagrid take care of her, while you take care of moving these giants back to somewhere safe in the Urals?"

Dumbledore turned to the giant, and spoke to her in her own language. She stood, and allowed Hagrid to lead her away.

When she was out of sight, Snape asked, "Shall I dispose of these beasts, Headmaster? It would be a good opportunity to replenish some rare ingredients."

Harry and most of the students glared at Snape, who was startled by their reaction.

"That will NOT be necessary, Severus," Dumbledore said. "I shall transfer the giants." He turned to Harry. "As I said, well done. I think you should go rest, Harry."

Harry was starting to waver. "Good idea," Harry said. He felt a heavy arm around his shoulder, and let himself fall back, exhausted, and he slipped into a state that was almost sleep and almost mere total exhaustion.

"Where do you want your boy?" Millicent asked Hermione as she lifted Harry into a firm grip.

Hermione smiled and said, "If he's not too heavy, come on."

Millicent snorted. "I could carry Greg back as far the castle. I can take 'Jack' here just about as far as you want."

Snape had been only slightly surprised to learn of the attack on the apparation class. He had not thought much of the security wizards, and of course had known there was an excellent chance of another attack on Potter before the end of the school year.

Snape therefore took part in the debriefing, composed and almost serene. He was pleased to see that Potter, now awake again, had insisted that Draco be included. If there was one thing that the group around Potter lacked it was a true representative of the great Old Families. While Neville Longbottom had a longer lineage and was as much a scion of the Old Families as Draco Malfoy, Snape still partially saw Neville as he had been for four years, and Snape did not take any girl as a good representative of their families, since they had to marry out to other families. The other members of Pure Families were either from poor families like the Weasleys, at best upper middle class families like the Macmillans, or foreigners like Zabini.

It was not that Snape liked Potter any more than he had at any point over the last six years. He was still an arrogant, strutting show-off. Now that Snape barely had to ever see him, however, he could be tolerated. Snape had been worried earlier in the year, when the Boy had been displaying such amazing power. Dumbledore's assurance that the Boy would be losing much of his extra power once the Dark Lord was gone was reassuring.



Snape could therefore sit and listen to the debriefing with a slight smirk. If he thought the Gryffindors received a few too many House points for the events that afternoon, he could at least console himself with the knowledge that Slytherin had slightly outscored the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs.

At the end of the meeting, most of the large group was sent off to dinner. Snape was not certain why the Granger girl had been giving him dirty looks throughout the meeting, and now at her exit. Within a minute, he was left with the Boy, the werewolf, and the cripple, sitting in front of the Headmaster.

"Is there any reason to think that this was indeed Voldemort's last attack on Harry before the Thirtieth of June?" Remus asked.

"Of course not," Snape answered. "There is no reason to increase precautions, but I do not think it would be wise to lessen any precautions, either."

Remus sighed. "That's what I was afraid of."

Harry shrugged.

"What is it?" Moody growled.

"I know we can't let up on anything, but what I want to know is, can we find him on or before the Thirtieth?"

"Oh, you think you're perfectly ready to face the Dark Lord now, Potter?"

"MISTER POTTER," Remus and Moody snapped.

Snape displayed his trademark sneer.

"If he hadn't had a portkey last October, I would have finished him then," Harry reminded the professor. "I'm much more powerful now. That doesn't mean he couldn't beat me, or kill me, but I can beat him, just like I could free you."

Snape closed his left hand into a fist, scowling. Harry ignored that, and went on, adding, "I would rather face him now, just in case he does pull off this strengthening ceremony."

Snape admitted, if only to himself, that the Boy had a point. "But he could have the ceremony anywhere," Snape pointed out.

"He could," Harry admitted. "However, if he thought he could maximize the effect of the ceremony, especially if he hasn't gathered a dozen followers to sacrifice, would he take a chance?"

That made Snape pause and think deeply. "How big of a chance?" he finally asked.

"According to some friends of mine, the ceremony will be maximized if it is performed where he was reborn," Dumbledore said.

"It might be a trap," Moody pointed out before Snape could.

"It might," Dumbledore agreed. "I think we might have to take the risk. What do you think?"

"May I be there this time?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "We shall have a trap of our own ready at the graveyard, and also be ready to travel, if Voldemort performs the ceremony elsewhere, should we believe we can go and intercede there instead.

"Would that be likely?" Remus asked.

"Oh, yes," Dumbledore said. "Voldemort underwent many transformations in his old life. Any of the places those transformations took place are possible and some of them are accessible. Those places would reenforce the ceremony, although not to the degree of the graveyard."

With the basic plan made, the smaller group broke apart as well.

## **Chapter XLIII**

The last weeks of May and the first three weeks of June flew past for Harry and most of the students. Slytherin and Hufflepuff fought through heavy wind and rain to a 180-30 Slytherin victory after six hours. Even Draco had admitted he had been lucky to come across the Snitch in the heavy weather. Gryffindor had crushed Ravenclaw 270-60 in a two hour match, giving Gryffindor their third Cup win in Harry's six years of playing.

Most of the Fourth years and below ignored the examination team as they arrived, and put the Fifth and Seventh years through their paces. The Sixth years watched the Fifth years with amusement, and the Seventh years with a tinge of worry, and in some cases even fear.

The O.W.L.s had been nerve-wracking. Even though the Seventh years were taking two-thirds the number of courses, they made the Fifth years look happy, well-rested, and jolly.

Some Sixth years, like Harry and Ron, looked on at this with more bemused amazement than anything else. Others, like Ernie Macmillan and Lavender Brown, looked nearly as nervous as the Seventh years. A few, like Hermione and Padma, merely looked determined.

The bemused and determined Sixth years approached their own exams with a fair amount of confidence. The nervous ones did not fair as well.

As with the first four years, the Sixth years received their scores just before leaving. The Seventh years would be sent their N.E.W.T. results in early July, while the O.W.L.s would be out in late July.

The day before they were scheduled to leave, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville collected their grades and went out into the bright late June sunshine. Ginny and Luna joined them, both still worn-out from the O.W.L.s, even though those had been over for almost two weeks.

"Who should go first?" Hermione asked.

Harry took the four identical envelopes, turned them so the names were not showing, shuffled them, and held them out to Ginny. Ginny plucked them, and read them out in order.

**Ron:**

Apparation . . . . .100  
Living with Muggles. . . . 96  
N.E.W.T. Care. . . . . 99  
N.E.W.T. Charms. . . . . 92  
N.E.W.T. Defence . . . . . 99  
N.E.W.T. Divination. . . . 81  
N.E.W.T. Ministry Prep . . 90

**Harry:**

Apparation . . . . .100  
Magical Traditions . . . . 98  
N.E.W.T. Business. . . . . 84  
N.E.W.T. Care. . . . . 99  
N.E.W.T. Charms. . . . .111  
N.E.W.T. Defence . . . . .120  
N.E.W.T. Transfiguration .111

Hermione:

Apparation . . . . .	.100
Magical Traditions . . . . .	.105
N.E.W.T. Arithmancy. . . . .	.104
N.E.W.T. Charms. . . . .	.114
N.E.W.T. Defence . . . . .	.102
N.E.W.T. Runes . . . . .	99
N.E.W.T. Transfiguration .	.114
N.E.W.T. University Prep .	.102

Neville:

Apparation . . . . .	.100
Living with Muggles. . . . .	96
N.E.W.T. Business. . . . .	96
N.E.W.T. Care. . . . .	99
N.E.W.T. Charms. . . . .	93
N.E.W.T. Defence . . . . .	99
N.E.W.T. Herbology . . . . .	.107

"Good," Hermione said, sitting back. "All we need to do is get through the next few days, and then we can start in on the N.E.W.T.s." Ron rolled his eyes, but wisely said nothing.

Friday, June 27, 1997

The train ride back to London was peaceful. Ron looked a little disappointed.

"What's the problem?" Tracy asked. She, Ron, Neville, and Ginny were in one compartment, Harry, Luna, and Hermione in another. "I could have sat in your lap the whole trip, if you had asked." The compartments really only comfortably sat six, so Harry, Luna, and Hermione were in the next compartment.

"It's not that," Ron said. "I guess it just seems strange . . . growing up, I mean. It seems just yesterday that I was getting on board for the first time."

"How did you end up riding with Harry, anyway?" Ginny asked. "Fred and George were supposed to look out for you."

"Yeah, right," Ron retorted. "They looked after me by strapping me in place and having a contest to see who could transfigure what into the nastiest spider possible. That was one of the few times I was actually glad to see Percy! I couldn't find any empty compartments, and Harry was only the person sitting alone that I could find."

"And aren't you glad you found him," Neville pointed out. "He might have ended up in. . . . Sorry."

Tracy frowned. "What for? Oh, you mean you think Harry could have ended up in Slytherin?"

"The Hat was trying to make up its mind between Gryffindor and Slytherin, when Harry told it he wanted 'anyplace but Slytherin'," Ginny said.

"H'mmm. . . . I wonder what Professor Snape would have done then," Tracy mused. "If he could have stayed out of things, I bet Harry would have transformed us five years ago."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"We're the House of Ambition," Tracy reminded Ron, "but that doesn't mean evil. There were any number of arguments, fights, and even a few duels my first three and half years. We didn't all follow Flint, Montague, and Malfoy, you know, at least not all the way. Harry could have turned the balance of power."

"Harry would have," Neville said. "Harry does not given in."

"There are leaders you follow because they've been put in charge of you, somehow, and there are leaders you just naturally follow," Ginny said. "That's Harry."

Ron frowned. "What?" Ginny demanded.

"Nothing," Ron said with a sigh, "just a pipe dream, up in smoke."

"Well, it can't be you think you'll be Head Boy," Ginny said, in the brutal way of little sisters. "You've been too mediocre a Prefect to expect that. Harry has a shot, although I'd say Ernie is the frontrunner."

"The Fourth year touts have the odds: Eight to Five, Ernie; Nine to Five, Harry; Nine to Two, Anthony; Twelve to One, Blaise; Twenty to One, Ron; Thirty to One, Draco, and some other, longer shots," Neville said.

Ron grimaced, but could not disagree.

"Then you must be thinking about the Quidditch Captaincy," Ginny said. "But you gave up on that."

"I know, and I'm not really having second thoughts," Ron admitted.

"I can see why you might have wanted it," Tracy said, "but why does it matter so much?"

"It's a family thing, isn't it?" Ginny asked. Ron nodded, and Ginny went on, "Do you know much about our older brothers?"

"Well, I know Percy was Head Boy our Third year and of course everyone knows about the twins," Tracy admitted.

"Bill is the oldest, and he was Head Boy and on some winning Quidditch teams," Ginny told Ron's girlfriend, "and even though the Quidditch teams were pretty lousy when Charlie was the captain, he was a brilliant Seeker."

"I guess, in the big picture, it doesn't really matter," Ron grumbled.

**"No, the bigger picture is Lord Thingy," Tracy said. The other three looked at her sharply. "What? If you know anything, I don't mind if you can't tell me. One way to keep a secret is not to tell it. Not knowing isn't going to bother me as much as it would most other people. Still, I know Lord Thingy is out there. He's after Harry. He'll be after Harry around his birthday, if not before."**

**"Probably," Ginny admitted.**

**"And, if he doesn't come after Harry directly, he could come after anyone, even . . . me," Tracy concluded in a small voice.**

**"He could," Ginny agreed, while Ron looked stricken.**

**"It was my choice," Tracy said. "I hope I won't have to pay for that choice, but no matter what, I don't regret making it."**

**Ron's response was drowned out by Luna's amplified voice, shouting in the corridor, "EVERYONE BRACE YOURSELVES! QUICKLY!"**

**At that moment, the train was forced off the tracks. As it was taking a curve at the time, all the cars tipped over to the right. The one with Harry and his friends therefore fell on the compartment side.**

**As soon as the train car stopped moving, Harry climbed out into the corridor, and then blasted open the side of the car. He literally flew out, and landed on the side of the car, erecting his strongest shields.**

**"No, no, Potter," Voldemort shouted at him from a distance, "not today! Enjoy the cleanup!" The Dark Lord disappeared.**

**The clean-up took over four hours. Harry sent Hermione and Luna back to Hogwarts for help, and organized the immediate rescue of the students out of the railroad cars. He sent Ron towards the head of the train, and Ernie towards the back.**

**There were literally dozens of serious injuries amongst the students, although fortunately no fatalities. Neville, for example, had broken his leg, with a double compound fracture, and Tracy had broken her wrist. Ginny took care of them until help arrived.**

**It took half an hour for the first real help to arrive. By the time Dumbledore led the first rescue team from Hogwarts, Harry had the older uninjured students patrolling the perimeter. The injured students had been given first aid and stabilized, and the younger students were keeping watch over them.**

Harry approached Dumbledore about an hour after the teams from the Ministry and St. Mungo's. Harry was only slightly surprised to see how tired the headmaster looked. "Headmaster?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"How could he have done this? I thought the Hogwarts Express was on a magical route."

"I don't know," Dumbledore answered. "He obviously concentrated his power on the rails. Neither you nor I could have done this, not because we lack the power, but because we lack the will to do evil."

"Neville has at least one compound fracture," Harry said, watching the emergency teams moving some of the healthy students off to London by portkey. "He won't be ready Monday night."

"No, he will not," Dumbledore agreed. "Will you allow Miss Weasley to stay with Mister Longbottom?"

"If you knew Ginny better, you would know that I don't 'allow' or command her, or really command any of them," Harry retorted. "I'll let her decide."

"And what do you think she will decide?" Dumbledore asked, curious.

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. "If we knew for certain Voldemort would be at the Riddles', then she would be with me. Since there's only the off-chance, then she might prefer to be with Neville."

"You are fully determined be at the Riddle House?"

"Unless you think we should be somewhere else."

"No, no that seems like the best guess. Nymphadora and Remus will be with you, and will call us in, should it be warranted. Now I see Miss Weasley is coming to see you." Dumbledore quickly moved off.

Ginny eyed the headmaster's retreating form, and then turned her attention to her leader. "Harry. . . ."

"Are you off to be with Neville?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Ginny said nervously. "Do you think . . . do you think Voldemort might attack Neville?"

"It's possible," Harry said, "but not very likely."

"Mum was here for a bit. If it's alright with you, I'll go to St. Mungo's for now, and then follow Neville home in two days."

"That's fine," Harry said. "Keep a close eye on him." In truth, Harry was more worried about Voldemort attacking Ginny, hoping to repossess her, than he was about an attack on Neville. Ginny should be fairly safe at the Longbottoms'.

Despite the late time of sunset, dusk was just starting to come in when Harry, Luna, Hermione, and Alastor Moody apparated to Diagon Alley. The pairs separated, and went to their respected flats.

Harry lugged in his trunk and Hedwig's cage, and went to take a shower. When he came out, Moody had laid out a late dinner of beef stew, bread, and two kinds of cheese. "Dig in, lad," Moody said.

"I didn't think I was hungry, until I smelled this," Harry admitted, taking his seat.

"Aye, some people react to the type of stress you went through today like that. Still, even if you weren't hungry, I would have said you should eat. There's no telling what the next few days will be like. There might be nothing but stress, there might be a few battles. You have to be ready, and eating a good meal and getting a good amount of sleep when you can just makes sense."

"How much sleep are you going to get tonight?" Harry asked.

Moody smiled. "I slept well last night, and I went back to bed at Hogwarts as soon as you lot went off. I'll stay up and keep an eye on things tonight, and sleep tomorrow morning. Bill Weasley will be by, and you lot will show for anything you'll need for the next few days. I want you all well-rested, so sleep in tomorrow, and stay up tomorrow night."

"That sounds reasonable," Harry agreed.

"I left the girls a note about it," Moody said.

"Good idea. This stew is good."

"Thank your house elf friend. He'll be here in the morning, too. You wouldn't want to eat my cooking, assuming there's even anything around here to cook." He grinned his nasty grin. "Tell you the truth, lad, I don't like eating my cooking either!"

Saturday, June 28, 1997

Harry made his way to the door, his eyes not quite open. "Wha?" he mumbled.

"Good morning!" Luna chirped.

"You're in a good mood," Harry grumbled. "What time is it, any way?"



"A little before Ten," Luna answered, breezing in. "Shall I make you breakfast? Dobby won't be here until afternoon. After I feed you, you may escort Hermione and me for the day."

Harry looked out into the hallway, and a bemused Hermione came in. Harry shut the door and asked, "What just happened?"

"Luna seems to be in one of her active moods again," Hermione answered.

"Oh . . . bother," Harry said, as pans were rattled in the kitchen.

"Oh, Harry-Pooh-Bear, you'll survive the day," Hermione teased.

"If I'm Pooh, Luna is definitely in a Tigger mood. Who does that leave for you?"

Hermione's hands went to her mouth. Harry instantly hugged her. "Hermione, you know I didn't mean that!"

"Sorry," Hermione said, her hands still muffling her voice.

Harry escorted her to one of the worn arm chairs and knelt in front of her. "Does it really still bother you that much? I didn't mean you ever looked like a rabbit."

"I guess it does," Hermione admitted. "That, and I always seem to have to be the sensible one."

"The sensible and responsible one," Harry agreed. "Look at the Marauders. Remus was sensible, but he wasn't always very responsible. Look at what happened to them. You keep us on the straight and narrow."

"Oh, like you aren't."

"In some ways, I am, but I am too ready to run off. Look what happened last year. At the seance, Sirius said we should always listen to Remus. We'd be better off if we always listened to you."

"I could have just as easily gotten us killed by the centaurs last year," Hermione pointed out.

"Well, I didn't say we should always do what you say, just that we should always listen to you," Harry teased. When Hermione managed a wavering smile, Harry asked, "So what's the plan for today?"

"Bill should be here around noon," Hermione said. "We can just browse around the Alley today."

"And then we disappear for a few days," Harry said.

"Well, we go back to Hogwarts, so we can exercise a bit before . . . Monday night."

Harry thought a moment, and then said, "I hope letting Tracy come along wasn't a mistake."

"Her parents are allowing her to go to the Burrow, so they shouldn't find out that she's really coming back to Hogwarts. She's not going with us Monday night." Hermione hesitated, then added, "And she is taking the healing courses, so she might be needed back at the castle."

"I know," Harry admitted. "I hope she's not needed for that."

"But . . . Uncle Ron," Rose complained yet again, "why didn't Uncle Harry come with you? Where's Aunt Ginny? And Auntie Luna? And Aunt. . . ."

"I told you, Rosie," Ron repeated for the fifth time since he had arrived at the Burrow the night before. "Tracy and I are just here for today. Neville hurt himself yesterday, and Ginny is with him. Harry, Luna, and Hermione, and Ginny and Neville and Tracy and I, should all be back for the entire month of July in just a few days." 'At least, we hope so,' Ron added to himself.

Monday, June 30, 1997  
11:45 pm, Little Hangleton

Six disillusioned figures sat quietly in a copse of trees atop of a small hill. To their left was the decrepit Riddle House, while off to their right was the village. Straight ahead was the cemetery. The small hill was really the only place that overlooked all three areas, as a small tree-lined lane blocked the direct view between the cemetery and the village.

The six had been present since 7:00. Harry and Ron had transformed into their animagi forms, and sniffed around, finding nothing unusual. From then on, all they had to do was wait, with Ron staying in his dog form to catch anything in the air.

Harry forced himself to stay still. He could almost hear a clock ticking away the seconds. If Voldemort was actually going to attempt this ceremony, he would have to do it between 11:00 pm and 2:45 am.

Harry had little doubt Voldemort would do something that night. After his bragging, the Dark Lord would have to do something, even if it was not the ceremony he had originally planned. The questions were, what would he attempt, and where would he attempt it?

Harry's attention started to wander. Luna noticed, despite the disillusionment spell, but decided under the circumstances, that this might be a good thing.

**Harry felt himself drift. As he realized what was happening, he decided to follow the feeling. In moments, he was looking at a large stone chamber.**

**Voldemort and his snake were there, as were twelve bound figures. At first, Harry was worried that Voldemort had found his twelve loyal followers. Their sacrifice could make Voldemort much more powerful and dangerous than he had ever been. While Harry was certain the conduits would insure that he could still out-power Voldemort no matter what, the rest of the world would be in even greater danger than it had been before until Harry (and his power) caught up with the Dark Lord, one way or another.**

**Then, Voldemort spoke. "Cowards! Fools! If you will not give me your powers, your lives, freely, I shall take them nonetheless! If I cannot be made immortal tonight, I shall be reborn in Darkness!"**

**Harry retreated quickly. Opening his eyes, he said, "Unless Voldemort was somehow projecting another false vision, he's in the Chamber of Secrets."**

**"It wasn't false," Luna said.**

**"Then we had best get back to Hogwarts as soon as we can," Remus said. He pulled out the appropriate portkey. "Let's go."**

## **Chapter XLIV**

Harry and Dumbledore hurriedly led nineteen others towards the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets: McGonagall and Flitwick; Ron and Ginny (who had flooded to Hogwarts earlier that evening without telling Harry or Ron ahead of time); nine aurors and hit wizards (including Tonks and Shacklebolt) and Moody; Remus and Snape; and Hagrid, with Madam Pomfrey and Tracy (who would act as medics, if necessary) bringing up the rear. The group was moving as fast as Moody could go.

"You look worried, Severus," Remus said with a bit of humor.

"If you're not at least worried, then you're as foolhardy as you are foolish," Snape growled.

"Actually, I'm not terribly worried," Remus said with assurance. "If Harry and Luna are right, then Voldemort is alone with his victims. Harry's connections should be more than enough to take care of the so-called Dark Lord. Even if Voldemort's so-called victims are actually laying in wait for us, we should be more than a match for them."

Snape shook his head. "I never heard of an optimistic werewolf before."

The group approached the entrance to the main Chamber a short time later. "How could Voldemort have gotten in?" Shacklebolt demanded. The remains of the cave-in had taken Dumbledore nearly three minutes to clear.

"There must be another entrance," Harry answered. "Mostly likely, through the Forbidden Forest, perhaps even going under the lake."

"Are you all ready?" Dumbledore asked. Everyone nodded from their set positions. "Go ahead, Harry."

Harry commanded the entrance to open. As it opened, pain shot through Harry's scar for the first time since the previous October. Dumbledore took this as an opportunity to hurry in first, followed by Harry. The others crowded the entrance.

Voldemort was indeed in the Chamber, with his dozen sacrifices surrounding him. All were either screaming, or had passed out from their screaming. A glowing, sickly green mist was just starting to come out of all of them, and the globs of mist were starting to swirl around towards Voldemort.

Dumbledore rushed into the circle ahead of Harry, calling out Commands of Power. Voldemort screamed in anger as the mist started to dissipate, and tried to counteract Dumbledore's Commands. Harry added a Command of his own to the fight, and that turned the action into the Defeat of Voldemort, for at that moment, there was a bright flash of multi-colored light.

Only Dumbledore and Harry were fully inside the Chamber, as McGonagall, Shacklebolt, and Tonks had tripped over each other trying to follow.

Following the flash of light, there was . . . nothing.

There was not a sound from inside the Chamber, and most of the magical torches had been extinguished. After the moment of stunned silence passed, Professor Flitwick took command. "Johnson, Stover, Starling, drag those three out from the entrance, and then transport them back to Madam Pomfrey! Alastor! Scan the inside of the Chamber! The rest of you! Back off!"

After the others had done as he commanded, Flitwick peeked inside the actual Chamber. A word relit the touches. "Harry and Albus are lying on the floor, as are twelve other people and a rather large serpent. There's no sign of Voldemort."

Flitwick looked around a bit more. "Right," Flitwick said. "Everyone, stay out." He stepped cautiously into the Chamber, while the others, especially Harry's four friends and Hagrid, were barely able to contain their concerns.

Flitwick cast several charms over the Chamber, and over the bodies laying around on the floor. Finally satisfied there were no obvious traps after some three long minutes, Flitwick turned back to the entrance. "Lupin! Snape! Get in here and take Harry and the Headmaster out to Madam Pomfrey." Flitwick went back to examining the others.

"Harry's alive," Remus said to the four concerned teens and the sobbing Hagrid as he came out. "He's breathing normally."

"The headmaster is also alive, but I don't like the sound of his breathing," Snape said, coming directly after Lupin. "Miss Lovegood, Mister Weasley! Come with me. Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, go with Potter."

Harry woke up with a headache. With his animagi-enhanced sense of smell, he did not even have to finish taking a deep breath to know he was once again stuck in a private room in the Infirmary. After taking that deep breath, however, he knew he was not alone. A slight movement on his part confirmed he was snuggled between Luna and Hermione. He also knew that Ron, Tracy, and Ginny were not far away.

At that moment, he caught another scent. "Neville?" Harry whispered in surprise.

"Hi, Harry," Neville said softly. Harry heard Neville enter the room, obviously with a limp. "Professor Flitwick sent for me. He said he thought the six of us, or rather, the seven of us, should be together."

Harry opened his eyes. "What time is it?"

"A little before Ten."

"On?"

"Oh, Tuesday morning."

Harry sighed. At least he had not been out of things for too long. "Good. Do you know what happened last night?"

"No, not really," Neville admitted. "I do know that the ceremony wasn't completed. It was designed to take away the lives and powers of those twelve people, and they are all alive, and Professor Flitwick said that they were still magical as far as he could tell. They're still out of it, and so is Professor Dumbledore."

"So, it's not good news, but not all bad news, then," Harry said thoughtfully. "Did Professor Flitwick say anything else?"

"Not really, but no one is sure what is wrong with those twelve people Voldemort was going to sacrifice."

"That can't be good," Harry said.

"I suppose not," Neville agreed. "Oh, and that snake of Lord Thingy's is dead. Old Snape did it himself, before Hagrid could make a pet out of it or something."

"That's good, anyway," Harry said.

"Hagrid's already skinned it and sent it off to the tanners. Professor Snape is turning most of the rest of it into potion ingredients."

"That's good, too."

"Anyway, Professor Flitwick asked me to check on you, because there are some people to see you."

"Anyone we know?"

"Actually . . . I think it's the same group you trained with in Rushak."

"The Dragons?"

"The Dragons."

Harry sighed, and eased his way out from the center of his nest.

No one saw Harry for the rest of that day or, even more worrying, that night. Nor did they see very much of Professor Flitwick, and he refused to answer any of the questions shouted at him in passing. Everyone who had been concerned with the foray into the Chamber of Secrets had been thoroughly debriefed, and many of the questionings came closer to grillings than interviews.

Professor Dumbledore had awoken shortly after noon that Tuesday. Over Madam Pomfrey's objections, he had checked himself out of the Infirmary shortly after 3:00.

He was not seen for the rest of the day or evening, either.

Wednesday, July 2, 1997

By lunch on Wednesday, the tempers of quite a number of people at Hogwarts were growing short. Hermione's was probably the shortest, in large part because she had no one to take her temper out on. Fortunately, before she could start actively taking her temper out on some one or some thing which was undeserving, a house elf she did not know appeared towards the end of the meal.

"Headmaster requests your presence in his office at Three. Headmaster wishes to inform you that Harry Potter will be there." The elf bowed and then quickly disappeared.

"About time," Hermione growled.

Harry and his friends, Dumbledore and the senior members of the Order, and Minister Bones were all present in the Headmaster's Office. "First of all," Dumbledore said, "we are sorry we had to leave for a short time. Harry and I needed to consult with some allies."

The group who had been to Rushak and a few others understood this to mean the Dragons, and that Harry and Dumbledore had in fact gone to Rushak to meet with them.

"Secondly, let me tell you the good news. Voldemort totally failed in his attempt to steal the life and magic from his victims last night. Voldemort chose the Chamber of Secrets to perform this rite because for him it symbolized the place where he started to displace the Tom Riddle he was with the Lord Voldemort he became. Had the ceremony been completed, all his original transformations would have been, in a sense, overlaid with new, stronger versions of those transformations, and those would have been reenforced by the lives and magic he was stealing. In short, Voldemort had hoped to totally reinvent himself, and in so doing, he also hoped to end the Prophecy."

"Why?" the Minister asked.

"Voldemort had hoped that by recreating himself because of Harry's pressure on him, and because of the damage Harry had caused his first recreated body, that would fulfill the Prophecy. While he likely never heard the complete Prophecy, it was obvious to him that his old self had to go, since he had failed time and time again to kill Harry."

"But it failed?" Hermione asked.

"The ceremony failed, but it partially succeeded in breaking the Prophecy. Harry and I ended the ceremony just before the new transformations were overlaid on Tom Riddle. In a physical sense, Lord Voldemort is no more. Tom Riddle remains."

That was met with a puzzled silence. Then Harry moved his bangs.

There was no scar.

"My links with Voldemort are almost totally gone, because in many ways there is no longer any Voldemort, only Tom Riddle," Harry said.

"Tom Riddle was, and is, a very powerful sorcerer," Dumbledore pointed out. "We do not know his current condition, but unless he is severely injured, he is fully as powerful as I ever was. However, he is totally human and mortal again. We do not believe any of the ceremonies he once worked, and tried replacing, can be used on his current body, in a sense, he is immune to those changes now. He is, as I said, fully mortal, but he still has all the knowledge and hatred he had before."

When no one said anything, Dumbledore went on, "As for Harry, he is still more powerful than I or Riddle were at his age, but not to the degree he was."

"Can you give us any examples?" Remus asked.

"Yes. Harry drove away over a hundred dementors at the end of his Third year. He easily destroyed large groups of dementors last October. I would say he could now still easily drive away ninety and destroy them in groups of a dozen or less. He can no longer cast an anti-apparation ward by himself, or an anti-portkey ward with the help of only one person. He can do so with one and two people aiding him, however, instead of the normal groups of four and eight. He was easily taking on three hit-wizards, or four or even five aurors. He could now take on say two hit-wizards or three aurors. His wandless magic remains fairly high, and his knowledge, of course, has not eroded. Over time, naturally, Harry's power will slowly continue to grow, as all of our power does over time, but it will grow slowly. He is still more than a match for Riddle."

"And you, Albus?" McGonagall asked gently.

"I am not," Dumbledore admitted. "I have to admit, I damaged myself last night. I advanced too quickly into the center of Voldemort's ritual, and I have suffered the consequences of being caught by the backlash of that much Dark Magic. I cannot fully regret doing so, because it insured that Voldemort is no more."

"What exactly does that mean?" McGonagall demanded before anyone else could.

"It means several things," Dumbledore said. "It means I can perform at my old high levels of magic for only short periods of time. It means I shall probably have to start taking afternoon naps fairly soon." He sighed. "It means I shall most likely die in five to seven years at the most."

Except for several gasps of astonishment, there was silence for several seconds. "Now," Dumbledore went on, "because of that, I wish to announce now that I shall be retiring as headmaster in two years, that is, in June, 1999. Hopefully, by then Riddle will be taken care of and I can devote what is left of my life to giving Harry and his two companions here more training, if they desire it."

Many of the people in the room were too upset about Dumbledore's condition to think of anything else. Luna and Hermione were not in that group. Luna looked at Harry sadly, knowing that Harry already had this knowledge, and was still struggling to deal with it.



Hermione, however, had other concerns. "And what of Harry, headmaster?"

"Harry was not in the center of the circle, as I had to be," Dumbledore said. "Had he not interfered as he did, I would likely have died at that moment. Had he entered the circle with me, we both likely would have at best seven to ten years each."

Hermione gave a small sigh of relief.

"I'm fine," Harry said, a bit of guilt in his voice. "I feel exactly the way I did before going into the Chamber. I've been tested rather . . . extensively, however, and it does seem as if I'm not quite as powerful as I was. I am, however, just as healthy. And, if anyone is curious. . . ." Harry pulled out his wand and cast a spell at his forehead. A faint trace of his scar appeared. "It's still with me, it's still part of me. Should Riddle transform himself in some new way, there's every chance that the scar will reappear, and so will my extra powers. I'm still a check on his power."

Harry dropped his wand, and the scar faded.

"So what about Riddle?" Snape demanded.

"Now that is a very good question," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Tom Riddle would be seventy-one. Somewhat elderly for a Muggle; early middle age for a Pure-Blood. How might Tom Riddle, who is half-Muggle, have aged had he not transformed himself? How is he currently, in terms of either his short or long-term health?" Dumbledore shrugged. "There is no way to know. Nor is there any way to know his current physical condition. My consultants do not believe he should have been truly damaged in any way, since the backlash hit me. He should have been physically weakened, perhaps severely, although that would be fairly temporary. However, having his transformations stripped away may have caused exacting psychological shock, and that may be permanent."

"So he may be truly insane?" Snape asked.

"It is possible." Dumbledore suddenly smiled. "If not, he is certainly very depressed."

Minister Bones did not find any of this amusing, although she had found large parts of it encouraging. "Obviously, we have to announce this. The question is, how do we do so? We need to let the population know that this Riddle is still out there, and still dangerous, without having everyone panic."

The meeting discussed that until dinner.

The seven teens sat in the Gryffindor common room after dinner. Tracy looked around in amazement. "I have to admit, I never thought I'd be in this room."

"Well," Harry said with a smile, "fair is fair."

"What do you mean?" Tracy asked.

"Well," Hermione repeated with a grimace and a glance at Ginny, "some of us don't come across too well in this story, but go ahead."

"My part is already out," Ginny added, "so it's alright with me."

"I have to admit, I'm impressed," Hermione said as she sat on the sofa in the common room later that night, Harry brushing her hair.

"With what in particular?" Luna asked, as she finished polishing her toenails.

"With Tracy coaxing Ron upstairs, without Ron threatening Neville when he went up to Ginny's."

"Good point," Harry said. He frowned. "Why didn't the alarms go off?"

"I turned them off," Hermione said. When Harry stopped brushing her hair, she said, "It's a secret passed from the Seventh year girl's Prefect to the Sixth at the beginning of every year, on condition that we not use it until we're in our last year."

"What?" Luna asked when Harry grimaced.

"It's just odd, thinking that my mother might have helped sneak my father up to . . . you know."

The two girls giggled at Harry's discomfort. "That's right, laugh at the hero," Harry grumbled, making them laugh all the more.

Harry looked pensive, and asked, "Can I ask you both something?"

"Of course," Hermione said, since Luna was still giggling.

"Is that . . . aura thing still present?"

The two girls looked at him, and shrugged.

"What?"

"Oh, Harry, we got used to that some time ago," Luna said.

"Actually, I don't think it's there anymore," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Still, Luna is right. It is, or was, nice, but it really had nothing to do with what made us like you, let alone love you."

"I was just wondering," Harry grumbled.

"Do you know what we were wondering?" Hermione asked. Harry shook his head. "It's been a year. Did you want to visit, well, go see the Dursleys' graves?"

"Why? To prove to my self they're really dead? I know that, just like I know they're being punished. I don't see the need to visit their graves. They hated me, they abused me. I'm sorry they were killed, but I don't need to visit them."

Hermione and Luna looked at Harry. He had not spoken harshly. Still, it was clear that Harry was not ready to confront his feelings about the Dursleys. Harry spoke into the silence. "No, I don't want to see the Dursleys. If you'd like, I could come with you when you see your parents."

"I would like that," Hermione admitted. "It was nice of your mother to send that message from them."

"That was supposed to be my mother," Harry admitted. "Even Snape has never said anything bad about her."

"I can't think of anyone else we can say that about," Hermione said.

In the silence, Luna said, while wiggling her toes to dry them, "What's something fun can we talk about? We should go to sleep happy."

"How about Rose's party Saturday?" Harry suggested. School had still been in session on her eighth birthday. While Rose had had a small party, the teens were giving her a larger one, and had held back some of their presents. "What do you think should be her main present?"

"Harry, don't you think she has enough presents?" Hermione asked.

"I'm certain Harry has something special in mind," Luna responded.

Harry flushed, giving away the game. Still, he asked, "What would you think of getting her an owl?"

"Interesting," Luna commented.

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Well, the Weasleys won't really retire Errol," Harry pointed out. "They told Bill and George separately at Christmas not to buy them a new owl. If Rose is old enough to take care of an owl, it's a way to help out the Weasleys and could help her feel more connected to me."

"How much care does an owl really need?" Luna asked.

"Well, in the winter, there's cleaning out the cage," Hermione pointed out.

"True," Harry agreed. "When she can keep the cage door open most of the time, she just has to keep the water bowl filled and make certain there's some food and she has to change the paper every few days."

"Let's suggest it to Mother Weasley," Luna suggested. "She would have a better idea than we on what Rose is and is not ready to handle."

"Agreed."

The three went to bed, happy.

## Chapter XLV

Thursday, July 3, 1997

Harry met with Dumbledore just after breakfast. "How are you feeling this morning, sir?" Harry asked in a slightly worried voice.

Dumbledore smiled. "Harry, I am not dying, at least not at the moment," Dumbledore reminded his young pupil gently. "You also know that I have great faith that there is a new adventure for us after this life is over. You have had more evidence for an afterlife than almost any Muggle has ever directly witnessed. Try and have some faith, too, my boy, as I do."

"If what comes after this life is the next great adventure, then why did you go into the Chamber first?" Harry demanded. "It was me who was supposed to destroy Voldemort. . . ."

"And you did so," Dumbledore pointed out. "It was your power that tipped the balance."

"But I really believe I could have halted the ritual, and destroyed him!" Harry protested. "You didn't have to rush in first, and . . . damage yourself."

"I believe you are wrong all around," Dumbledore said firmly. "I realized as I saw what was happening in the Chamber that you could not do both. Whoever stopped the ritual would absorb the backlash. I could have let you do that by yourself. Tom Riddle would have been stripped of his transformations, and you would be the one with a limited life span."

"And you could have killed or captured Tom Riddle," Harry pointed out.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Remember, there was only an instant before his automatic portkey kicked in. I do not believe I, or anyone, could have caught him. Tom Riddle would have been on the loose in either scenario. In the current situation, I have a few years, and you could have well over a century. The other way, you would have a few years, and I would have had at most a few decades. Even if what comes next is, as I have oft-said, a grand adventure, we should all try to live this life to the utmost." Dumbledore smiled. "As I have said, have faith, Harry."

"It's not easy, either having faith or getting used to the new situation," Harry said.

"How do you see the 'new situation'?" Dumbledore asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Things were coming to a head with Voldemort," Harry said. "I knew how to fight him; I knew how to destroy him. That Pure Magic spell is just beyond my powers right now. I might have to kill him using, well, you know."

"No, I do not know," Dumbledore said sternly. "Because of your power, you will likely have to help capture Tom Riddle. Remember, there are not twenty wizards alive who come close to your power, and I doubt if any surpass you. There are several ways of holding him forever, or at least longer than any wizard will naturally live. You will have to go to Rushak to learn some of them later this summer. You, Miss Granger, and Miss Lovegood can go, allowing your other friends time to bond."

"I'll mention the idea to them." Harry frowned. "What about Remus and Dora?"

"Remus and Nymphadora need not go. All three of you are quite capable of transporting yourselves to Rushak."

"But it does still have to be me, doesn't it?" Harry insistently demanded.

Dumbledore admitted, "In terms of the Prophecy, perhaps not. Should a group of aurors or hit-wizards come across Riddle, they certainly may triumph. However, it is not more than possible. You are likely to still be called upon to make the final capture." Dumbledore looked at Harry. "What is bothering the most, Harry?"

Harry sighed a deep sigh of longing and despair. "There's no way I can get that power back, is there?" Harry frowned. "I miss it."

"There is." Harry's face brightened. "All it would take is becoming an amoral killing machine, like Voldemort. Voldemort has also lost about a third of his power, just as you have."

Harry sighed again, more in sadness this time. "I was afraid of that."

Dumbledore was relieved. Harry might always long for that lost power, but he was unlikely to pursue the Dark Arts to recover it.

"When should we go?" Harry asked.

"If it pleases both you and your friends, I was thinking of having you go from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-fourth, but we can decide the exact dates later. That will give you some two weeks with your cousin and the Weasleys, and bring you back early enough to prepare for your birthday and the weddings in August. If you prefer, you could leave earlier, but I do not think it wise to put it off much later."

Harry nodded, "Like I said, I'll talk to them."

Saturday, July 5, 1997

Rose stared at the barn owl in the cage. "He's really mine? To keep?"

"She is, if you promise to take really good care of her, and share her," Harry said.

"She's beautiful," Rose said, mesmerized.

"Here's a book on owl care," Hermione said. Rose took the package and ripped it open, smiling at the book, Your Flying Familiar: Owl Care for Young Witches.

"And you'll need these, too," Luna said, pointing at the other gifts. Rose quickly ripped open the presents: matching water and food dishes; owl treats; owl kibble; and even a mouse lure on a long piece of string, so Rose could play with her owl.

"You'll need to name her," Ron said. "Try and do it before Ginny does it for you."

"Hey!" Ginny protested.

Rose ignored the byplay and leaned close to the owl in the cage. "Do you like the name 'Agnes'?" she asked.

The bird gave a dissatisfied squawk.

"No?" Rose thought for a few moments. "How about 'Gretel'?"

This time, the bird gave a happier squawk. "Right. Gretel it is."

"Come on, Sirius," Ginny said, "let's help Rosie get Gretel settled in up in her room." Ginny turned to Rose. "Come on. We can start reading over your book."

"Okay!" she said, and then turned back. "Thank you, Uncle Harry, Aunt Luna, Aunt Hermione."

Harry bent down and kissed her forehead. "You're very welcome, sweetheart. Now run along. You know your Aunt Hermione will be along to quiz you on owl care pretty soon."

"Hey!" Hermione now protested.

Rose giggled. She looked at Luna. "They're both so silly. It's a good thing you look after them."

"I do my best," Luna said gravely. After Rose left, Luna looked at Harry and Hermione. "See, some people understand my rôle quite well."

"Be that as it may," Molly said, "are you certain you want to leave so soon?"

Harry shrugged. "The sooner we go, the sooner we come back. The headmaster wants us to spend up to six days away. I'd just as soon try and get back before Remus' next transformation on the morning of the Twentieth, and of course we have to be here for Bill's wedding in early August, not to mention Remus and Dora's later."

"Have you spoken with Rosie about leaving?" Molly asked.

"Not yet," Harry answered.

"Hermione and I needed to speak with my father first," Luna pointed out. "I could hardly go off without his permission."

"True," Molly answered. "And what did he have to say?"

"That I should go with Harry, of course," Luna answered. "Whatever Harry has to do to entrap Tom Riddle will need more than just Harry doing it to make it work. If Hermione and I understand also the procedures, then we can help people like Ron and Ginny learn them."

Molly sighed. "Yes, they will want to keep going, won't they? Just like the three of you won't stop. We can't stop now, just because the danger is partially over."

"No, we can't," Harry said gently. "And you, more than most people, know why."

"Because Tom Riddle is evil. He was evil at sixteen," Molly said. "That's how old he was when he created that accursed diary. That means, he was not only evil at sixteen, he was powerful."

"I couldn't create something like that diary by myself," Hermione said. "Luna, Ginny, and I, working together, might be able to do it, but I doubt it."

Harry frowned, but said nothing. Molly did not notice, and said, "Make certain you talk with Rosie tonight."

"We will," Harry promised.

"So you will come back?" Rose asked for the third time.

"I promise, we will come back," Harry said. "We'll be gone for eight days, all together. Dobby and Mister Moody will come with us part way."

Rose thought for a moment. "Will you see Sirius' mum?"

"We might," Luna said.

"But you're not going to take Sirius away, are you?"

"No," Hermione said firmly. "You'll go away first, when you go to Hogwarts in three years."

Harry smiled, and said, "Just think, by then Natalie will be a Seventh year and the Quidditch captain. Bonnie will be a Fourth year."

"That's the nature of time," Hermione said. "It does tend to march along."

"And you'll be here the rest of the time?" Rose asked, not caring about those details.

Harry shrugged. "I should be staying here most of the time, just like Luna and Hermione will be at the cottage. I would imagine Ron will visit Tracy, and Ginny will visit Neville. We might go to Diagon Alley, or Hogsmeade, or into Muggle London. We certainly plan on spending most of our time at Ottery St. Catchpole."

"Remember, we also have two weddings to attend," Luna pointed out. "We'll have to take you to Diagon Alley for a nice set of dress robes, so you can be the flower girl for Remus and Dora."

"Okay, then!" Rose kissed each of the three, and went off to play some more with her toys, and to read about taking care of post owls.

This left the two girls in Harry's room. As per Mrs. Weasley's strict orders, the door was kept open.



"Harry," Luna asked, "what odd thought struck you today when we were talking about Riddle's enchanted diary?"

"I just wondered how different it really was from the Map. That's pretty interactive and magical as well."

"Have you had any conversations with it?" Hermione demanded.

"Actually, I have had a few," Harry admitted. "I really didn't until after Pettigrew was executed. I couldn't stand the idea of interacting with his younger self. But since then, I have talked to all of them, and, well, I don't know what made Wormtail turn on them, or maybe I should say I don't know what made him go over to Voldemort, but I have enjoyed talking to all four of them as they were at sixteen."

"Oh," Hermione, "I didn't realize. To answer your question, I suppose Luna or I could create something with the personality, or personalities, like the Map or the diary, without a tremendous strain. But the diary also brought you inside it, possessed Ginny, and released that avatar of Tom Riddle. That took huge power as well as knowledge to create. You have the power, we have the knowledge. Tom Riddle had both."

Harry sighed. "Fate would have been better off giving either of you this much power. You would have been intelligent enough to know how to use it. And don't tell me again how good and moral I am. In your own ways, you both are, too."

"Thank you, Harry," Luna said. "That was a true compliment."

Friday, July 11, 1997

"Can't sleep, lad?"

"No," Harry admitted to Alastor Moody. It was just before midnight, and Harry, his two lovers, Moody, and Dobby were back on the island in the Adriatic. Harry, Luna, and Hermione would travel to Rushak the next morning.

"Why not?" Moody asked, carefully sitting down next to Harry on the large piece of driftwood. Moody looked out over the small waves, just as Harry was.

Harry sighed. "I was hoping that everything with Riddle would be finished by now, that I could try and get on with my life."

"Still on that, hey? Well, I suppose I cannot blame you for that."

"Well, I might feel a bit better if I had any idea where the bastard was, what condition he is in, and what he's up to," Harry pointed out in a somewhat quarrelsome tone.

"Well, I wish I could tell you differently, but there's not been even a hint, anywhere," Moody admitted.

"Has anyone scoured Albania?" Harry asked. "He wasn't a disembodied spirit the entire time before Quirrell picked him up. He must have some secret hiding places there. He wasn't floating around in the woods, you know."

"Really?"

"Really," Harry said. "I know I told Dumbledore that he may have possessed other people. At least that's what he claimed when he was talking out of the back of Quirrell's head." Harry shrugged. "I don't say he was telling the truth."

"Interesting. Dumbledore may have organized something. I'll find out, and I'll also pass it along as a hint through back-channels. I do know no one has brought it up in any open meetings."

"Be careful," Harry warned.

"I will, Harry." Moody gave Harry his widest twisted smile. "And don't worry. There's little I can do here but take in the sun."

Tom Marvolo Riddle paced a cave in the mountains of Albania, his last and most secret retreat. It was into this enchanted cavern complex that Salazar Slytherin had finally settled. Tom Riddle had absorbed the lessons contained in the Dark Arts tracts Slytherin and some of his descendants had accumulated here on and off over a millennium. It was here that Riddle had undergone the first physical transformations, which had nearly led him to true immortality.

All of which were lost.

While objectively Tom Riddle was in much better shape than he had been when he was just the shadowy mist which had survived the Killing Curse that had rebounded off of the toddler Harry Potter, in most ways Riddle knew he was worse off now.

He had gambled in numerous ways, and lost all of them. Had he been able to overlay those old transformations, Lord Voldemort would have been replaced, and the mysterious powers Potter had gained might have been negated, or made irrelevant.

Now all those transformations were lost and perhaps gone forever. Several weeks of studies had shown him that trying to recapture any of those transformations save one yet again were certain to fail at this point. He now had to decide on a course of action.

Tom Riddle knew he was still an immensely powerful and knowledgeable sorcerer, but he also knew he was much less powerful than he had been just the previous October. He was also a great deal more vulnerable, and without nearly all the resources which had laid outside these caves.

On the plus side, the Prophecy, whatever it had exactly been, might be considered fulfilled. The 'Dark Lord' was gone, destroyed when Harry Potter had added his power into the balance. No one had seen 'Tom Riddle' in some forty years. To a Muggle, he would appear as a somewhat worn man in his late forties or early fifties, who was obviously recovering from

some sort of accident. He was moving stiffly, and had a limp, which was only slowly getting better. With a little work, he could pass anonymously through most of the magical world until he was ready to act.

"Not more than a week," Riddle mumbled aloud, "I need to decide what to do in a week or less. Less would be better." He sighed. No, he would not need that time to decide. There was only one place, one group, he could go to for help. What he needed to do was steel himself to ask for that help and leave as soon as possible.

July 4, Rushak Calendar  
Day 1

Harry looked up into the bright, hot sky. "I forgot to ask, what's the date here?"

"I'm not exactly certain," Hermione admitted. "It's early July, ten years after we first arrived. Rora would have aged over six years since we saw her at Christmas."

"Today is July Fourth," a familiar voice said.

The three teens stood and hurried out of the circle. "Sibyl!" Luna cried out, embracing the older woman.

"Welcome back, my wonderful apprentice," the Sibyl said to her. "Welcome back, Harold, Hermione."

Harry and Hermione returned the greeting, while Luna gave the Seer another hug. "Come along, my friends," the Sibyl said. "We shall apparate to the Oak Cottage where you spent that September nearly ten years ago. We shall talk there."

"Yes," the Sibyl said, sitting in the tiny sitting room of Oak Cottage, "Albus has given us access to all the reports on what has happened in your world." She turned to Harry. "You did well, Harold."

Harry shrugged. "I wish we had done a bit better and ended it, but I know I shouldn't be dwelling on that."

"Well, you have at least taken the first steps to dealing with your conflicts over these events." The Sibyl squared her shoulders. "I shall be teaching you three ways to ensnare this Tom Riddle's soul. Any of you will be able to ensnare Riddle, if he is under restraint. The three of you, working together, will be able to seal him away from the rest of the worlds for the rest of his life, no matter how long that might be."

"I shall also be teaching you various ways to restrain this beast. Those, you will be able to teach your friends. Finally, I shall teach the three of you to join together in one final spell. This one will allow you to accurately track this monster, should he ever be within some three

hundred of your miles. Should he be within approximately four hundred and fifty of your miles, you should be able to get a general direction."

The three younger people looked very pleased and excited about these prospects. It was Hermione who asked, "How long do you think this will take?"

"That is not possible to say," the Sibyl admitted. "You will likely learn the basics very quickly. However, you should not return until these spells and rituals have been mastered. It may take you as little as twenty days, it may take your full allotment of sixty-five. We shall see."

Saturday, July 12, 1997

Sibyll Trelawney approached the staff table in the great hall. Dumbledore and the four Heads of House (the only staff present) looked up in slight surprise. She had not attended the table since the end-of-year feast.

Just as she had come close enough for Dumbledore to greet her, Trelawney halted and proclaimed, in a voice Dumbledore recognized as the Voice of Prophecy:

*A Prophecy has been shattered, Yet the Pieces remain true. The Dark One is gone, Yet the Seed of Darkness remains. The Sacrifice of the interfering Phoenix May therefore have been in vain.*

*The Bearer of the Prophecy Must still crush the Seed Before the Seed germinates And a new Dark Movement arises, For out in the East, Darkness gathers.*

*The Bearer and his partners Must face the Dark Seed alone. Failure brings on Darkness. A Prophecy has been shattered, Yet the Pieces remain true.*

Trelawney shook her head. "Please pardon me, I seem to have been a bit faint for a moment."

Dumbledore sighed. "It is past time we discussed your Gift," he said. When Trelawney looked panicked, Dumbledore added, "You may be partially pleased."

## **Chapter XLVI**

Harry, Hermione, and Luna were somewhat confused after their first ten days in Rushak. They had quickly learned all that Dumbledore and the Sibyl had told them they needed they learn.

"You have learned the basics quickly," the Sibyl had confirmed. "Knowing the basic spells is just the start, however. You must be able to entrap this Tom Riddle quickly. You cannot trap him like a fly in amber, even if that is the final effect we hope for. He likely must be hit and hit hard and fast, entrapped before he can react. You have the basics. Now, each action must become instinct. Only then will you have the speed to win."

Sunday, July 13, 1997  
Early in the Morning

# **THE SUNDAY PROPHET**

## **SCANDALS IN THE POTTER CROWD**

by Rita Skeeter

While the Wizarding World has been celebrating the partial defeat of the Dark Wizard we can now call safely Voldemort, we have discovered the while the 'Boy-Who-Lived' is a hero, he and his friends do not lead heroic personal lives.

Rumours have circulated for over two years about the relationships between Harry Potter and his two best friends, Muggle-born witch Hermione Granger and the Pure-Blooded Ronald Weasley (son of high Ministry of Magic official Arthur Weasley and youngest brother of frequent Ministry Spokesman Percy Weasley). The rumours usually had Miss Granger paired off between her two friends, and strife between the two friends. The reality is much more surprising.

It turns out that Ronald Weasley (age 17 1/2) has a son who is over three years old. While the mother is identified as one Rora D. Rushak, The Prophet has been unable to identify who this woman might be, other than the mother of Sirius Arthur Weasley. Ministry (and family?) Spokesman Percy Weasley refused to comment or to give any further information. It is possible that it was the disclosure of this child that caused the breakup of the relationship between Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger last July, who had been linked with famed Bulgarian Seeker Viktor Krum as well as Harry Potter.

Young Sirius Weasley has been under the care of Weasley's parents since this last Christmas. Arthur and Molly Weasley have also been taking care of a young witch named Rose Evans since about that same time. No information is available on Miss Evans' background, but it must be pointed out that 'Evans' is the family name of Harry Potter's mother. Since the girl has just turned 8, the most obvious relationships between the girl and Potter are unlikely unless there has been seriously illegal time-altering magic used somewhere along the line.

**As for Sirius Weasley, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Luna Lovegood (daughter of scandal sheet Quibbler publisher Daniel Lovegood) became his godparents last December. While this may indicate a reconciliation between Granger and Ronald Weasley, it also points out an unusual relationship. It appears that 'heroic' Harry Potter has a serious relationship with both girls, the exact nature of which can only be speculated upon.**

**It seems that these two witches were the winners of some sort of competition within a cult that Potter cultivated this last autumn. Dozens of Hogwarts witches were competing for Potter's attention last autumn. For months, this crowd of witches, with witches from every House and at least one as young as eleven! took turns embracing and kissing Potter every day, until he chose the finalists. Potter apparently has a breast milk fetish (perhaps as a result of his mother being killed and then being brought up in a loveless Muggle household?), and had his finalists 'supply' him with breast milk over the course of a month. Despite their comparatively undeveloped figures, Granger and Lovegood seem to have the ones who suited Potter's tastes.**

**Harry Potter has helped to partially save the Wizarding World. We must beware that he does not take advantage of this for his personal pleasures.**

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"Oh, dear," McGonagall said as she read the newspaper.

"I believe it shall be rather . . . loud at the Burrow this morning," Flitwick said.

"I do not like Potter, nor do I approve of his relationships," Snape stated. "However, since the breast milk was harvested as part of a medical potion prepared under my supervision, I shall write them a letter today." He looked up from the paper with distaste. "I shall also be writing the head of the Apothecaries and Potion Makers Guild, and she will ensure that my letter is as prominently displayed as this garbage."

"I am also a member," Dumbledore reminded Snape, "and I can reach Poppy this morning. We shall also sign it. It is the least we can do."

"And just about the most we can explain," McGonagall added grimly.

"No," Dumbledore said, "there is one other thing which must be done. Miss Skeeter has gone over the line for the last time. Severus, please prepare the letter as soon as possible. I must go have a word with the Minister."

"Do you think the Minister will wish to get involved?" Professor Flitwick asked.

"Oh, yes," Professor Sprout stated firmly. "Remember, after Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood, and Miss Bulstrode, Susan Bones was the most heavily involved of all the girls who worked on and contributed to the potion. And the Minister is quite protective of Susan." Professor Sprout stood. "Severus, do you have a complete list of those who worked on and contributed to the witch's brew?"

"Of course."

Sprout smiled a smile nastier than any had seen her smile in decades. "I believe I should make some fire calls."

"I believe Minerva and I should help," Flitwick said.

"I shall fire call the Slytherins after I do the letter," Snape added.

Breakfast ended quickly.

At the same moment Minerva McGonagall had opened the morning paper, Tom Riddle had been standing in the middle of an unplottable valley high in the Tibetan Plateau. He doubted that even a thousand beings outside of the valley knew of its existence.

He had first learned of the valley in Salazar Slytherin's last journal, which he had read at the end of his Fourth year at Hogwarts. Slytherin had written of the eleven Lords of Magic. Eleven immensely powerful beings, who had removed themselves from everyday life.

Powerful beings . . . who were immortal.

Riddle had determined that he would be the twelfth, and that he would then destroy the others as he took control of the world. He had tried to enter the valley in 1948 and again in 1953, and had been unable to do so.

By then, he had undergone the first of the many transfigurations that had turned his conception of Voldemort into at least partial reality. When he had tried again in 1956, he had been able to enter the valley.

He had quickly determined that the Lords of Magic (now numbering 14) were too powerful for him to consider taking out in any reasonable time-frame. He had also determined that they were no threat, for they had abjured the world. They had no interest in power. They merely sought knowledge.

He had used them. Riddle now knew that if he had any real chance at regaining what he had lost, only these powerful, mostly ancient beings (the youngest would now be 397, while the oldest was over 6,000 years old) held that chance.

Riddle looked up at the great bronze-encrusted wooden gates. "I, Tom Marvolo Riddle, request entrance!"

The gates silently opened just enough for Riddle to squeeze between them.

Then they shut, just as silently.

Early That Afternoon

Rita Skeeter sat in her stylish, angular flat, sipping a gillywater and gin, a smile on her face. She was back with a vengeance, and had scored against that snotty little bitch Granger. She had overheard Granger and Lovegood discussing being away in Diagon Alley the previous week, and knew this was her big chance. There were no libel laws in the magical Britain, and there would be little the teens could do when they returned. The timing had seemed hazy, but it had sounded like they might be gone for months, that is, until the start of the school year.

At that moment of satisfaction, twelve figures crashed through her flimsy personal wards. One, a tall, powerful-looking and handsome black man, said simply, "Rita Skeeter, you are under arrest for being an illegal animagus. Other charges are pending." Two figures grabbed her and activated a portkey, and within seconds, the apartment was empty.

Riddle had made his way through a maze of passages. Unlike his first trip, there were no traps, no hazards. Even the passageways seemed to have far fewer twists and turns. In less than half an hour, Riddle found himself in the Audience Chamber of the Lords of Magic.

The Chamber was a cavern. Its living rock floor was polished smooth, and extended in an oval, some ninety yards long, thirty wide, and sixty yards high. He had entered at the bottom of the oval, and had to walk the seventy-five yards to where a small stool sat.

Beyond the stool, there was a raised wooden dias, with an ancient wooden table. There were now fifteen thrones made of combinations of stone and wood behind the table, and thirteen of the thrones were occupied by heavily robed figures.

The only sound was Riddle's soft footsteps. He went and stood beside the stool.

"We are slightly surprised," one said in a flat, emotionless voice.

"Why?" Riddle asked. He held his temper. He remembered these beings seemed emotionless. He was surprised that they would even acknowledge their own surprise.

"We expected you some fifteen years ago," another said.

"Would you have re-embodied me?" Riddle demanded.

"No," the first speaker agreed tonelessly. "We would more likely have dispersed you, as a bad experiment."

"I thought so. That's why I didn't come then."

"And yet you come here now," stated a third voice, this one a woman's. "What makes you think we won't destroy you now?"

"You are the only hope I see in regaining what I lost," Riddle admitted angrily. Then he snapped, "And even if you do, then at least I would not have been totally defeated by that old fool and that stupid boy!"



"Temper, temper," the first Lord chided tonelessly. "Why should we help you, when you did not listen to us the last time?"

"What do you mean?"

"We agreed to grant the transformation which allowed your spirit such permanence, and told you where to seek the other three transformations you sought, which together put you on the road to the type of immortality you sought," the woman stated. "What was the last thing I said to you, right before we started the process?"

Riddle glowered, refusing to answer.

"What?" she mocked, "is that great mind you're so proud of failing you? I warned you, you had to give up acting on emotion to be truly immortal. If you did not, the balance of Magic itself would be thrown out of sync, and a force would be created to counterbalance you."

"I did give up emotion!"

The robed figures all shook their heads. "Idiot boy," a fourth Lord spoke. "We told you not to act on emotion. You gave up love. You gave up compassion. You kept your hate. You gave up, well, in short, you gave up your positive emotions -- to a more complete degree than any of us, I must in fairness add -- but you kept your negative and neutral ones. Therefore, a champion who inspired love and compassion, who felt these things for the world, was thrown up by Higher Magic to oppose you."

"You mean you threw up Potter!?"

"Not even we can exert any control over Higher Magic," the woman said.

"You influence it!" Riddle accused.

"Of course we do, idiot," the fourth voice said. The Lords' calm tones were grating on Riddle's nerves. "Every living thing on the planet, right down to the algae, does to some extent."

"What is it you want, Riddle?" the first voice demanded.

"Can you at least restore me to what I was when I left here the first time?"

"We could," the woman said. "You would be long-lived, at least a thousand years, and very difficult to kill."

"And I could try again. . . ."

"That would restore to Harry Potter powers greater than yours, and he would merely destroy you again. I am certain next time you will not get away so easily, and you will die."

"No," Riddle said, "this time, I would go into hiding. Potter would be powerful, but I would still outlive him."

The Lords looked at each other, each realizing that Higher Magic would throw up a new champion at that time. If Riddle did not realize that, they saw no reason to mention it.

"Why should we help you?" the second voice asked instead.

"If you can enjoy little else, you still enjoy a challenge. I would think this would be one."

"That is one reason," a fifth voice, also female, stated, "but it is not enough."

"What else would you want?"

"We will send you on a quest. Should you complete it, within the guidelines we set, we will strongly consider your request," the first voice said.

"Consider?"

"It's either that or be refused," the fourth voice stated simply.

Now Riddle considered. He had little choice, since the rest of the magical world was looking for him and as far as he could tell no one else had the power to help him. "Does Potter retain any link to me? I can't detect one."

"He does," the second woman said. "Even now, he is in another dimension learning how to track you."

"Will you at least tell me what you want before I decide?" Riddle demanded.

"Yes," the first voice said. "We want you to lead Harry Potter to us."

"What!"

"We want you to lead Harry Potter to us. Our valley cannot be easily found, even by most powerful wizards. We want you to lead Harry Potter to us."

"Why?"

"That is none of your concern," the fourth voice said.

"However, there are guidelines," the first woman's voice said. "You may not kill or torture any sentient being from the time you leave until the time you return. You may not injure any sentient being."

"Don't take that as a license to kill and torture other living creatures, sadist," the fourth voice said blandly. "Trust me when I say that we are barely tolerating the idea of allowing your conditions to be restored."

"Potter will be returning to our dimension in a few days," the first voice said. "We shall give you a piece of glass, which will glow red when he returns. It shall glow orange if he is within two hundred miles of you, blue if he is within fifty miles of you, green if he is within five, and violet if he is within a quarter mile. Remember, however, that he will be actively seeking you. He will be able to trace you, at least by direction."

"There is an old house in Ireland which your followers did not betray the location," the second voice said. "We are sending you there."

And instantly, Riddle found himself in the wrecked castle in Ireland.

"Master?"

Gregory Pother, minority owner, publisher, and chief editor of The Daily Prophet, looked up and scowled at his elf. "What is it, Posey? I thought I said I was not to be disturbed?"

The little elf banged her head noisily on the floor, and then said, slightly dizzily, "Mister Dawson demanded of Posey announcement." This was the general manager of the paper.

"Very well. Let him in."

Geoffrey Dawson hurried in a few seconds later.

"What is your problem?" Pother demanded.

"It's that Potter article," Dawson panted.

"Got a few howlers, huh?"

"A few? Try two hundred and counting! Not to mention the letters from Hogwarts. . . ."

"Finally stirred that old bastard up, did we?" Pother said with a sly smile. "That'll teach him to deny our people access to sources!" He smiled nastily. "Stick 'em in the back of Tuesday's morning edition, all together. No one can say we didn't run 'em, and almost no one will read even a quarter of them."

"The Minister. . . ."

"I couldn't care less!"

"Skeeter is under arrest. They're charging her with being an illegal animagus, and probably more."

Pother shrugged. "Never liked her much."

"And the advertisers are threatening to pull out."

"Nonsense. They're empty threats."

Dawson looked doubtful. "They claim if we don't fully retract the story, they'll pull all their ads. Permanently."

"Nonsense, I said!" Then, seeing the really worried look on the normally staid Dawson's face, Pother reluctantly asked, "Who?"

"Every business in Hogsmeade, every business in Diagon Alley, including Gringotts. . . ."

"What?" Pother frowned. "Gringotts advertizes?"

"Of course, although I admit they're little adverts. The Macmillans and Browns, and even the butterbeer and the other big co-ops are threatening, too."

The two men were startled when an eagle owl banged against the study window. When Pother opened the window, six owls actually flew in. Each refused a treat and left as soon as their letter was taken, signs that their owners were not happy with Pother. The publisher was glad he had paid a small fortune to have his home warded against howlers.

Seeing his superior pale as he read each note, Dawson asked, "What are they?"

"They're from some of the other owners."

"I thought you were the only owner."

Pother shook his head. "Technically, I'm the only individual owner, with thirty-four percent. The rest is owned by various trusts."

"And these are from the trust officers or controllers?"

Pother nodded. "The Potter and Black Trusts, with one and six percent. That's hardly surprising. The Brown Trust, with two percent. The Dumbledore and the Greengrass Trusts, each with about one percent. The Ollivander Trust with five percent." He sighed. "Even the Malfoy Trust, with seventeen percent. These are all the large Trust owners. Fifteen percent is in the hands of a large number of small holders. The other eighteen percent is in the hands of three retirement funds. Normally, they try to stay neutral, but I've never seen any sort of response this well-organized or this quickly organized."

P>The pair sat in silence for some minutes. Finally, Dawson said, "There's really nothing we can do for the morning edition, and the evening edition only has half the run. Still, we could put a front page notice in that about Skeeter's arrest and note that we're investigating her story on Potter and Hogwarts."

"Excellent idea! Then we can really slam Skeeter Tuesday in both editions." Pother shook his head. "I have to admit, I'm really surprised by the reaction."

"I know," Dawson agreed. "I would think people would be worried about Potter's power and appalled by teenage girls being milked for his benefit, especially because it was so out in the open!"

Pother shrugged. "Maybe that's why they weren't so upset. Dumbledore's version of the story was too well-known within Hogwarts."

"They think it's true, that's obvious."

Pother sneered. "There is no such thing as knowable truth, there is only what you believe. And, once the public believes something, it can be difficult to change their little minds."

"Obviously, we'll have to be totally pro-Potter for a while," Dawson said.

"Nonsense! We just have to be much more subtle, but we'll be pro-Potter until he goes back to Hogwarts. And unless someone explains the little boy and girl, or anything else, remind our readers of that."

"Right."

Wednesday, July 16, 1997

Tom Riddle stood in deep shadows, waiting. There were many ways he could lure Harry Potter to the Lords of Magic, but most involved much more violence and pain than the Lords were willing to allow him to inflict.

Riddle knew (or at least thought he knew) Harry Potter at least moderately well. There was a chance that Potter would follow him no matter what he did or what clues he laid down. The Lords of Magic could easily insure that none save Potter followed him to their hidden valley.

On the other hand, the Lords would not like their existence to be common knowledge. Having Potter's merry band camped on or even near their borders, with a posse of reporters close behind, would not enhance his chances of getting what he wanted back.

In short, he was in something of a tight squeeze.

A more sympathetic person might have realized that Riddle was in the same position he had put dozens of his Death Eaters in scores of times, ie having a mission almost impossible to accomplish. The thought did not occur to him.

Riddle watched the house through the trees. His quarry had to appear sometime. It was a beautiful day, and sooner or later, they had to come out. He could only hope she would take a walk in the woods.

## **Chapter XLVII**

Thursday, July 17, 1997

Harry, Luna, and Hermione emerged from the underground grotto a few minutes after noon, smiling, happy, relaxed, and holding hands.

"Have a good time, did ya?"

"Good afternoon, Alastor," Luna said. Her smile faded. "What has happened?"

Moody sighed.

"What's Riddle done?" Harry demanded.

Moody simply gave them the information. "Yesterday afternoon, Longbottom and the Weasley girl went out for a picnic. They were attacked, and the girl was taken."

"Is Neville . . . dead?" Hermione asked.

Moody frowned from confusion. "Actually, no. He wasn't even hurt, he was just petrified. The girl recognized him as Riddle. Riddle told Longbottom that Harry here should try and follow. He left a clue. Dumbledore is waiting for you at Hogwarts. I have a portkey here."

"Let's go!" Harry said, looking very determined.

"Wait!" Luna said.

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Riddle has kidnaped Ginny, and wants Harry to follow. That means he's running towards some trap he has organized. Obviously, he could have run in any direction. Still, there is at least a slight chance he's been fleeing in this direction. As Harry pointed out last year, Riddle has hidden in Albania before this, and Albania is in range."

"True," Hermione said. She looked at Harry. "We should do the tracking spell."

"There is nae that much time," Moody warned.

"We won't need much," Hermione stated, closing her eyes. "Harry, take a deep breath and calm down."

"Yes, dear," Harry said, following her instructions.

Moody watched as the three teens' breathing slowed and went into sync. They relaxed only for a moment, and then they opened their eyes.

"183 miles to the South by Southeast," Hermione said.

"I have them," Harry assured them. "Dobby!"

Dobby popped into the clearing. "Harry Potter calls?"

"Three knapsacks with changes of underwear and socks, food concentrates and chocolate in those ever-fill packages you told me about, and the ever-fill thermoses, two per knapsacks. One with water and one with hot soup. Light Muggle denim jackets and our heavy cloaks. You and Winky are to make certain our supplies are kept filled."

"Yes, Master Harry!" Dobby disappeared.

"Master Harry?" Hermione asked.

"If that's what he wants to call me and he takes pay and wears clothes, why not?"

Hermione sighed. "Fine."

Tom Riddle looked at the girl with a sneer. She was moderately easy to control. He only wished he could repossess her. He was not in any condition to thwart the Lords -- yet. He glanced at the watch glass they had given him. Potter and his sluts should be back at any time. He smiled as it glowed red, but frowned when he saw it change into orange.

Potter had not reappeared back in Britain. He was somewhere much closer. The questions now were, would word of the kidnaping have already reached their appearance point? (It was probable that it had, Riddle decided, but not certain.) Would Potter go immediately back to Britain, or would he think to trace him first? After all, that was why Potter had left for training.

Riddle decided that Potter was most likely want to go back to Britain to gather the clue he had left. Since he had two women with him, however, there was a good chance someone would think to try and trace. "Get up, girl," Riddle ordered.

"Why?"

"Get up, or I shall force you."

"What does that glass mean?" Ginny asked, slowly standing.

"Never you mind, girl." He waved his wand, and the few supplies he had were gathered into two knapsacks. "If you want to eat and drink for the next two or three days, pick that up and carry it. Lose it, and you get nothing. Understand?"

"Yes," Ginny hissed.

"Good. Use the toilet if you need it. It might be the last plumbing you ever see."

While Ginny used the facilities, Riddle watched the glass. Just as she came out, the orange washed out and turned to blue . . . which quickly faded and slowly turned violet. Riddle roughly grabbed Ginny and disappeared.

The race was on.

"Harry did what!"

Alastor Moody looked at the werewolf, who appeared slightly feverish. 'Not surprising,' Moody thought. 'It's only a few days 'til the next full moon.' Moody's memory was drawn back to the previous December, when Harry had been recovering from the poisoned knife. Moody and Lupin had been sitting in Harry's room in the Hogwarts' Infirmary. Harry had been scratching away at some of his homework, Remus had been correcting student essays, and Moody had been drawing up some lesson plans.

Tonks had come into the room and laughed at them, saying, "This what I like to see. Three generations of men at the family business."

After she had left, Harry had said, "She's right, you know."

"About what?" Moody had asked.

"We may not be related, but we are a family, and I'm learning the family business from you two."

Moody and Lupin had both thought about that, and had to agree. Moody had outlived the few relatives he had had, and he had never been very close to any of them. Lupin's parents and grandparents had been killed in the first war, and he had no other contact with his other relatives.

"Well," Moody had said, "I'd be proud to claim either of you."

Coming back to the present, Moody looked at Remus Lupin. "Harry did exactly what you would have wanted to do in his place," Moody said. "He located Riddle, and he and his girls went after him. We cannot trace him. He and his girls are on their own." He glared at Dumbledore. "Unless you have any ideas?"

"There are thousands of places Riddle might be heading," Dumbledore said in a tired voice. "There is only one that I can think of where I can even ask for help. If you'll excuse me, I'll need to create some very long-distance portkeys."

Saturday, July 19, 1997

Tom Riddle nearly collapsed in front of the great ancient wooden and bronze gates. It would normally have taken the best parts of three days to apparate from Albania to the secret valley in Tibet. Even a powerful wizard got tired after three or four long apparations, especially when he was dragging a reluctant witch with him.

It had taken Riddle 36 hours.



Despite being a good four time zones east, and it being high summer, dawn was still quite some time away in the high mountains. Potter had come close enough twice for Riddle to know that his two women were with him. He knew he did not want to be caught by the three of them.

Well, that was no longer his problem. Potter would be stuck at the borders of the valley until one of the Lords invited him in. They could deal with the two witches as well.

Riddle managed to stand just as the great doors opened. He dragged the now re-petrified Ginny Weasley behind him, and entered the cavern.

"There must be a way in," Hermione stated, "we just can't see it."

"No," Luna agreed, her tone a mix of sadness, anger, and despair, "we can't." She sniffled slightly. "Ginny. . . ."

Harry glared. They were at the crest of a low mountain, surrounded by very high mountains. Wards of such immense power that they made the wards of Hogwarts seem insignificant stopped them from their goals -- catching Riddle and saving Ginny.

"I don't think staring at the ward boundary will help," Hermione said.

Harry growled. He lifted his arms, and raw power shown from his hands and streaked from his wand. "Whatever forces command these boundaries, I demand entrance for myself and my companions!" Harry's power flashed across the wards, which flared. The very ground shook.

"Say who you are and what you are and what you want!" an unseen voice commanded.

"I am Harry Potter, the Avenger, and his two companions. We seek one who is lost to us and the evil wizard who took her!"

"I am Luna Lovegood, companion and fellow seeker!" Luna called out.

Luna elbowed Hermione. "I am Hermione Granger, companion and fellow seeker," Hermione said in a much less enthusiastic voice.

"Only Harry Potter may take the final journey. However, the three of you may first transport to a shelter, unless your companions prefer to wait outside the wards. At the shelter, you will be provided sustenance and warmth." The high valleys were still chilly, even in the summer. "Afterwards, Harry the Avenger, you will travel to the gates, and confront your future."

The three looked at each other. "We'll come inside the wards," Hermione said. The voice gave them the apparation coordinates, and they were allowed inside the wards.

"Not a very comfy place," Harry remarked.

"Better than the top of the valley," Luna said as she lit the fire. She looked at the table. "Rough bread, yak butter, some sort of dried meat, and some dried fruit. Not a feast, but with what we have with us, it should make a good meal."

"We have to be careful," Hermione pointed out. "Inside wards that powerful, our food might not be replenished."

"Good point," Luna agreed. "Oh, a letter for Harry." She held it out.

Harry glanced at it, "Directions to a gated cavern," Harry said.

"I know you want to get to Ginny as soon as possible," Hermione said, "but I think you should eat first."

"I agree," Harry said. "I'll take the water and some fruit with me. I'll leave the rest of my supplies with you. You two should sleep in shifts. I don't want the pair of you kidnaped."

"I could be wrong, of course, but I don't think Riddle is in control here," Luna said as she split up the food.

"I don't think he works for other people," Hermione pointed out.

"No," Luna agreed. "However, he must want to be restored to something like he was before. There are powerful magical groups hidden all around the world. Some are Light, some are Dark, some are more neutral. They might help Riddle, or they might want something from Harry."

"I guess I'll find out soon enough," Harry said, sitting down to some hot soup and the bread.

Less than an hour later, Harry had reluctantly left Luna and Hermione behind and traveled to the gates. When they closed behind him, a line of magical torches lit, showing a long, descending tunnel into the mountain.

Harry frowned. He was tired, he was angry, and he was out of patience. He dismissed his feelings, and carefully moved down the tunnel.

After a hundred yards, side tunnels started showing up. Since they were all dark, Harry kept moving down the main tunnel. The torches lit up forty yards ahead of him, and went out about twenty yards behind him.

When Harry had progressed at least a mile underground, he stopped walking and glanced around. "Oi! How much longer is this nonsense going to go on?"

The same voice that had responded to his call on the mountain now called from in front of him, "In your measurements, approximately another four hundred meters. Then, you shall be making a right turn, and walk another fifty meters or so. I shall be waiting to speak with you."

"Yeah," Harry called out, "I have some things to say to you, too!" He broke into a slow trot, which quickly moved him to the areas where the torches were lighting.

Harry made the right turn, and finally, he found himself in a circular room, some thirty yards across. A figure in a dark robe stood to Harry's far left in the shadows.

"Where's Ginny?" Harry demanded.

"She is safe. Your two companions shall not be harmed. We hope we will not have to hurt you."

"I don't like threats," Harry stated.

The figure pulled down the hood of his robe, revealing a young-looking Indian-looking man.

"Who are you?" Harry asked.

"How old do I appear to you, Harry Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe thirty. Since you're a wizard, I suppose you could be older."

"I was born near the upper-Ganges, in what you would call the year 489 bc."

"You're . . . 2486 years old? Yeah, sure."

"I am. In my regular life, I was about as powerful as you are. Tell me, since our powers slowly grow over time, how powerful might I be now?"

"You're just saying that so I won't hex the hell out of you," Harry said.

"No. There are thirteen of us here at the moment. While no one and nothing is truly immortal, we come as close as is possible. We will provide you evidence later."

"We'll see. Where is Ginny? Where is Riddle?"

"Riddle is housed some distance away. His captive is, as I said, currently safe and well-taken care of."

Harry frowned.

"It will not do you any good to lose your temper, Harry Potter. We will be talking with you, and hopefully we will be able to come to an agreement, over your future, Riddle, and his captive."

"You mean your captive."

"She is not our captive. Riddle is not one of us."

"Then why did he run here?"

"That may also be revealed later. Now, you are tired." A slight movement of the man's finger caused the lights to brighten. The part of the chamber that had been in the deepest shadows now showed a door. "There is a sleeping chamber beyond that door. The lanterns will respond to your commands. There are water and fruits. You will be called for in nine hours." The man bowed, and in less than two seconds, he had faded out of sight.

"Nice trick," Harry admitted. He sighed, and carefully opened the door, but there was only a bed (with a chamber pot underneath it, which made Harry wrinkle his nose a bit), a chair and small desk, and the two lanterns on the walls.

Harry took off his cloak, his knapsack, some of his layers of clothes, and his boots. Harry laid down, and was soon asleep.

"It looks pretty out there," Luna said some hours later. Both she and Hermione had taken short naps.

"It does, but somehow, I think it would be dangerous to wander around," Hermione pointed out.

"It would be," Luna agreed. "There are watchers. I can feel them. They are passively hostile."

Hermione would have dismissed anyone else saying anything like that, but she had come to trust Luna. "Passively hostile?"

"I don't believe they will attack us, unless we try to leave."

"Or unless they are ordered to?"

Luna chewed on her lower lip for a moment before answering. Finally, she said, "Perhaps. I don't really sense that, but that doesn't mean it couldn't happen."

"So we keep trading off naps?"

"That does seem to be our safest course of action."

"What do you want?" the oldest of the Immortals asked. "Has Potter done something?"

"Potter slept well. He woke up twenty minutes ago, and knows we will expect him soon."

"And Riddle?"

The Indian wizard smiled. "We still have him asleep. The girl is awake and pacing, but she is not yet powerful enough to do anything."

"Then what is the problem?"

"Contemplate the approaches towards the north northeast."

The woman concentrated for a moment. Her eyes opened wide in surprise. "I must admit, I did not expect the pair of them."

"What do we do?"

She shrugged. "Awaken Riddle. Send for the others. We may as well start."

"Of course."

In the blink of an eye, Harry was transported from the bed chamber to the Audience Chamber. Harry admitted he was a bit impressed by its size.

He found himself standing in a circle of light about nine or ten feet across. He could not move out of the circle. About ten yards off to his left and slightly behind him, Riddle stood frozen in a similar circle. Ginny was behind him and to his right, also frozen in place.

In front of Harry, twelve of the fifteen thrones on the dias were occupied. "Who are you?" Harry demanded. One his attention was on the thirteen seated before him, he did not notice Riddle and Ginny being unfrozen.

"Over the millennia," the Indian wizard intoned, "many have sought immortality. Others have had it thrust upon them. A few have been granted it. We thirteen are immortal."

"Thirteen?" Harry asked.

"Yes. One is occupied just outside our valley at the moment. To continue, we seek others to join us."

"Why? Are you off to conquer the world, like Riddle?"

"Yes and no," the wizard answered. "Should any wizard attempt to, as you say, conquer the world, the magical world produces a counterbalance. Such was the case with Riddle and yourself. This has happened thirty-six times around the world over the last twenty-one hundred years, to our knowledge."

"Has the dark wizard ever won?" Harry asked.

"A few times. At which point, another champion emerges. Because dark wizards can never truly band together, they can never win in the long run."

"So, there are at least thirteen of you. I take it you're claiming to conquer the world for the good guys, eh?"

"In a sense, yes. We believe it will take the power of twenty-seven immortals, working together, to be able to prevent a dark wizard emerging powerful enough to oppose us. Until that time, we watch, with as much dispassion as possible, and rarely interfere."

"Riddle seems to want you to interfere," Harry pointed out.

"True. As I said, some of us achieved immortality through our own efforts, a few wizards throughout history have achieved it by accident, and a few have been created. We wanted to try an experiment, and Riddle wanted power and a longer life."

"And what does he want now?"

"He wants us to duplicate it. A much more difficult procedure, considering what happened a few weeks ago."

"Why did he kidnap Ginny?"

"Ah . . . our price to consider attempting to replicate the procedure was for him to bring you here unharmed. To do that, he kidnaped the girl."

"Why did you want me here?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"We have asked you here to join us. We would like you to be the fourteenth Immortal Lord of Magic."

## **Chapter XLVIII**

Several Hours Earlier

"Hermione."

"Mmmmm?"

"Hermione! Wake up!"

Hermione rolled over and shut her eyes more tightly. "Luna, I'm too cold to make love with you."

"And why are you cold in July?"

"Eh?" Hermione opened her eyes. "Oh. Right. Tibet." She rolled over. "Is it my watch already?"

"Not quite, but two people appeared near the woods. . . ."

"Woods?"

"It's well past dawn and that fog has disappeared. I would have awoken you in about twenty minutes in any event. There are woods about ten to twenty yards away from the cabin. About three minutes ago, two people appeared, and when I looked at them, one flashed his fingers three times, which I took to mean they were giving us fifteen minutes to prepare for them."

Hermione rolled out of bed. "Then I guess we should prepare." She wrinkled her nose. "Chamber pots. Yech."

Luna shrugged her shoulders. "Some pure bloods still think plumbing is decadent. At least our use of the utensils is more sanitary than the Muggles', and, after all, much of the Muggle world still doesn't have anything much better."

Hermione sighed, "These aren't positions I'm used to," and did what had to be done.

Ten minutes later, Luna beckoned the two tall figures into the cabin. The temperature the night before had been just above freezing, and it was still a cool morning. The two men were well-bundled up.

"Headmaster!" Hermione said, with a touch of surprise as the taller figure unwrapped a muffler which would have done the Fourth Dr. Who credit.

"As I told you, I am not in any immediate danger of failing health," the elderly wizard said, the twinkle back in his eye. He turned to the other figure. "Allow me to introduce Titus Sergius Sapiens, sometimes known as Serge the Vampire Killer."

Hermione frowned. "I thought that was a family in Eastern Europe."

"No, that is just me," Sergius said, taking off his heavy hooded coat, revealing a well-muscled man around twenty-seven. "First of all, let me tell you about the thirteen inhabitants of this valley."

"What?" Harry asked.

"We are inviting you to become immortal."

Harry finally blinked. "Why?"

"As I said, some of us became immortal through our own efforts. . . ."

"Like Nicolas Flamel?"

"Not quite," the wizard answered. "To achieve immortality through a Philosopher's Stone, you need to absorb it. When you just use the Elixir, it extends your life. Riddle there would have combined his essence with the Stone, which may have reconstituted his body . . . or perhaps not. It has never been done before."

"I see." Harry frowned. "So, you want me to be the fourteenth member?"

"Correct."

"And you need twenty-seven to take over the world?"

"We will not attempt to take over the world. We will be guiding the world, but we will not be eliminating free will or anything like that."

Harry thought about that. "And you've been at this some two thousand years?"

"The Fellowship is nearly four thousand years old. The oldest of us has lived just over six thousand years," the wizard agreed.

Harry shook his head, as if to clear it. "So, you have been searching for almost four thousand years, and you just have thirteen members?"

The wizard grimaced. "Basically, yes. We do have an associate who will join us in the end, but who lives apart from us. You have to understand, eight of us have achieved immortality on our own, and we have brought in five wizards, of your power and morality. Very few others have ever achieved our life-spans. 'Immortality' is a misnomer, of course. Anyone can be destroyed. Three of our former members grew depressed over the centuries and killed themselves. Not everyone is cut out for immortality. One other went dark, and we had to destroy her. Not everyone can live dispassionately."

"As for wizards such as yourself, there were at most a dozen of your born-power born so far in the twentieth century. Of them, only two have shown any signs of being able to handle the higher power levels required to achieve immortality. You were one, of course, and we were not going to help Riddle there too much. We are willing to do more for you."



"What did you do for Riddle?"

"We tried a new process on him," the wizard admitted. "It is what helped his essence survive separation from his original body. It was a test of a ritual which replaced a three-step process which we used to use."

"How many people like me have you asked?" Harry inquired.

The wizard shrugged. "We have considered perhaps four dozen over the last three thousand years."

"And only five out of forty-eight have accepted?" Harry asked. "Tell me, do I happen to know one of the others?"

The wizard nodded. "We did attempt to recruit Albus Dumbledore, just over a hundred and ten years ago. We kept the invitation open until fifty years ago. That was when he finally turned us down. We decided not to pursue fifteen of the now forty-eight."

"You do not have to make a final decision at this time," a witch said, speaking up. "However, there is something you do need to decide now."

"And what is that?"

"What to do with Riddle," she answered. She slipped off her hood, and Harry guessed she was from somewhere in the Middle East, and looked to be in her late thirties, by Muggle standards. "Your choices are 1) Kill Riddle and join us now; 2) Kill Riddle and refuse to join us; 3) Kill Riddle but put off your decision on if you wish join us until later; 4) Have us kill Riddle and join us now; or 5) Refuse to kill Riddle or have him killed, in which case we will try and redo the ceremony. If it works, that will give him a life of 900 to 1000 years, and making it difficult to destroy his essence before then."

"I was not planning on killing him, you know," Harry pointed out.

"You were hoping to capture him and imprison him in one of the so-called 'inescapable' dimensions? You no longer have the power to do that," the Indian wizard pointed out.

"I do, if either Hermione or Luna helps me," Harry said.

"He could escape," the Middle Eastern witch said.

"Dumbledore claims the traps last at least three hundred years," Harry protested.

"But he will now live a thousand years," the witch stated.

"You don't have to extend his life," Harry said.

"That is true in theory," she said. "However, by luring you here, Riddle has done us a favor. This chance is his reward."

Harry frowned.

"By the way," the Indian wizard said in a coaxing voice, "the process will restore you to the power levels you had before your confrontation with Riddle last month."

Harry smiled, and he saw the two Lords whose faces he could see smile back. "You know," Harry said, "if anything makes me think your offer is too dangerous to answer quickly, it was that offer and the way you made it." Harry glowered at them. "I am not easily bribed. I certainly wouldn't agree to join you on the spur of the moment, without knowing all the details. And, if you knew me at all, you'd know I'd at least have to talk things over with Hermione and Luna after you told me what you think are the details."

"So, you will not decide now?"

"This instant? No, I will not. First, let Ginny go. I'm here; she's served your purpose."

"She has not yet served Riddle's," one of the still-hooded Lords commented.

Harry transferred his glare. "If you can say that, then I really doubt if you're really as Light, or even as neutral, as you claim."

Silence hung in the air for a long moment, then the hooded wizard said, "I accept your rebuke." He turned to the others, saying, "The girl should be sent to the other two."

Ginny disappeared. "Do not fear," an expressionless, genderless voice stated. A ripple went through the group. Riddle realized that this was one voice he had never heard before. He suspected that it was from the oldest of the group.

"Since you wish time, we give you seven days to decide. If you decide yes, you do not have to join immediately. You cannot change your mind if you say yes, but you have up to decades to actually join. Riddle will stay here, as he is, until then."

"Thank you."

"You should also know that another person close to you besides your three friends will be here soon to help advise you, along with another who I believe is a stranger to you."

"Dumbledore and your associate?" Harry asked after a few moments' thought.

"Exactly. Go back to your room. They shall be with you within the hour. The three girls will be with you as well."

"Is there any chance I could be with them first?"

"As you wish." Harry was popped back into the bed chamber.

"But what do these people want with Harry?" Hermione asked.

"They must want Harry to join them," Luna pointed out.

"Exactly," Dumbledore said.

"Remember, while eight of the Lords made themselves immortal with sorcery and ritual. . . ."

"How?" Hermione interrupted.

"Six with Philosophers Stones and two with a more complicated set of potions and rituals," Sergius answered, "at least as far as I know. I could be off in my count. The important thing is, they took five wizards like Harry and made them immortal. They are offering him that, along with his higher level of power back."

"We have to stop him!" Hermione cried out. Luna, looking horrified, nodded her agreement.

"Why?" Sergius asked.

"What do you mean, 'why'?" Hermione demanded.

"You can't be eager to see Harry die," the young-looking man said dispassionately. "Are you afraid he will leave you in a few decades, as you age and he remains young?"

"I wondered how you could look so young," Hermione accused. "You're one of them, aren't you?"

"More or less, mostly less," Sergius answered.

"Don't try and distract us from Harry," Luna warned.

"I am not. We cannot yet reach him yet. Briefly, I was born in the year when Quintus Fabius Maximus Rullianus was consul for the fourth time and Publius Decius Mus consul for the third time, or 297 bc by your dating system. Although part of the Patrician and then-wealthy Gens Sergia, my father had married the daughter of a Prophetess. My older brother and I were very magical, my sister and younger brother were not. Now, many of the Patrician Gens had more than a touch of magic in them. That's probably how we claimed divine ancestors of one type or another."

"Like Caesar," Hermione commented.

"Like Caius Julius Caesar the Dictator, yes. When I was in my teens, a plague swept through Italy, killing off all the intelligent magical creatures, and killing perhaps a tenth of the wizards and witches, including my mother. Over the next seventy years, the plague would sweep through five more times."

"We learned that the plague had taken even higher tolls east of us, and less to our west and north. Still, a number of what you would call wizards and witches feared the plague would return, as it indeed did. A group of twenty-six joined together to make a Philosopher's Stone. While it is incredibly difficult for even the most brilliant alchemist to make one, the group had nine excellent alchemists."

"Twenty-six is an odd number for a magical group," Luna pointed out.

"It is. I was brought in as the twenty-seventh by my brother. We began working when I was eighteen. The accident occurred just before the Nones of August, the year Cnaeus Cornelius Blasio was consul for the first time and Caius Genucius Clepsina consul for the second time."

Hermione cleared her throat.

"Sorry. 270 bc. The short version of the story is, all the others were killed, while I absorbed the powers of the Stone." He grinned nastily. "That's why I've had to kill so many vampires. They want to feed off of my special blood."

"So you're almost two thousand three hundred years old?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, I'm much older than that," Sergius answered. "After the third wave of the plague swept through Italy, most of us who remained left for Rushak. I came back, in your time, over three hundred years later, if what you would think of as the year . . . 72."

Hermione mind bent. "That . . . that would be. . . ."

"That would be over three thousand years," Luna said, breathlessly.

"I have gone back to Rushak for shorter visits. I won't swear to it, but altogether I believe I am just over six thousand years old, give or take a year or two."

"Does magical power really increase with age?" Hermione asked.

"It does."

"How powerful were you? How powerful are you?" Luna asked.

"I started off slightly more powerful than either of you. I am currently much more powerful than your lover ever was. Remember, while none of the current Lords are really more powerful than I am, four of them are more-or-less as powerful, and the others are all at least slightly stronger than Harry currently is."

"Getting back to Harry," Luna said, "why can't you get to him and help him?"

"He is not in any physical danger," Sergius assured them.

"But they must be working with Riddle!" Luna protested, while Hermione agreed.

"No, they are using Riddle. They want to offer Harry membership. Riddle wanted some of his transformations back. They agreed to consider restoring one, if Harry was lead back here without Riddle's hurting anyone."

"Why?" Luna asked, before Hermione could.

"No more than one of them leaves the valley at a time. They could have kidnaped Harry directly, but that would have hardly inclined him to listen."

"And kidnaping Ginny would?" Hermione asked.

"Of course not. Remember, I said they would consider restoring one of Riddle's transformations. I would imagine they are offering to kill Riddle for Harry, if he will join. They will transform Riddle only if Harry refuses to at least join later."

"Do you know that for certain?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, no. I suppose they might transform and release Riddle if Harry doesn't immediately agree to join, sooner or later."

"We were going to capture and imprison Riddle dimensionally," Hermione said righteously.

"The transformation would allow Riddle's spirit to live on temporarily if the body is destroyed, and keep the body going for up to a thousand years," Sergius told them. "The traps you can create do not last that long."

"Why would they do that for Riddle, anyway?" Hermione asked.

"Well, there was a very difficult dark ceremony, which took twelve steps spread over three months. It took the sacrifice of several dozen lives, and rarely worked. The Lords long ago created a three-step process, which did not take the direct sacrifice of anyone."

"Direct sacrifice?" Luna asked.

"It had to be done in the presence of six dying people. Anyway, they had created a one-step process. They wanted to test it, and Riddle wanted to undergo it."

"And these people think they're not dark?" Hermione asked.

"They think of themselves as utilitarian."

"But. . . ."

"You are thinking like the mortal you are," Sergius said. "They believe they are doing the greatest good in the long-term. Do you think in four or five thousand years people will care any more about your Muggle World Wars than your Muggle classmates cared about the wars between Egypt and the Hittites? In a hundred thousand years, will any of this detail matter?"

"But what if Riddle had taken over. . . ."

"You weren't listening. When a dark wizard gets too powerful, magic itself provides a champion to fight him. Should that champion lose, another is born or thrown up by chance. It's never taken more than two."

"You mean. . . ."

"I mean, in the end, Riddle could not win. Neither Light nor Darkness can win. It's all very . . . Zarathustrian."

"But your friends believe they can overcome Higher Magic," Luna pointed out.

"So they do," Sergius agreed. "Well, they think they can sidestep it at any rate. Seven of them are very brilliant, far surpassing anyone in this room. They calculate it would take between twenty-one and twenty-four immortals of a certain power to outflank higher magic. They decided long ago to wait until the number is twenty-seven as insurance."

"Might that not just cause an even more powerful dark backlash?" Luna asked.

"If they tried to assert direct control, yes, I believe so, although they are not so certain. Still, that is why they will NOT try for direct control."

"They've been at this for about three thousand years," Hermione pointed out. "Aren't they worried that it may take another three thousand?"

Sergius laughed. "Time is not our major concern, Miss Granger."

There was a soft 'pop' sound, followed by a much much louder noise. "**WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON THAT PRICK BASTARD, I'LL GRIND HIS BALLS INTO POWDER AND THEN I'LL SKIN HIM ALIVE AND REDUCE HIS BONES TO FLOBBERWORM FODDER! KIDNAP ME, PETRIFY ME, AND USE ME AS A LURE, WILL THEY? WHEN I'M DONE WITH HIM, I'LL START IN ON THOSE SMUG, SMARMY, MOTHERFU.** . . . Oh, hello, Headmaster."

"Good morning, Miss Weasley. Allow me to introduce Titus Sergius. . . ."

"You! They said you're one of them!"

Sergius skillfully dodged Ginny's lashing boot. "I am associated with the Lords of Magic, but I am not of them." He dodged again. "Calm yourself, Miss Weasley. We need to know how Harry is doing."

Ginny glared at the man, then looked at Hermione and Luna. Whatever she saw there made her calm down. "I take it you've told them who these bas . . . err, people are?"

"I have. Did Harry make his choice?"

"No, he didn't. They wanted to give me to Riddle, but they backed down when Harry called them on it."

"Good," Dumbledore said. "We still have a chance to work this out."

## **Chapter XLIX**

Sergius suddenly looked over his shoulder. "One of them is coming." A second later, a heavily-robed figure faded into view next to the outside door.

"Ah," Sergius said. "Chandra, this is Luna Lovegood and Hermione Granger. I believe you have already seen Ginevra Weasley, even if you were not introduced. Luna, Hermione, Ginny, allow me to introduce Chandra Gungu, one of the solidly known as the Lords of Magic."

"Titus Sergius," Gungu said in his expressionless voice. "How . . . nice to see you again." He turned to the three girls. "Harry Potter has requested to meet with you before he meets with these two. Would you care to join him now?"

All three teens looked at him with deep suspicion. Dumbledore looked at them, and then exchanged a glance with Sergius.

"It is quite safe," Sergius told them. He turned and faced Gungu squarely. "These three are under my protection."

"So?" Gungu replied.

The air rippled. "It would not be wise to confront me over this," Sergius warned.

Gungu considered, then bowed. "As you wish." He turned to the girls. "Shall we leave?"

"Take us to Harry," Luna demanded.

Gungu almost frowned, but said nothing. He and the girls faded away.

"It was out of character for Miss Lovegood to confront anyone like that," Dumbledore said, frowning.

"Luna and I had a very nice conversation, although none other could overhear us," Sergius said, with a sly half-smile.

"May I know?"

"Your trio is just two steps away from forming the most powerful magical gestalt in over two thousand years. One step beyond that will make Harry slightly more powerful as he was last month." He hesitated, then added, "They could even take a third step, which would make them, collectively, almost as powerful as the Lords over time."

"Oh . . . dear. . . ."

The three young women appeared in a windowless room, illuminated only by one dim candle. That was enough to show the most important thing in the bedroom.

"Harry!" Hermione ran and embraced her lover. "We've missed you!"

"We have," Luna agreed, joining their embrace.

"I've missed you, too," Harry murmured into their hair. He looked up. "Are you alright, Ginny?"

"I suppose."

Luna reached over. "Come here, silly goose." She pulled Ginny into the group hug.

"Are you certain you're alright?" Harry asked gently.

Ginny nodded, but started crying, mostly from relief.

Half an hour later, Harry shifted on the bed. The four had been lying there for nearly half an hour, while each had told the others what had happened to them. "I hope you all know I have no intention of joining this group today."

"Good," all three women stated firmly. At that moment, a fission of power tickled Harry's senses. He had been able to draw power from his lovers and friends since the first trip to Rushak. That ability had grown over his Sixth year at Hogwarts. After the defeat of Voldemort, the ability had diminished slightly.

Now, it was back in full. Harry sensed the tendrils of power from all three of the women near him. To his great surprise, he realized that the powers were not just flowing from the three to him, they were flowing in all directions. The connections were bringing all four of them together.

Harry looked at them Luna and Hermione had obviously grasped the significance even before he had. Ginny was wide-eyed in wonder at what she was feeling.

Then, Ginny smiled.

With that acceptance, all four realized, the connections were permanent.

A knock at the door made all four sit up and get off the bed quickly. "Come in," Harry called out. He was glad that it was Dumbledore and a person who could only be Sergius.

After Dumbledore made the introductions, Sergius asked, "Have you made your decisions, or may we advise you?"

"I hope I can get some advice from both of you later on," Harry said, "but I know what I have to tell these people now."

"Then come along. We might as well get things moving."

"They're willing to hear me this quickly?" Harry asked, surprised.



Sergius shrugged. "If you are ready, they will listen. We have just met, Harry Potter. Let me warn you. Your power is great, but it is not as great as these people's. My power is great, but I have to coexist with these people for a very long time to come. I will help as I can."

"Thank you," Harry answered.

Sergius was correct. By the time the six people had walked to the Audience Chamber, the thirteen Lords had gathered on their thrones. Tom Riddle was also present, once again trapped in a circle of light.

"Titus Sergius," said the oldest of the Lords. "Welcome to your proper place. Would you sit with us?"

"Not yet," Sergius replied. "As I promised long ago, I will take my place as the final player when the time comes. It has not yet come. I have come to stand by, and perhaps advise, Harry Potter."

"Why?" another demanded. "You did not counsel me. You did not counsel Dumbledore. Why counsel Harry Potter?"

"Because of all who have been considered, I find him the most worthy. Not because he is the most powerful, for that would have been our brother M here. Not because he is the most able. Certainly not because he is the wisest. No, Harry Potter has the most compassion, the greatest capacity to love and to be loved. Should he decide to join, he will bring great gifts to the Lords. For the moment, I wait to hear his words."

"What have you decided, Harry Potter?" Gungu asked.

"I will not join you today, or any time soon," Harry answered. "I am certainly interested in knowing more about you, and what you hope to accomplish. Compared to you, I don't have much time, but I should certainly have years to decide, not minutes."

"True," Gungu agreed.

"But I must ask you, do NOT transform Riddle," Harry pled. "It's not a deal. If you really believe in the Light, do not allow Riddle to follow Darkness again."

"You promised!" Riddle called out.

"We promised to consider your request," Gungu reminded Riddle.

"We will consider. Titus Sergius, return Harry Potter and his friends either to the guest room or to your quarters. Albus Dumbledore. Please remain. We will inform the rest of you when we decide."

As they were walking towards Sergius' quarters, Ginny asked, "Why did they want to meet with Dumbledore?"

"They probably know he's dying," Harry answered. "They can probably restore him, and still make him immortal."

"He wouldn't!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Why not?" Luna asked.

"It would go against what he's always said about death being 'the next great adventure', and Voldemort's pursuit of immortality being wrong," Harry said.

"And yet, he is a good friend of mine, and an even closer friend to Nicolas Flamel," Sergius pointed out.

"And he might wish to join to help guide the Lords," Luna added. "That would be very like him. He would not want to be nearly-immortal for its own sake, but could be tempted by the good he could do."

"But. . . ." Hermione sputtered.

"He would still be working behind the scenes, as he so enjoys doing today," Luna responded.

"I suppose," Hermione said, "but it seems wrong." She turned on Harry. "Why would you want it?"

"I don't know if I do," Harry admitted. "I don't want to close off the possibility. I need to talk with Dumbledore and Mister Sergius. . . ."

"Call me Titus Sergius, or Sergius, or just Serge, as you prefer," Sergius said.

"Thank you. I need to know a lot more about their agenda." He looked Hermione straight in the eye. "Are you afraid we won't grow old together? That if I join them, I'll leave you? I don't know about the first, but if immortality requires the second, I won't do it."

Hermione burst out into tears, and hugged Harry fiercely. Harry hugged her back, and managed not to roll his eyes.

"You would, of course, fail to grow old with your friends and lovers," Sergius said.

"However, while forming new attachments is discouraged, it is understood that you will maintain, and cherish, those ties you already have."

"They can ask me again when I'm thirty. Until then, I hope they, and you, will answer an awful lot of questions."

"Hello, children, Titus," Dumbledore said, coming into the sitting room of Sergius' suite a while later.

"My, Headmaster," Hermione said severely, "you certainly have a bounce in your step and a twinkle in the eye."

"Ah, yes, well . . . eh. . . ."

"You took the Lords up on their final offer, I take it," Harry said expressionlessly.

"I made a deal," Dumbledore admitted.

"Out of which, you get immortality," Hermione accused.

"Out of which, I had to accept immortality," Dumbledore agreed. "I do not look forward to it."

"Tell us," Luna suggested.

"I will be staying here the rest of the summer," Dumbledore told them. "I shall be restored in health, and undergo the first transformations required of me. I shall be returning next year, and will not, after all, be returning to Hogwarts after this next year. This was required of me."

"And in return, if this was such a sacrifice?" Hermione asked.

"It was, Miss Granger. I have been closer to death than I am at this moment, or if you prefer, closer than I was before this offer was made. I was not tempted then. I was not just now."

Dumbledore shrugged. "What else was implied in this deal? First and foremost, they will not help Riddle for three years, starting from today. Should he somehow manage to find some new ceremony to push him towards immortality before that, the Lords will attack him in unison. They shall destroy him. Riddle understands that very well."

"So that means that Harry has three years to catch him and put him away, rather than kill him," Hermione summed up. "If he doesn't catch Riddle, they will help Riddle."

"Correct. Harry is not to chase after Riddle for one year. If Riddle chooses to hide, he has a year to find a good spot. If he is foolish enough to cross paths with Harry, well, Harry may deal with him as he feels he must."

"What about everyone else?" Luna asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Harry may not chase after Riddle for a year. May the British Ministry? May you? Or anyone else, for that matter?"

"Actually, I suppose they may, although actually the same restrictions which apply to Harry apply to me." Dumbledore shrugged. "Despite the recent changes in the Administration, I doubt they would be able to do much beyond insuring he does not hide in Britain, which you, with your abilities, could insure in any event. If Riddle is that foolish, Harry may inform the Ministry, and they may capture or kill him, or Harry may."

"And what about Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry just looked at Dumbledore, who looked sadly back. "You are committed to nothing more than you were before. You and I will talk often over the course of the next year, but they do not expect any further decision from you until you are thirty."

"I see." Was it luck, or had they been listening in?

Dumbledore turned to Sergius. "Have you considered my request?"

"I have, but I need some additional information." Sergius turned to Harry. "Would you like me to work with you, Harry Potter, over the next thirteen months? I can help you develop your gifts and powers, and will advise you on anything you wish."

"Thank you, Titus Sergius. I accept your offer."

Sergius nodded, and turned to Dumbledore. "I shall be there."

"Titus Sergius will teach the N.E.W.T.-level Defense classes, and will be there for all of you to go to."

"Is there any reason for us to stay here, then?" Titus Sergius asked Harry.

"I suppose not," Harry admitted. The three girls looked at each other, and none had anything to add.

"Good luck, then, Albus Dumbledore."

The group disappeared.

"Merlin," Dumbledore said, "I hope I have done the right thing."

One of the Lords appeared next to Dumbledore. "I believe you have," Merlin said. "It was not easy for you. It should not have been. Come. We have much to do."

"Where are we?" Ginny asked.

"Somewhere in Hogwarts," Harry answered.

"Exactly when are we?" Ginny asked. "I mean, I don't even know what day it is."

"It is Saturday, July Nineteenth, shortly before Six in the evening, local time," Titus Sergius answered. He turned to Harry. "Your friend the werewolf is here. Will you run with him tonight?"

"I thought the full moon was tomorrow," Harry answered.

"At Four-twenty, local time," Sergius replied. "Ten and a half hours from now."

"Oh . . . well, I was planning to."

"Then come along to dinner. You should rest afterwards."

"Do you know Hogwarts well?" Hermione asked.

"I taught here for almost a hundred years, centuries ago," Sergius replied. "I also have visited a few times since. Minerva McGonagall knows me, and knows of me."

Sunday, July 20, 1997

After being up half the night running with Remus, Harry was feeling rather bleary-eyed at breakfast. Nonetheless, he dragged himself into the great hall, where there was the final meeting of the Order of the Phoenix, along with the non-members of the staff along with the Minister and a few select members of the Ministry and the Board of Governors. As he came in, the Weasleys finally released Ginny from their embrace.

Harry and his six friends sat at the Gryffindor table, to Tracy's amusement. The Minister and the leaders of the Order, plus Sergius, sat at the staff table along with the Minister and the Hogwarts staff. The members from the Ministry were seated along the Slytherin table (which Tracy did not find as amusing), while the regular Order members sat at the Hufflepuff table while the Board of Governors sat at the Ravenclaw table.

Dumbledore, to nearly everyone's confusion, was missing.

Professor McGonagall called the room to order, and announced that breakfast was served. When that failed to quiet the room, her glare -- followed by the further announcement that nothing would be imparted until after she had eaten, and that they could please themselves if they wanted nothing to eat before lunch -- did.

"No hints?" Ron asked Harry as he scooped a pile of baked beans onto his eggs and toast.

"No," Harry said. "We need to hear what McGonagall says. You'll have a chance to hear more details later."

"Fair enough," Ron admitted.

When the clattering of the silver died down and everyone who was interested had poured their second (or third) cup of coffee or tea, Minerva McGonagall stood. The hall quieted.

"You are all aware of the events of some three weeks ago," she started. "In short, due in large parts to the efforts of Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter, the Dark Wizard formally known as Voldemort" (a number of the audience still winced) "was defeated and transformed back to his former self, Tom Marvolo Riddle, Junior, a half-blood wizard who had been a Slytherin Prefect and then Head Boy in 1944."

"He sought retransformation, begging the favor from a powerful sect in Asia. They wanted to speak with both Professor Dumbledore and Mister Potter, but sent Riddle to lure them to

them. To do this, Riddle kidnaped Ginevra Weasley. Mister Potter, along with Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood, approached the group from one direction, while Professor Dumbledore, accompanied by this wizard, Titus Sergius, approached from another."

"Professor Dumbledore and Mister Potter negotiated with this group. These people had no interest or reason to harm Miss Weasley, and they released her unharmed. Mister Potter and his two friends, along with Titus Sergius, accompanied Miss Weasley back to Hogwarts last evening. Professor Dumbledore is still with this group."

"The Headmaster will return to Hogwarts in late August. He shall, however, be retiring after this academic year."

"The group has agreed not to help Riddle in any attempts at restoring his transformations for three years. Should he try and find anyone else to help him, or try to transform himself by himself before then, the sect will help to track him down and then destroy him."

"Neither the Headmaster nor Mister Potter may try and track Riddle down for a year. Therefore, unless Riddle is foolish enough to attack or at least approach either, which I grant you he may be, neither the Headmaster nor Mister Potter may help in capturing this criminal."

She glared at Minister Bones, and then at the Ministry officials. "Please note that YOU, and the other Ministries around the world, may track and capture Riddle. I grant you, he is still a very powerful, evil, dangerous wizard. I doubt there are more than two hundred wizards or witches around the world who could match his power. On the other hand, I doubt there are any three aurors in the world who together would not be more than his match, if they have any abilities to work together. From what we know of Tom Riddle, he is unlikely to run and hide."

She sighed. "I grant you, Tom Riddle is unlikely to come back to Britain, unless it is to launch an attack on some target. Still, his crimes here, and in neighboring countries, far surpassed the point where any Ministry can have any legitimate qualms or objections to searching for him. It is up to our Ministry to put pressure on those Ministries to find him, and arrest him."

McGonagall looked over at the British members of the Order of the Phoenix (by far the vast majority). "While the Headmaster will be exploiting his contacts, and may have missions for the overseas members, the Order of the Phoenix is standing down in Britain, until further notice." She glanced around. "Just for your information, Titus Sergius will be joining us for a year, teaching the Sixth and Seventh year Defense classes."

She glanced over the group. "I have arranged the release of a statement to the press covering these points. Good morning." She left the table.

"Could you all wait here?" Harry asked his friends. When they agreed, he made his way over to Mister and Mrs. Weasley.

"What may we do for you, Harry?" Molly asked.

"Several favors," Harry admitted, drawing them aside.

A few moments later, Harry came up to his friends and led them from the great hall. "Come on," he said, "we need to talk."

## **Chapter L**

"Where are we going?" Ron asked.

"At the moment, to the Room of Requirement," Harry said. "After that, well, that's what we need to discuss."

The Room provided a comfortable inglenook, with seven roomy chairs set in a circle. Harry sat, and the others sat around him (Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Tracy, Ron, Luna). Harry asked Hermione to sum up what had happened in Tibet.

When Hermione had finished, Tracy asked, "So, since you don't have to decide for at least thirteen years, and you can't go after Riddle for one year, what do we have to decide today?"

Ginny, Neville, and Ron gaped at her. "What?" Tracy said. "Those are issues Harry has to think about. I'm sure we'll be talking with him about these things many times over the years. Harry, you seem to want to discuss something, or some issues. What do we need to talk about?"

"Hermione left out one thing," Harry said. "In addition to that, we need to talk about the next month or so, first."

"In what way?" Neville asked.

"First of all, Hermione, Luna, and I are going to be spending most of that time together. We would like to spend it with all of you. If so, there is an island in the Adriatic we can go to. We've all been there, except for you, Tracy."

"Is that where the gateway to that other wizarding world is?" Tracy asked.

"Yes, although we won't be going through it over the next month," Harry answered. "We all have to be back for Bill and Fleur's wedding on the Second, and again for Remus and Dora's wedding on the Twenty-Third. I talked with Mister and Mrs. Weasley, and then with Madam Longbottom. You all have permission, except for Tracy. I could talk with your parents, if you wish."

"And what would we be doing there?" Tracy asked.

"Three things," Harry answered. "First, our summer has been pretty well interrupted. We need to get our summer school work out of the way. Second, bonding. We'll be building our bonds, both as two pairs and a trio, and as a group."

"And what sort of group bonds do you mean?" Tracy demanded.

"Well, if you're worried about anything like the physical pair-bonding you and Ron may have done, I certainly don't mean that," Harry teased. "Still, that brings us to the third point. I can restore the magical bonds some of us formed last year, on a higher, and more reciprocal level."

"Meaning?"



"Meaning right now, I don't just have those bonds with Luna, Hermione, and Ginny, they have those bonds with me and with each other. We can share power, and to some degree feelings."

Tracy thought about that. "Tell me, if you were made immortal, would that carry us along through those bonds? For that matter, if one of the bondmates were to die, how would that affect the others?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted, and a glance at Hermione and Luna showed they did not know either.

Finally, Hermione said, "The original power-sharing didn't have any implications along those lines. These bonds seem to be a higher order of the same type. Still, we must verify that. Titus Sergius can likely help us."

"Can you be certain these bonds won't form spontaneously?" Tracy asked.

"No," Luna answered.

Tracy looked at Ron. "I think it would be best we not go, then, unless they can talk with this Sergius first."

Hermione stood. "Let me see if I can find him," she said. She walked out of the room.

"What are you going to do?" Neville asked Ginny.

"The bonds have already formed for me in Tibet," Ginny answered. "You have choices. I don't. I'm not making your coming along a condition, Neville, but I'm going. I'm hoping you want to come, too."

Neville looked torn, to say the least.

The wait for Hermione became rather uncomfortable.

Twenty minutes after she left, Hermione returned with Titus Sergius. "Right," he said, jumping right in. "Hermione has filled me in. I don't have a great deal of time, so forgive my being brief. One, the bonds can form spontaneously, but only with Harry acting as a catalyst, and with all persons' consent, although that might be unconscious consent. Two, if Harry accepts the immortality rituals, that will not make any of you immortal. It would make certain life-extending rituals easier for you to undergo and survive, but that seems unlikely at the moment. Three, when one partner within the bonds dies, there will be a fair amount of physical discomfort. Considering the type of emotional bond that is required for these magical bonds to form, the physical discomfort would be nothing compared to the emotion distress you'd feel in any event. Does that sum up what you need to know for now?"

They all nodded. "Great," he said, and left the room.

"Not one for chit-chat, is he?" Ginny commented.

"Why did he come all the way up here?" Neville asked.

"I would imagine so there could be no doubt about the message," Tracy said. She turned to Ron. "Do you want to go?"

Ron hesitated, but then said, "Yes, I would."

"Would you like me to go?"

"Yes," Ron said sincerely, "I would."

"What about you, Harry?"

"Please, come with us," Harry said.

"Does anyone have any objections to my coming along?" Everyone shook their heads.

"Alright. I'm not certain I'd like this sort of bonding, but we'll see how it goes. Speak with my parents, Harry."

"I'll ask McGonagall to arrange the meeting," Harry said. He turned to Neville. "How about you, Nev?"

Neville looked around, and saw acceptance from everyone. "I wouldn't miss it!"

"Then go to the library or someplace," Harry said. "Meet me back here at Eight tonight, and we'll see where we stand." Harry strode from the room.

Ron instantly turned on the trio of girls who had been with Harry. "How did Harry get his full powers back?" he demanded angrily.

Hermione and Ginny actually recoiled. Luna, however, merely stated, "He hasn't gotten his full powers back."

"Then he got some of them back," Ron stated. "I know Harry as well as any of you. We all saw how upset he was after he lost some of those special powers. I've never seen Harry with the attitude of . . . 'I'm-in-charge' power like he has right now."

"Harry was upset at losing that power," Luna agreed. "However, he was much more upset and even depressed because he had thought the confrontation with Riddle would be over. He knew he might lose some of those powers, so it really bothered him that he had lost those powers and Riddle was still around."

"Harry's whole life has revolved around having to deal with Riddle and the effects of Riddle," Hermione agreed. "Even when he had all his powers, there was a little tiny bit of doubt that it would be enough. Oh, I know he acted at times as if he knew he would triumph, but he wasn't totally certain. Now, he really does know that unless he makes a serious error, he should win. He just wants it over."

"But he has gotten some of his powers back," Ron stated.

"Somehow, the bonding with the three of us opened that power back up," Ginny agreed, with a worried look at Neville.

"I could feel it, although none of us have said much about it," Hermione agreed.

"Magical power does not primarily reside inside us," Luna reminded the group. "The power is all around us. The question is, how much of that power can we draw through ourselves and direct? Riddle was more powerful as Voldemort, because those transformations didn't just increase his life span and tie his soul closer to this world, they also enabled that body to draw and use power at a higher level."

"Harry has the natural ability to draw that power as well. In addition, the curse-link to Voldemort forced those conduits to become even larger. When the link was mostly destroyed, the conduits collapsed a bit. These new bonds are not just allowing us to draw on that bit of residual magic inside of us, they are also re-expanding Harry's power connections as well. Therefore, Harry is all the more confident."

Ron frowned.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked.

It was Tracy who asked. "I'd be much more worried if this weren't Harry we were talking about. He's proved himself many times over. Still, we have to wonder, how might this greater power affect him?"

"Mentally, you mean?" Hermione asked. Tracy nodded. Ron was just glad he had not had to ask the question.

"Harry cannot be turned to Darkness, if that is what you are asking," Luna said, slightly coldly.

"Harry can never become another Voldemort," Tracy agreed, "or another Grindelwald. Have you ever considered Harry with that level of power, sustained over time? Dumbledore isn't quite as powerful, and he was content with working behind the scenes most of the time, not to mention that he was about a hundred when his greatest fame came. Harry is our age. How is he going to handle being everyone's hero? What will he do when they come and beg him for a miracle? Or at least to fight against some wrong, real or perceived? He won't be able to say, 'I don't have the power to help,' because he likely will at least have the power to affect outcomes."

"What are you trying to say?" Hermione demanded.

"I am saying, if Harry had stayed even at the level of power he was at after Voldemort was reduced to Riddle, his going to these Lords of Magic might be the best thing, both for him and for the world."

"What!" Hermione, Luna, and Ginny all screamed.

"Why do we stay away from Muggles? In part, because our powers frighten them. In part, because they outnumber us, and would likely try to either kill us or force us to use our powers under their controls. And, in truth, so we aren't tempted to take them over, from evil or good

intent." Tracy stared the three girls down. All of them had learned these basics back in their first term at Hogwarts, before they had started to sleep in the History of Magic.

"Substitute wizards for Muggles, and Harry for wizards," Tracy said. "Understand."

The three teens looked both confused and angry. "I understand how you feel, I think," Tracy said. "Harry is not an abstraction, he's Harry. He's a cute, wonderful, lovable boy. I'm in love with Ron, but I understand why you two are madly in love with Harry. You three love him as a friend, and so do I. We want him in our lives. We have to face the possibility, and it's only a possibility, that we might have to lose Harry to fate."

There was silence for a moment, and then Neville said, "That sucks."

The group met again that evening. Harry came bouncing into the room last. "It's all arranged. We leave tonight, and we all go to France the morning of my birthday, where we'll stay through Bill and Fleur's wedding. We go home for a few days, and leave again until just before Remus and Dora's wedding, and we stay at home until we all go back to Hogwarts. Dobby and Winky will be bringing our stuff. Is that alright?"

"I suppose," Tracy said, speaking first. "How do we get there?"

Harry actually grinned and gestured to the door. Tracy frowned and stood up. Going over to the door, she blinked. "Wow."

"What is it?" Ginny asked.

"It's . . . beautiful."

"Come on," Harry urged them.

"How did we get here?" Hermione asked as she stepped through. "This isn't part of the room of Requirement, is it?"

"Nope. I asked for an exit on the island. You can't there from here, but you can get here from there."

That made the group pause as each thought that convoluted thought out. Then they all shrugged.

After all, they all believed in magic.

"You look beautiful," Ron said. They were in a small suite of rooms in the residence wing of Harry's villa. There was a small sitting room with a walk-in closet just off the main entrance area to the suites. Beyond that was a slightly larger bedroom (since the suites formed three-quarters of a circle, the outside rooms would be slightly larger than the inside) and a

bathroom. Tracy was standing in the doorway to the bath, only wearing a short fleecy dressing gown, drying her hair.

"Thanks. You look pretty yummy yourself."

"And we have over a week here," Ron said. "Even if we have to do some homework, we can spend some fun time on the beach."

"I haven't done much swimming," Tracy admitted. "Have you?"

"Some. We have a pond at home that's deep enough and wide enough to do a bit more than paddling."

"Was Harry serious about the beach attire?"

"Clothing optional"? Actually, I think he was." Ron shrugged.

"Oh," Tracy teased, "you're not shy?"

Ron flushed a little, but admitted, "Look, Ginny and I bathed together until we were nine or so, and we always skinny-dipped in the pond unless there were guests. I've seen you, and to be honest, I've seen Hermione partly naked. I don't think I'll be too shy here."

"We'll see."

At that point, they were distracted by Ginny's loud laughter from the common area. Curious, Ron and Tracy went out to see what was going on.

Ginny was laying on a sofa, still laughing, while Neville stood nearby, shaking his head in wonderment. "What's so funny?" Ron asked.

"It isn't funny, just . . . odd," Neville said.

"What isn't funny?" Ron persisted.

"We were going to go skinny-dipping in the sea," Ginny said, recovering her breath. "The other three made it to the beach first, but they weren't swimming."

"And?" Ron thought about it. "Oh. . . ."

"I mean, I know it's snooping, but we've all wondered how the three of them, you know . . . do it," Ginny said.

"True," Tracy admitted. "I mean, do they do things as a trio, or, well . . . you know. . . ."

"Well, tonight they doing things as a trio, things that required flexibility charms at the very least," Ginny said. "It was a little erotic to watch, but it was funny-looking in retrospect."

"Well," Neville said firmly, "let's leave them a little privacy."

"Good idea," Tracy said, pulling Ron back towards their own rooms. "Good night, and have some fun private time!"

"We will," Ginny promised, "and you two have the same!"

Ten minutes later, the trio lay entwined in each other's arms on blankets near the pebbly beach. "This was wonderful," Hermione said.

"We should do this more often," Luna agreed.

"I don't know if we could do everything we've done tonight too often," Harry admitted.

"Did either of you feel some sort of magical power surge towards the end?" Hermione asked.

"That was Neville making love with Ginny," Luna said. "That completed his bonding to the group."

"I thought I'd have to do something?" Harry said.

"They saw us," Luna said, "and we accepted them, and they us. That was all it took, since we are all so close in any event."

"How do we bring Ron and Tracy in?" Hermione asked. "Hopefully not through sex!"

"No. After all, we didn't need that with Ginny," Luna pointed out. "We will likely need trust, openness, a willingness to share power, and physical, affectionate, touch, but not sex."

"That's good. I'm sure it would never work if that were the case," Hermione said.

Harry suddenly sat up, making the two girls hit the ground.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"It's Riddle," Harry said. "He's back in Albania, at that same location he had Ginny when we first came back." Harry started to stand.

Hermione and Luna pulled him down. "You are not going to go running after Riddle in the middle of night, with your willie waving in the wind," Luna stated firmly.

"Riddle is likely still a creature of the night," Hermione said. "First thing in the morning, we'll see if we can bond with Ron and Tracy. If we can, the six of us can hold anti-apparation and portkey wards, and you now have the power to confront him and end this. If we go now, just the three of us, or even the five of us with Neville and Ginny, it probably wouldn't work."

Harry thought about what his companions had advised him. He did not like the advice one bit, especially because they were right. "I suppose we have to wait, then. I'll tell Dobby to get us up early."

"Ron'll love that," Hermione pointed out.

"He'll forgive us," Harry assured her.

"This had better be bloody good," Ron grouched. He glared at a clock. "Six-ten? In the bloody morning?"

"Yes," Harry snapped. "Right now, if you and Tracy are willing to open yourselves up to the power-bonding, we have a chance to catch and destroy Riddle today. He's 183 miles away."

"He's at the lair he took me to, isn't he?" Ginny asked.

"He is," Harry affirmed.

"What about me?" Neville asked.

"Ginny bonded with us in Tibet," Hermione reminded Neville, "and you bonded with her last night. That connects you with us."

"Oh. . . ?" Ron growled a little at Neville.

"What would we have to do?" Tracy asked, suspicious.

"You have to give up control and express physical affection to one of us, other than to Ron," Luna said. "Expressing it with Harry would make the strongest bonds, then with Hermione or myself, then Ginny, then Neville."

"I'll do it," Ron said. He looked at Harry and Hermione, confused. They smiled, and drew Ron into a group hug.

"Think of all our adventures, and how much we care for each other," Hermione suggested. A wave of power swept over all the group except for Tracy.

Tracy frowned, but then made her decision. She held out a hand to Luna and the other to Ron as soon as Ron had let go of Harry and Hermione. Another wave swept over the group, and when this one ended, they found themselves formed into a group embrace.

Tracy spoke for them all when she said, "I don't know what we did, but whatever it was, it worked."

"Let's get ready to go," Harry said. "It's time to finish this, once and for all."

Fifteen minutes later, Albus Dumbledore was shocked when Professor Trelawney burst into his bed chamber.

*The Bearer of the Prophecy Goes to Crush the Bad Seed. The Champion, with six partners,  
Restores some balance to the World.*

*Now seven companions face the Darkness. Seven friends, three sets of lovers, May restore  
Light and hope to all; Yet the Bearer must shoulder the burden.*

*In the end, this balance may not be enough; The worlds may be out of sync. Light magic may  
be too strong With seven champions of stout heart.*

Trelawney shook her head and looked around. "Oh, dear. Have I done it again?"



## **Chapter LI**

Tuesday, July 22, 1997

Tom Riddle put the finishing touches on his packing. He was glad that Potter had not yet told about his Slytherin ancestral hideaway, but knew it was only a matter of time before aurors from some ministry or other showed up. He therefore had been busy all night, packing away the most important parts of his heritage and of course the tomes on Dark Magic he would need in the future. He had, after all, every intention of outlasting Harry Potter.

"Going somewhere, Tom?"

Riddle turned slowly around, shocked. "How the hell did you get past the wards, boy?"

"Actually, I have regained most of my powers. And it's no use trying to disappearate, I have wards up against that and portkeys. You're stuck here."

"Really?"

Riddle started to move his right wrist, which would let him draw his wand. He was only slightly worried. After all, Potter had foolishly not come in with his own wand drawn.

"Sorry," Harry said. Riddle's wand flew out of the forearm sheath and into Harry's left hand. Harry snapped it. "Like I said, my powers have returned. I'm slightly more powerful than you ever were. Oh, in case you're wondering why your reaction time is so off, I hit you with a disorientation hex before I spoke to you. It barely affects you, while almost anyone else would be staggering around like they were stoned or drunk, but it did its job."

"And you think you're just going to kill me?" Riddle snorted. "I doubt you have the balls, boy."

Harry's wand appeared, and it made a series of movements before the slightly befuddled Riddle could react. Riddle could no longer voluntarily move below his neck.

"Do you think the Lords will let you get away with this, Boy?" Riddle demanded angrily, with fear underlying.

"Yes," Harry said simply. "They are likely keeping close track of both of us. If they wanted to save you, they probably would have by now. As for killing you, yes and no. You are going to end up dead. I've decided to make certain you die." Riddle started swearing at Harry, which he ignored.

Harry pulled out a small but complicated piece of glass. "I am going sever your soul from your body. Your body will die within twenty minutes. I will trap your soul and essence in this trap Titus Sergius gave me. You will, essentially, be a slightly weaker version of what you were for fourteen years. Then, I'm going to place this in a time bubble."

Riddle stopped cursing. "That's . . . that's impossible!"

"Not for me," Harry said. "It will be a very small time bubble, but large enough to take care of you. If Hermione's calculations were correct, and they always are, within a minute, for every

second that passes here, you will be existing through a full day. After decades, or perhaps a century or two, your thoughts will start to break apart, the last remaining bits of you will come apart, and then your soul will separate and go wherever it goes when we die."

Riddle stared at Harry in horror. He was too shocked to do anything else.

"Goodbye, Tom," Harry stated simply, "it's been hell knowing you."

Harry called his friends in some fifteen minutes later. They were all wary of the glowing sphere in one empty corner of the cave even before Harry had told them what he had done, and what was contained within the small glowing sphere of magic.

"I think we need to take care of this material," Harry concluded. "We don't want to leave it here until some Ministry or other decides to clear it out. Hermione, Luna, Tracy, could you pack up everything Riddle hadn't managed to get to yet? Ron, Ginny, check out what he did pack, and see if there are any hexes or traps. Neville, you help me keep an eye on this time bubble. One of us has to watch it at all times."

The group hesitated, and then did as Harry requested. They kept up a strong level of conversation on what had happened recently, especially the night before and that morning.

After nearly two hours, Tracy turned to Hermione and Harry and asked directly, "Hermione, does all this make sense to you?"

"Which parts?" Hermione responded.

"Even with these power connections, how did we six manage to set up anti-disapparition and anti-portkey wards powerful enough to keep Riddle in here, when Harry was using all his power to create and power this time bubble? I mean, I can see how the six of us could do one or the other, even with a wizard as powerful as Riddle. But we should have had to draw on power from Harry, and I don't think we did. And if we did, Harry, how could you have had enough power to create this time bubble by yourself, which is frankly awfully amazing in and of itself?"

"You didn't draw any power from me," Harry said.

"I didn't think so, but that doesn't answer the question," Tracy said.

"True," Harry agreed. "Tell me, how do you feel?"

"Eh?"

"How do you feel?"

"Confused."

Harry smiled. "Let me be clearer. When you were holding the wards together, how did your magic feel?"

"It felt . . . it felt like a rushing river, instead of a little stream," Tracy said. Then she realized what she had said. She looked about, and saw every had been listening.

Ron looked at them, confused. He looked around the room. Hermione and, even more surprisingly Luna, had looks of horror on their faces. Neville and Ginny, however, looked as confused as he felt. Ginny, seeing the same things, thought hard, and slowly, the same look of horror spread over her face as well.

Neville and Ron looked at each other, and it was clear they were both thinking hard. Ron and then Neville each had the same awful thought.

"Could it be true?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Harry said, "why don't we ask?"

"Ask who?" Ron asked.

Harry spread his arms wide. "Come on!" Harry shouted. "You must be keeping track of us and Riddle! One of you must be spying on us. Show your self!"

The group suddenly looked at the far side of the cave, across from Riddle's prison. One of the Lords of Magic was standing there, clapping.

"Well done," he said as he stopped clapping. He lowered the hood of the robes. He was a tall, distinguished-looking, athletic wizard, with greying red hair. In Muggle terms, he would pass for someone in their early 50s. The wizard looked a bit like Dumbledore had when he was younger.

"I remember your voice," Harry said. "You were called 'M' -- M for Merlin?"

"Again, well-reasoned. Tell me, what is it exactly which has all of you so concerned?"

"Our powers spiked," Hermione said. "Harry had us holding wards we should not have been able to power. . . ." She turned to Harry, "You knew?"

"I suspected," Harry replied. "If you hadn't been able to hold the wards, I would have attacked Riddle from behind and not bothered talking with him."

"That wouldn't have been very sporting, Harry," Merlin reproved mildly.

"Oh, and how 'sporting' was Riddle towards me? Or your lot for that matter?" Harry spat back. "Don't try and make me feel guilty. Go on, Hermione."

"These bonds that have been created between us. They're doing the same things to us as Harry's bond with Voldemort did, aren't they? They're increasing the amount of magical power we can channel."

Merlin was silent for a moment, and then said, "Yes."

"So tell me," Harry asked, "was this your plan, or is this how you were created?"

"This is basically how I was created as well. On the other hand, while I did not think of the original plan, I did implement this version of it."

"I'm a bit lost," Ron said.

"Remember how we told you that these Lords of Magic come mostly from two groups? Wizards and witches who have become immortal through some process like absorbing a Philosopher's Stone, or who powerful wizards who were made immortal by the group?" Harry asked.

"Yes. . . ."

"And that Higher Magic threw me up to face Voldemort to keep magic in balance?"

"Yes."

Harry rolled his eyes slightly. "And that they had helped Voldemort transform into the powerful Dark Wizard he was, even though they claim to be at worst neutral?"

"Sure. . . ."

Harry sighed. "Well, there you are. They helped create Riddle, and earlier Dark Wizards no doubt, so that Higher Magic would create an even more powerful wizard to destroy them, me in this case. In doing so, I created bonds with all of you except Tracy months ago, where we traded power back and forth. In their caverns, those bonds were not only recreated, but made more powerful, and then the four of us bonded with the three of you. In one complicated plot, they now have the seven of us who could be added to their coven."

"You mean . . . I'm now as powerful as, say, Dumbledore?" Neville asked, shocked by even thinking such a thing.

"Not quite, Neville," Merlin replied. "I would say that if you took the power of your Professor McGonagall at you age as the starting point, and the power of Dumbledore at your age as the ending point, you, Tracy, Ron, and Ginny would be grouped between three quarters to ninety percent of his power, not that these things can really be measured by numbers. Hermione and Luna, you are both now slightly powerful than Dumbledore was at your age. As for you, Harry, well, I would say only Sergius, myself, and four of the other Lords surpass you at the moment."

Harry started to speak, but was cut off by Merlin's enthusiastic chatter. "Remember, do not overly interfere with normal life around you. You could create quite a Dark coalition by accident, and none of us wants a Dark war on that scale! Obviously, we'd like you to get a bit more life experience before we start the process of making you immortal. And you ladies may wish to have a child or two. Alas, once the process starts, wizards may no longer sire children, nor witches bear them. Still, we won't start for perhaps thirteen more years. . . ."

"No!" Neville cried out.

"No, what?" Merlin asked, confused.

"I know this is something you've dedicated your existence to, but I don't think it's right," Neville answered. "It's certainly not right for me! I don't want this!"

"You have it, at least at the moment," Merlin retorted. "Now you six can refuse to use your greater power level. If you don't, then you will lose some of it over the next ten years, which is when you'll face the final decision. Lose your powers, and it will be made for you. Abuse your powers, and we may be forced to make the decision for you."

"Oh, like if one of us were to go rogue, you wouldn't just either force us to take care of things or use us to create some other poor sacrifice to fate in the hopes of gaining more recruits," Hermione said scornfully.

Merlin glared at the group. This was not going as well as he had hoped.

Harry glared back at the Lord of Magic. "Tell me," Harry said in a cold voice none of his friends had ever heard him use before, "how powerful would I be if I were to channel all the power of my friends?"

Merlin looked very startled by the idea. "I . . . what?"

"I suggest you leave," Harry stated. "I bet, if I borrowed a bit of power from my friends, I could blast your arse to pieces. And if I know my friends, they'd be happy to lend me that power right now."

Merlin took stock of the teens' attitudes. "Very well, Harry. The Lords will be contact with you, either ourselves, or through Titus Sergius or Dumbledore." He silently disappeared.

The group was silent, and then Ginny said, "What was a whole lot to take in."

"It was," Harry agreed.

"I can't believe that was Merlin," Ron said, his voice confused between awe and disappointment. "I mean, we've all been taught to revere Merlin, and here he turns out to be, well. . . ."

"A manipulative, cold-blooded, Slytherin-type, instead of the idol of all?" Tracy suggested sardonically.

"Something like that," Ron admitted. "Sorry."

"I said it, not you. He wasn't what I would have hoped for, either."

"So what do we do now?" Neville asked.

"We think about this," Hermione said. "We've been given power and opportunity, and we have to consider our options. We likely have more than Merlin mentioned. After all, he's framing the discussion so far, and he wants us to follow a course of action that benefits him. There must be better options."

"We should also eat," Luna said. "We've been busy."

"We also have to finish packing away this material and keep an eye on Riddle. He would easily last several hundred years in there, which could mean a day or two here."

"First things first," Tracy agreed. "We get rid of the Riddle problem, and then we decide what to do about this . . . this curse."

The rest of the group agreed. Riddle lasted over 243 years in his subjective time, which meant they waited just over twenty-four hours. Whatever else happened, at least Tom Riddle, alias Voldemort, was gone.

The group moved back to the island that afternoon, taking the Slytherin material with them, well-packed and shrunken to fit into one lightened box, which Harry and Hermione further shrunk to the size of a Vesta box.

"What do we do now?" Ron asked blankly.

"We think," Hermione said simply. "We split up and we think."

"Let's just go to our rooms," Harry said wearily. "Dobby will bring us dinner. We think and we relax tonight. Let it perk around the back of our brains until tomorrow night, after dinner. Then, we can discuss things as a group, and see if we want to go as a group in whatever direction. Let's agree, no arguing before then. Okay?"

"Alright, Harry," Neville said. The others nodded their agreements as well.

"So, what did you have in mind as you sit around and let things 'perk'?" Hermione asked tartly as the trio entered their suite.

"I'm going to take a long, very hot shower," Harry said. "It would be very nice if the two of you would join me."

"Now is hardly the time to fool around!" Hermione objected.

Luna peeled off her dirty, sweaty jumper. "It may or may not be the best time to fool around, but it IS time to get clean. And you know it always feels better showering together."

"Please?" Harry begged, making puppy-dog eyes at Hermione.

"Ass," Hermione stated, but she started stripping down as well.

When the shower was running full-blast, Harry leaned in close to nibble on Hermione's earlobe. While he was there, he made a very serious suggestion, which he then repeated to Luna just as quietly.

The two girls looked at Harry with real respect, and nodded their agreement. They then went back to letting Harry wash their hair. And, because Harry's idea had given them some hope, the trio had a very satisfying evening.

And next morning as they woke up.

Thursday, July 24, 1997

That morning, Hermione managed to find herself alone with Tracy. She whispered to her for less than fifteen seconds. Tracy nodded, and they went their separate ways. Luna did something similar with Ginny. Ginny later whispered to Neville, and Tracy to Ron.

Early that afternoon, as lunch wound down, Tracy asked, "I was wondering; Luna mentioned that the grotto where you make the connection to Rushak has a lot of interesting and odd runes. Could we take a look sometime?"

Harry looked indecisive. "I suppose. It could be dangerous, you know. Even Hermione and Luna don't know what a lot of that stuff means."

"Look, if we all go, Ron, Ginny, and Neville can light their wands, so we can really see. You can keep an eye out in case we get into trouble. Between Luna's Second Sight and your enhanced magical senses, we should be safe enough."

"You have enhanced magical senses?" Ron asked. The other five teens rolled their eyes, while Harry smiled.

"No, Ron, he has just been lucky all these years, moving a split second before some danger appeared out of nowhere," Hermione said sarcastically.

"Well, excuse me!" Ron said. He turned to Harry. "What do your senses tell you?"

"Well. . . ." Harry suddenly whipped out his wand and zapped something in the corner of the room. "I know that Merlin was standing there, and just went off with the equivalent of a stiff kick in the balls. Let's go. He'll be back, and angry, pretty soon." Harry was already moving from the room. The others moved after him.

"Where are we going?" Neville asked.

"An island far off the coast of Dyrmaid," Harry answered. "The opposite end of the continent from Rushak. Come on."

"Can they follow?" Tracy asked.

"To the planet, yes; to the island, probably not." Harry hustled then into the entrance to the caves, and then commanded the door shut. "Remus once told me that as the heir, I could

command this shut even against Dumbledore or Voldemort. I would guess Merlin can work his way around it. It just might take some time. We just have to hope that it's enough time."

It was enough time, but only by three minutes. Merlin glared at the empty circle, and started to work out where the group had gone.

The seven people found themselves in a smaller stone circle than the one at Rushak. "Where are we again?" Ron asked.

"The island of the Dragons," Harry said.

"From one secret group to another?" Ginny asked.

"Secret societies often, although not always, distrust each other," Tracy pointed out. "Even if they agree on goals, they are often in conflict."

"Even if that's true," Neville asked, "are we going to be welcome here?"

"I will be," Harry said. "If there is any problem with your being here, I'll handle it."

"Then I suggest you handle it," a voice said.

Harry bowed. "Number Three?"

"That was my number while training you. Here, I am Number Forty-five. You shall be known as Ninety-nine. I take it you have a tale to tell?"

"I do."

"They went where!"

"Temper," Merlin reproved one of his seniors. "They have gone to the Island of the Dragons."

"Does that present a problem?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes! We do not always get along well with the Dragons."

'Then the worlds might be well-served,' Dumbledore thought, but did not say.



## **Chapter LII**

"Tell me the gist of your tale before you leave that circle, Ninety-nine," the Dragon wizard known now as Forty-five commanded. Seeing Harry hesitate, he added, "Start by telling me exactly what secret society is after you." He feared he knew the answer.

"Have you ever heard of a group on our world who call themselves 'the Lords of Magic'?" Harry asked.

It was clear Forty-five had, and that he was not pleased to hear of them again. "Yes." This was not good. "How is it you have? And why are they after you?" He paused, looked thoughtful, and then said, "If they truly are out to get you, it is a miracle that you are here instead of dead."

"They don't want us dead, they want us to join them," Harry said bitterly.

"WHAT!" The wizard shook his head, as if to clear it. It did not help at all. He thought some more; it still did not compute in his brain. Finally, the wizard decided Harry must have misspoken. "You mean they want you to join them, Ninety-nine."

"No, sir. They want all of us to join their group." Harry then briefly told the Dragon the whole tale of what had happened since Harry, Luna, and Hermione had last returned from this world. The Dragon seemed to become more and more upset over the seven minutes it took to tell the precis. When Harry was finished, he sighed deeply and said, "You are all indeed welcome here for the moment. Are any of you injured, or in need of anything?"

"Err . . . toilet?" Ron muttered.

"Right, come along then."

"Sorry," Ron said meekly, "but we left in rather a hurry."

"I understand," Forty-five said sympathetically. "I will take you to a place of rest. Ninety-nine will then explain things in greater detail to the members of our Council who are currently present."

The group left the circle. After a few steps, another Dragon came up to the smaller group and led them away, while Forty-five led Harry off. The new Dragon did not introduce himself, but led them to a small cabin.

"Do you need anything else?" the Dragon asked as Ron sprinted towards the outhouse.

"Err . . . what day is it here?" Ginny asked.

"It is the Twelfth of November." The Dragon bowed and left.

"What do we do now?" Tracy asked.

"We wait."

After an hour, six Dragons showed up at the cabin to speak with Harry's friends. They took each teen aside and quizzed them separately, looking for every detail of their encounter with the Lords of Magic, and their opinions and feelings about it all.

"Can't you tell us anything?" Hermione asked for the third time, this time as the Dragons prepared to leave.

Five of the Dragons looked at the one who had been questioning Luna. He considered, and said, "We of course have long known of these so-called Lords of Magic. We knew of their goals for your world. We could of course never approve of those goals, but felt we had no reason to move beyond that generalized disapproval. After all, our ancestors left your world many millenia ago. It is no longer our world. However, we did not know they were doing anything beyond taking advantage of what seemed to us to be the recurring cycle of Dark Wizards in your world. Now it seems as if they are to some degree creating those Dark Wizards. This may call for more than mere disapproval on our parts."

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"They are certainly throwing the balance of magic off in your world to some degree, and that in turn might affect ours, and the other worlds."

"So, you might help us, in some way?" Hermione asked.

"For us to make such a decision, we needed all possible information and view points. We now have some of that information, thanks to you. It is not that we distrust your friend, for he is at heart one of us." Hermione and Tracy had both voiced that concern. "We thank you for answering our questions, and we ask for patience as we consider our options."

"Just one more thing," Hermione said. "Titus Sergius said that he had spent a great deal of time in this world. Do you know him?"

"We know the wizard you know as Titus Sergius very well," the Dragon said. "We believe, that is we hope, he has been unaware of how deep and dangerous a game these Lords of Magic have been playing with the fate of your world."

He looked at the others, and another Dragon took up the monologue. "There are nine connected worlds," he said. "Dark magic and Light magic canceled each other out on one world. Magic barely exists there, save on those rare occasions when people from one of the other worlds visit. Life itself seems to be slowly dying there."

"Dark magic triumphed on the second world, and it is now cut off from the other seven. The point is, Light magic also tried to play the same game of dominance on both those worlds as Dark magic always does. The Lords of Magic may, as we have always believed, be Light at heart, but they may yet serve the Darkness through error."

"We thank you for your help," the first Dragon intoned, and they left the teens.

"My goodness," Luna said. "Things are much more complicated than we ever thought."

"Do you think the Dragons can really take on the Lords of Magic, or get them to change their minds?" Neville asked.

"Take them on? Perhaps. However, those self-proclaimed Lords of Magic are all many hundreds of years old, some thousands," Tracy pointed out. "Somehow, I don't think flexibility in purpose is an inherent characteristic of the group."

"Eh?" Ron asked.

"These lords are a bunch of stubborn bastards," Ginny translated.

"Ah. I thought that's what you meant, but I wasn't certain," Ron said. "In that case, I totally agree of course."

"You don't seem terribly worried about it," Hermione said, a bit petulantly.

"No, I don't, do I?" Ron said with a trace of smugness.

"Why? Do you want their immortality, and their powers, Ron?" Hermione asked.

Ron gave Hermione a very dirty look. "We all die sometime, but I'm in no hurry," Ron said. "I admit, the idea sounds nice. But I wouldn't want the responsibility of trying to run the world, by myself or as part of any group. No one is that wise. I know I'm not."

"That's one difference between ourselves and the Lords, one that the Lords don't have, and that Voldemort didn't," Tracy said thoughtfully.

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione, you are often telling people how to behave, although you haven't been nearly as insistent about it this last year. Still, do YOU think you would want to command an entire world how to act?"

"No," Hermione said. "I think I should be able tell people how I think they should act, but that doesn't mean I'm always right."

"Just usually right," Ron teased.

"More than I'm wrong," Hermione said. "But making people obey my ideas is also wrong. Even if I were always right about how I should act, which I'm not, that doesn't mean I would be always right about how others should act."

"And again, that's different than Riddle was and these Lords are. Riddle wanted full control and they want basic control," Tracy said. "It's fundamentally wrong, on every level."

"True, but why aren't you worried, Ron?" Hermione asked. Luna rolled her eyes, since the answer was obvious to her.

"Because I think one of three things will happen, if all these theories of balance are true," Ron stated with confidence. "One, Harry was not given his powers to stop Voldemort, but to stop these Lords of Magic. Two, Harry will help create a group to destroy the Lords. Three, if

Harry doesn't have the power to do one or the other, someone else will be thrown up and will do it. One way or another, these superior bastards will be taken down at some point. They won't win, and I'm not going to make that task harder by joining them."

"Well said, Mister Weasley."

The group turned in shocked surprise. Finally, Hermione said, "Titus Sergius?"

"Yes," the Roman answered, walking into the cabin. "Or, as I am called here, Number One."

"YOU command the Dragons?" Tracy demanded.

The wizard shook his head. "No, not now. I have not for many centuries. However, I founded the Dragons, and still act as their chief advisor."

"I'm confused," Neville said.

"You're not the only one," Hermione said. The others could only agree.

"I had never seen any reason to stand in the way of the Lords of Magic. They could, after all, do without me, should they reach a membership of twenty-six or so. I have to admit, that while I have had my suspicions this past century, I had no evidence that the Lords were truly active in creating Dark Lords. I accepted their explanation of helping Riddle some forty years ago as a one time experiment. I know now I should not have. Which may prove Mister Weasley's point of any small group's incapacity to rule, in a sense. I was fooled, plain and simple."

Sergius shrugged. "Still, I had anticipated the problem. I just did not realize this was upon us already."

"Well, it is," Hermione snapped. "How can these people fool themselves into believing they aren't Dark in result if not in intention? Their interference created Grindelwald, and that created two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, numerous smaller wars, famines. . . . My God! They helped cause the death of over a hundred million Muggles! Maybe close to two hundred million! And how many hundreds of millions more suffered because of them?"

"Yes," Sergius said sardonically. "Muggles are such an endangered species."

"That is not the point!"

"That is not the point to you," Sergius pointed out. "Yes, they enabled Grindelwald to cause trouble. However, Grindelwald did not have the Austrian archduke shot, nor had he, or the Lords, anything to do with the series of treaties, the arms race, the imperial conflicts, or other causes of the Muggle First World War. His people pushed a bit to keep it going, but the Muggles did at least ninety-five percent of that themselves as well."

"And that makes it right?" Hermione demanded, incredulous.

"Of course not. And of course he was involved in aiding the Soviets in tracking down magical groups that opposed him, and was associated with the Nazi SS as well. He also kept the

Chinese and Japanese wizards at each other's throats. My point is, the Lords of Magic see themselves as using the material around them to create what they consider to be a good end result, good Utilitarians that they are. To you, Muggles are civilization, and the Magical world is something outside it. To us, we are the civilization, and the Muggles are outside it. To many in the magical world, including the Lords, the Muggles are something to be controlled, not a focus, and that will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number over a period of millennia."

"Disgusting," Hermione stated with contempt.

"Perhaps," Sergius conceded, "but moral indignation is not terribly helpful."

"It is not when trying to create a particular course of action, but it is when it comes to staying true to one's moral compass," Luna stated. "Few people ever call themselves evil. They either claim to be above mere good and evil, like the Lords, or claim good and evil do not truly exist, like Voldemort. The Lords must be stopped. Harry will stop them."

Sergius smiled ruefully. "Harry is far from powerful enough to stop the Lords."

"Harry does not succeed by acting by himself," Luna stated stepping up to face Sergius almost nose to nose. "Harry succeeds by inspiring others. I am inspired. I will fight the Lords. I will fight to inspire others to fight the Lords. I fight with Harry Potter, the Avenger of Light, a True Sorcerer, and the Restorer of the Balance of Magic!"

"I will fight with Harry," Hermione said, unsure of what Luna meant beyond that.

"I will fight with Harry," Ginny stated.

"I will fight with Harry!" Ron shouted.

"I will fight with Harry," Neville said firmly.

"I will fight with Harry," Tracy joined in.

"The six of you, or seven with Harry, equal perhaps four of the Lords," Sergius told them, "maybe five."

"The four or five most powerful Lords," Ron pointed out. "Which mean we could take most of the other eight."

"And what might Dumbledore do? And what about you?" Luna asked. "Or are you sitting this out? Again." Sergius winced at that.

"And how about your Dragons?" Hermione asked.

"Perhaps, although the Lords will not allow themselves to be caught easily, and any open battle could cause devastation beyond any Muggle-caused atomic doomsday."

"Then we shall just have to come up with a better scenario," Hermione stated.

"First," Sergius warned, "we will have to wait and see if the Dragons are interested in getting involved directly, and then we shall see what must be done."

Luna merely smiled. "Harry Potter has come to the center of events. Any good sorcerer who is not greedy for power, like the Lords, or as stupid as Cornelius Fudge was, will be moved to help."

#### Back at the Burrow

"So no one has any idea exactly where they are?" Molly asked.

"Not with any certainty," Minerva McGonagall admitted. The pair were sitting at the kitchen table very early in the morning, sipping tea. The pair's attention was attracted by a small noise at the kitchen door.

"Rosie? Rosie, dear, what are you doing up so early? Or late, or whatever?"

Rose Evans merely stared straight ahead. Molly frowned, but McGonagall put a hand on Molly's wrist, to stop her from standing up and going to the girl. McGonagall generally did not think highly of Divination as a branch of magic, and had an even lower opinion of the Professor at Divination at Hogwarts. Still, she was not totally ignorant of the subject.

"I hate to say it," McGonagall said, "but I believe she is about to deliver a Prophecy."

"Oh, my!"

Far to the north, Severus Snape was shocked in his monthly bubble bath when Professor Trelawney entered his well-warded secret pink-and-gray marble bath. He was about to scream at her in anger, when he saw something that terrified him.

Trelawney was about to deliver a Prophecy.

Worse, when she came out of it, he could tell she was going to tumble into the bath with him.

Across the Earth, twenty-five other seers found at least one other magical person to deliver the most important Prophecy ever delivered. One of them was one of the Lords of Magic. Across five other earths, twenty-seven seers on each one delivered the same Prophecy at the same time.

On the sixth, twenty-eight seers delivered the Prophecy, as Luna declaimed it to her friends, Harry, Sergius, and the Dragons.

*The greatest sorcerers from across the seven Earths  
Will gather to decide the future of all magic.  
Three paths are open, and they hope to choose.  
One path leads forward to war, and magic itself  
Could easily disappear from one or all the Earths.*

*One path leads into an unknowable future:  
Lords must forsake their ambitions,  
And the Boy-At-The-Center must choose a fork.  
One fork will lead to destruction from the best intentions.*

*One fork will lead to the same path,  
Only it will come from the deceit of others.  
Only the straight, narrow path may lead to a future  
Where the balance of magic may be kept by all.*

*The final path leads not forward, but back.  
The sorcerers must return to the Nexus,  
And the Phoenix must go to his fall-back plan.  
The Lords must disband, and the Earths separate.*

*Only the Roman shall stand guard, knowing how to act.  
The Lords shall know they must disband.  
Should they not, a Power will arise to end magic  
On their Earth, as well as life itself*

*The balance they upset shall be destroyed.  
The Dark Lord shall still be destroyed.  
The Boy-At-The-Center may live, if he is clever.  
All in command must agree on the path taken,  
Else Magic shall disappear on all the Earths.*

Rose collapsed, although McGonagall, who had anticipated the event, managed to catch her. "There, there," McGonagall said, awkwardly trying to calm the now-crying girl, "It's alright."

"No," Rose said, "it is NOT alright. The world is in terrible danger. Harry . . . Harry is in terrible danger."

"You mean . . . you mean, you remember the Prophecy you just made?" McGonagall asked in awe. Only the most powerful seers ever remembered any of their prophecies. That Rose could remember her first argued that she would be powerful indeed.

High in Tibet, the thirteen Lords, and Albus Dumbledore, considered what they had just heard.

"Is it possible?" Merlin asked. "Could we really have been serving Darkness in the name of making the world a better place?"

"You know it is more than possible," Dumbledore stated, "unless you can figure out some way a false prophecy could be induced into a very powerful seer."

"There isn't," the seer snapped.

"Does anyone doubt that?" Merlin demanded.

No one said anything.

"Fine, let's set that aside for a moment. We don't want a war which will destroy magic, do we?" Merlin stated, daring anyone to disagree. No one did.

Merlin turned to Dumbledore. "Tell us this backup plan. Then we had best decide on our course of action between the other choices, because some powerful sorcerers will be inviting us to a parole soon."

No one could disagree with that, either.

"Well," Dumbledore said, "it concerns the Half-Blood Prince. . . ."



## **Chapter LIII**

Tracy and Harry passed each other again, pacing back and forth. No one was certain how many times they had walked past each other over the previous three subjective weeks.

As bored as the seven were, no one was bored enough to count.

Titus Sergius had arranged a parole of the most powerful sorcerers on seven dimensional Earths. The seven teens also attended. When the teens had asked where they were, Sergius had shrugged his shoulders. Dumbledore had tried to explain, but it required an understanding of Arithmancy that was far ahead even of Hermione's current understanding.

While the sorcerers debated (discussed, debated, contended, argued, fought, and occasionally hexed each other), the seven had been left in a rather nice, if small, hunting lodge two of the Lords of Magic and Dumbledore had conjured for them. They had nothing to do.

The only small comfort was that time, wherever they currently were, was subjective. They would all be returned to their home planets without having lost any real time.

After three weeks, the lovers had even stopped making love so often. It took most of their collective will not to fight amongst themselves.

Finally, on the 'afternoon' of the twenty-second day, Dumbledore came to talk with them.

"It's about time," Ron grouched.

"Ronald, we have all had much to discuss," Dumbledore reminded him, and the others. "Had not so many seers received that Prophecy, it would have been impossible to have reached an agreement of any kind."

"And our fate has been decided, has it?" Harry demanded coldly.

"Your options have been narrowed," Dumbledore acknowledged. "First of all, the Lords of Magic have agreed to cease in their goal of manipulating our world, or any other for that matter."

"They planned on extending their influence elsewhere?" Tracy asked, getting in just before Hermione.

"No," Dumbledore said, "but no one can blame the representatives of the other worlds for not being worried on that point. So, the Lords have also agreed not to help any future wizard to gain immortality, including myself. They therefore have of course also agreed not to try and create any more powerful Dark Wizards, there being no point in it for them any more."

"They just agreed to all that?" Ginny demanded, disbelieving.

"It did take some time, as they sought ways around the Prophecy. They, and we, created many scenarios, models of the world if you will. None succeeded in the Lords' plans working out. Every time, the result was a Dark one."

"And they accepted that?" Tracy demanded.

"They did. They have many faults, as we all do. However, they are all very intelligent, and basically well-meaning people. They genuinely sought power to help people. It took time to prove to them they had not only caused more harm than good in the past, but would cause much more harm than good in the future, no matter how they tried to manipulate that future. They have accepted it."

"And all this took three weeks?" Hermione asked.

"No. All of this took twelve days. After that, we broke into two groups. One group has created a set of guidelines for sorcerers of our power. The barriers at the gateways between our worlds will also be increased. We will still be able to communicate, but we will never again be able to travel back and forth."

"And the other group decided what to do with us," Harry said, now looking rather determined, and even awesome in his power.

"The other group ran models," Dumbledore said, now seating slightly. "Essentially, you have two options, going forwards or back, as the Prophecy stated. Forward is by far the easier option to take, but slightly more dangerous."

"How so?" Luna asked.

"We can essentially partially slow down the power flow. Other than Harry, you will all be slightly more powerful than you were before you all connected your power flows. Harry would almost be as powerful as he was last June. Those connections between you would also be severed. They are too dangerous to be allowed. In the hundred simulations without partially limiting your power, there was a Dark result forty-five times. I think you would all agree that is too high of a probability outcome."

"I cannot believe any one of us would turn Dark," Luna stated firmly.

"No, none of you would do that," Dumbledore agreed. "Still, we all affect the world around us. With your potential power as a group, the balance of magic can easily be thrown off, just as Riddle did for the opposite reasons."

"And what do your models tell you about what happens if we limit ourselves in this way?" Harry asked.

"In that case, the models turned Dark nine times, which is better than what we expected," he answered.

"I can forego my extra power," Neville said. The other six looked at each other, and all agreed they could live with those restrictions.

"So, what does 'going back' mean?" Harry asked after they had agreed.

"All of the sorcerers, working together, can turn back time on our Earth. This will take a tremendous effort, and in fact, four of the Lords would have to sacrifice their immortality to make it work. In our world, we would all be sent back to June, 1996, except for Titus Sergius,

who would be sent back beyond June, 1995. No one in our world, save Titus Sergius, the Lords, and myself, would have no memories, as time is being restarted. The Lords and myself would have our memories slightly modified as we would go back to rejoin our former selves."

"What the hell kind of plan is that?" Ron demanded. "We went through all this shit for the last bloody year, two years, really, for six of us, to beat Riddle! And now you're going to make us do it over? Or will you just kill us and let our past selves live on?"

"We will not kill you," Dumbledore said. "In that sense, you are being reset. As for Riddle, well, I had a fall-back plan. The connections between the worlds have been unusually open these last few centuries."

"Due to the Lords, and Sergius, no doubt," Hermione said.

"In large part," Dumbledore agreed. "Had they not been easily crossed last year, as I said, I did have an alternate plan. Titus Sergius would have to make some alterations in the time line between June, 1995 and June, 1996. . . ."

"Such as?" Harry demanded.

"First of all, Julian Malfoy will have to be stopped. We know from the recent investigation into the MHC that it was only some inspired trickery on his part in July, 1995, that kept the company from being uncovered by the Ministry. We can all say bad things about the Ministry, but they were very good at uncovering money. They would have gone after the Marvolo Holding Company while continuing to deny that its owner had returned to life."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Greed," Tracy said. "If the last Marvolo was dead without an heir, the Ministry could basically loot the company, and you can bet that Fudge and his gang would have had very sticky fingers."

"Exactly. Even though it made a fair amount of money, because it operated in the Muggle world Voldemort, as he was then, had little interest in the MHC, until Lucius Malfoy brought his cousin's actions to Voldemort's attention. That set the entire Malfoy plan into action, which resulted in the deaths of the Dursleys."

"You mean, after all you've learned, you really want me to consider going back to the Dursleys?" Harry demanded, aghast. "No, wait, I'm modified or dead or whatever. The Harry of 1996 will be stuck at the Dursleys. Are you mad?"

"We, and you, should consider both options," Dumbledore said. "There are a couple of other minor changes that he must make as well."

"Can he save Sirius from the Veil?" Harry asked.

"I won't lie to you," Dumbledore said. "We ran the model over a hundred times. In a third of those scenarios, Voldemort wins, because Sirius doesn't follow orders, trying to protect you but ending up getting you killed. I wish I could say otherwise."

"And what are the results of the scenario you're trying to talk us into?" Ginny asked.

"Harry defeats Voldemort every time."

"How many times does Harry live to enjoy his victory?" Luna asked.

"He also dies in nine percent of the models. I should add that in none of the models is the outcome a Dark one."

"How many times do we all end up together like we are now?" Harry asked.

"None," Dumbledore admitted.

"You're asking me to give up Tracy, and my son," Ron said.

"That is partially true. Your son is part of Rushak. The remaining five worlds will be cut off from our world, and so he shall be sent back to his original home. My distant cousins and the Dragons will look out for him, and he will have many opportunities. You and Miss Davis, however, come together in only one percent of the models. Actually, the most common outcome, in terms of romance, pairs Harry and Luna, you and Hermione, and Ginny and Neville some forty-two percent of the time. Harry, you wind up with Ginny about twenty-four percent of the time and Hermione twenty-one percent of the time."

"Let's see, I'm dead nine times out of a hundred, plus forty-two, twenty-four and twenty one. What happens the other four percent of the time?"

"We ran this model over six hundred times. Half the time you end up alone, at least through age twenty-one, since that's as far as the models could take up as we looked for possible Dark outcomes. The other two percent come with Susan Bones, with a number of girls taking up the rest."

"So none with both Luna and Hermione?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Dumbledore said.

"Well, sod that."

Hermione frowned, distracted. . . ."So, I, or the old me, end up with Harry twenty-one percent of the time, Ron forty-two percent of the time. . . ."

"Fifty-four, actually," Dumbledore corrected. "You die in four percent of the scenarios, and actually end up with Luna fifteen percent of the time. As for the other six percent, they seemed to be men or women you meet after Hogwarts."

"And I suppose if I don't end up with Ginny, I end up with Luna?" Neville asked, confused.

"Oddly, no, you and Luna never end up together," Dumbledore said. "The important thing to remember is, going ahead is easier, and more dangerous. Riddle is destroyed, but the balance of magic is in a much more delicate balance. Going back, Riddle will still be destroyed, with the possibilities that you will lead personally less satisfying lives, with less power, than you will if we go forward."

Harry gathered his friends around him and they talked for ten minutes.

Finally, he turned around. "My entire life has been manipulated, by this Higher Magic, by the Lords of Magic, by Voldemort, and by you. My parents were murdered, my godfather was murdered. I was locked in a bloody cupboard for almost ten years! I was locked in a bedroom and fed through a cat flap for over a month! I was beaten, abused, and insulted!"

"Thanks to you and the rest of these bastards, I've been ridiculed by most of magical Britain. I was forced to be an accessory to murder before my twelfth birthday. I killed a sentient avatar before I was thirteen and witnessed two murders since then, which were partially my fault because YOU failed to give me the guidance I needed. I've committed murders, even if they were in self-defense."

"The only reason I want to keep as much power as I can is so I can make certain that the next manipulative bastard that messes with me or my friends gets blasted into another dimension, which is no doubt why you want me, this me at least, basically dead! I have two women who love me, and each other. I have four other loving friends. I have close friends back on our world; ones I love like Remus and Dora, and ones I'm close to, like Dean and Seamus. I have a cousin, a blood relative, who loves me. Tell me, under your scenarios, would I ever even meet Rose?"

"Almost certainly not," Dumbledore said.

"You not only want Ron to give up his life and the life of a woman he loves, but a son. A son he will never even know exists! How can you even think to ask any of us to do this?"

"Tell them, Miss Davis," Dumbledore commanded.

"They can ask, because it's what they think is best for the world," Tracy said. "They prefer dealing with damaged, conflicted, powerful Harry, rather than confident super-Harry."

"What do you think I should answer, Tracy?" Harry asked.

"I think you should tell the Headmaster what you feel."

Harry looked at Dumbledore and said, "I think you should take your backwards idea and shove it up your arse, and then fuck yourself with it."

"Harry! Language!" Hermione scolded. "Really, there's no need to be vulgar."

"Yes there is," Ron argued. He looked at Dumbledore, the greatest wizard of the twentieth century. "Fuck you, and the idea you rode in with."

"Sit on a Snorkack," Luna added, getting into the spirit of things.

"Eat fertilizer," Neville agreed.

Ginny raised her boot. "Or come a little closer," she encouraged the old wizard, ready to take aim.

"Either that, or let the door hit your arse while you're leaving," Tracy agreed.

"In other words, Headmaster," Hermione stated, in her plummiest accent, "we suggest you get stuffed."

Luna grabbed Hermione and Harry by their hands. The group joined hands as they felt themselves trapped by a magical power beyond their own. They knew what was coming, and, directed by Luna, with all their power, they took the memories, especially the memories of love, as deeply as they could from the minds of themselves and their friends. They used their combined power to send those memories into the vortex of the spell forming around them. With luck, the memories would be planted so deep into their past selves that it would take decades before they remembered.

But she knew they would remember.

"I am very sorry," Dumbledore said. "I would have greatly preferred that you had take the best road voluntarily. You will have to meet the Half-Blood Prince involuntarily."

And their world dissolved.

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Friday, June 27, 1996

Titus Sergius Sapiens stood, invisible, on Platform 9 3/4, watching. It had not been easy pulling off this, his greatest scheme. He had lied to Harry and his friends. He had seen what the Lords had been plotting for over four centuries. His plan had be to even more subtle than the Lords. At this point, his plan had succeeded.

Granted, it had taken a larger toll than he had thought it would. He had not anticipated in having this Earth divided from the other Earths. He would never travel to visit his beloved Dragons and the world he had helped to create. He had never anticipated having to overlay fourteen months of history.

He had not really known Harry and his six friends personally for any length of time, although he had been looking in on the Boy for years. He ached with the pain the seven had felt as their future selves had been erased.

He had argued against that plan at first, hoping they could take refuge with his beloved Dragons. Doing so would have prevented the barriers between the worlds being closed to the degree the other worlds had demanded, however. In the end, he had had to agree to their sacrifice.

Sergius wondered at the seeming ease with which Albus Dumbledore seemed to have agreed to their sacrifice. There was just a hint of pain behind the man's expression, and a distinct lack of the twinkle in his eyes that hinted that perhaps it had not been easy for the man. The most the wizard had said was, "The right thing is rarely easy."

'No,' Sergius thought, 'it is rarely easy.' Still, the Lords were disabled, and their most fanatical members had had to sacrifice their immortality and even part of their magic to help pull off this massive time shift on one world. Merlin had also hinted he might give up his immortality, once young Harry triumphed.

The students had started to stop saying their goodbyes, and some had started to leave with their families. Sergius saw the final, dying elements of the huge time-shift charm start to fade. To his surprise, he saw a new element appear.

He cast a quick diagnostic. His eyes went wide as he saw what Luna had done. He briefly thought about stopping the spell from being completed, but relented. In thirty-five or forty years, the memories of a path not taken would return to any of the seven who remained alive.

Sergius agreed with Luna that they deserved that much.

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Hermione suddenly flushed with a very disturbing vision. She resolved to concentrate on Ron; she wanted no more thoughts about Luna naked, which had been plaguing her for weeks. She certainly did not need Harry intruding into her daydreams as well. A threesome? Absurd.

Ron frowned, wondering where the vision of a smiling small boy came from.

Luna was not certain what she had just felt and Seen, but decided it was likely a good thing.

A depressed Harry followed a quietly fuming Vernon Dursley (and cowed Dudley Dursley) out towards the parked car. He frowned. It felt like some sort of spell had hit him. A brief vision of himself, nude on a large bed, kissing the equally nude Luna and Hermione, flitted through his head. He flushed with embarrassment. 'I've got enough problems without having thoughts like those!' he thought.

Harry sighed. This summer was not going to be pleasant.

**THE END**