

# **The Mathias Prophecy Book II**

By

Esined

## Table of Contents

The Mathias Prophecy Book II .....	1
WINTER BLUES.....	3
Here We Go Again.....	23
Happy Christmas.....	37
A Day of Surprises.....	54
Auld Lang Syne.....	71
Friends Enemies and Allies.....	87
Quidditch Time!.....	101
Betrayal.....	116
Recovery.....	133
Exams and Farewells.....	150

## **WINTER BLUES**

As Harry headed towards her last class before the Christmas recess, she was frustrated and upset. It had been over six weeks since Peter Pettigrew had been apprehended and questioned. Ron had done an excellent job portraying her father's ghost, and Pettigrew had crumbled in terror, succumbing to his guilty conscience over betraying her parents, and helping Voldemort to send her back in time to the night of their death.

Remus Lupin had fully recovered from his silver poisoning and Harry had regained her magic, her friends becoming more aware of her increased abilities. Ron took her powers in stride, coming from a pure blood wizarding family he was used to seeing wizards and witches of varying degrees of power. Hermione, on the other hand, was amazed that Harry was becoming so adept at skills she was only beginning to understand. Harry also suspected Hermione might be a little jealous, since Harry was finding that many of her abilities were so natural that it took very little effort to accomplish them.

Professors Lupin, Snape, and Dumbledore were very pleased with her progress with her advanced tutoring sessions. She was doing well with Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Lupin and Snape had secured permission from Dumbledore for her to read some of the restricted books in both the library and their private collections. She found them interesting, and often frightening. It made her more aware than ever of how difficult it was going to be to try to defeat Lord Voldemort.

Professor McGonagall was filling in for Sirius with transfiguration until his return, and now had Harry able to turn large pieces of furniture into animals such as horses, cattle, and camels. She had also been continuing to try and transform in secret, and suspected that soon she would be able to get the spells right, and become an animagus. She had a feeling that the hawk she had been trying to become was actually some other type of large bird, and decided on her next trial to try to assume the shape of the suspected bird.

She was also getting along much better with Professor Snape. She found that underneath that sour demeanor there was a nice person, albeit reserved. She was still working on getting the Wolfsbane potion mixed correctly, and after the recess, he was finally going to let her start to mix some of the ingredients with his supervision.

Hurrying through the corridor, she raced towards the dungeon, for her regular potions class, and knew Snape would not be pleased that she was late. She had been with Professor Lupin, who had been trying to placate her, since she had heard no news about when Sirius would be finally exonerated, and able to return to Hogwarts. All he would tell her was to be patient a little longer, but her patience was worn out. She had done everything they had asked of her, but they would not answer any of her questions, and her adolescent temper was now on a short fuse.

As she turned the corner towards the dungeon, she saw Snape, just entering the classroom ahead of her, and swore under her breath. She knew she would end up on the detention table and he would make the rest of her day utterly miserable. It would take every ounce of determination she had to remain civil and not lose her temper with him. He might be a fairly decent human being when they worked one on one, but he could still be a tyrant in class.

"Potter, you're late," he scowled as she entered the dungeon, "take the front desk, and consider yourself on classroom detention."

"Yes, Professor Snape," she bit her lip in annoyance, to keep from snapping at him.

"Mr. Weasley, perhaps you could tell us the ingredients used for the potion to cure poison ivy?"

"Uh... moss, aloe plant, alcohol, and uh..."

"Miss Potter, perhaps you would like to help Mr. Weasley? It's apparent that he did not do his assignment."

"Toadstool roots boiled down to paste with white oleander," Harry responded almost immediately, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

"Mr. Weasley, why don't you join Miss Potter at the front work table? It seems the Gryffindor students have their minds on the holiday rather than potions."

As Ron moved to sit beside Harry, Malfoy snickered from the back of the room, whispering loud enough for Harry and Ron to overhear.

"Maybe Weasley and Potter should just think about how to butter up Professor Snape with Christmas presents, but then again, Weasley is too poor to get him anything, and Potter already spends a good deal of time with him alone. I'm sure she knows what he likes."

Harry waited to see if Professor Snape would respond, knowing he had also overheard the snide and rude innuendo. When he didn't look up from his desk, she sat back and stopped working.

It was one thing to be on detention, but Snape should not allow Malfoy to make such a remark. Snape was the head of Slytherin house, to which Malfoy belonged, and everybody knew he favored them, but Malfoy's conduct was unacceptable. The last time Malfoy had made an off color remark, they had all started fighting in the hallway, and everybody was given some form of detention.

"Miss Potter, you are not cutting up your plants," Professor Snape finally remarked without looking up. Harry knew he had some form of telepathic ability, so she was not surprised that he knew what she was doing.

"No, and I won't until Mr. Malfoy apologizes to both myself and Ron," she replied keeping her voice calm, "you may not find his remark offensive, but I do."

"What remark would that be, Miss Potter?"

"The one we both know he made, Professor, and if you are not going to do anything about it, then maybe I will."

"Are you threatening another student, Miss Potter?" Snape asked, finally looking up, his dark eyes glaring icily.

"I don't threaten, Professor, I take action," Harry countered.

"Harry, don't do anything stupid," Hermione whispered from behind her, "Snape's in a bad enough mood already."

"Miss Granger, do you have something to say to the class? If not, please refrain from talking or you will find yourself with your friends at the detention table," Snape told her, without taking his eyes from Harry, "go back to work, Miss Potter."

"No, not until Malfoy apologizes."

"Miss Potter," Snape got up slowly, his eyes never wavering from her face, "I told you to continue your work, unless you would prefer to go to the Headmaster?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm sure professor Dumbledore would like to know all about this little incident," Harry answered softly, her temper ready to explode.

"Harry, don't!" Ron hissed. "It's not worth it. Malfoy is just a jealous jerk. Let it go," he said taking her arm, trying to keep her anger in check.

"I'm sorry, Ron, but I will not sit here and listen to Draco insult my friends or my reputation, not to mention Professor Snape's credibility. If you and the Professor choose to turn the other cheek, that's your business, but I am not going to do so."

"And what are you going to do about it, Potter? Go crying to the Headmaster?" Draco taunted her brazenly.

"Mr. Malfoy, that will be quite enough," Snape reprimanded. He was aware of how powerful Harry was becoming, and her adolescent temper did not mix well with that kind of magical ability.

"No, Draco, I'm going to go see Professor Dumbledore for whatever detention he sees fit to give me for doing this," Harry drew her wand, pointing it at Draco, "poison ivy poison oak, poison sumac with one stroke." A bright blue stream of light hit Malfoy in the stomach before he could duck, and almost immediately, he started breaking out with the poisonous rashes all over his body. "Don't ever insult me or any of my friends or instructors again, Draco, or the next time you will find yourself in a worse situation," Harry told him as she gathered up her books and supplies. "Oh, and by the way, Happy Christmas. Professor, I'll be in the Headmaster's office, whenever you care to join me," she called over her shoulder, flouncing out of the classroom before Snape exploded in a furious tirade.

Harry went directly to the Headmaster's Office. She knew he would be angry with her, but she needed him to understand how she felt. She missed Sirius and couldn't understand why it was taking so long for him to be cleared of her parent's murder. Pettigrew had confessed and was being held in custody. She knew there were other people involved, people in high government positions, but she didn't care. She wanted some stability in her life.

It was Christmas, and she should be happy, but she wasn't. She had no real family, her aunt and uncle didn't like her and merely tolerated her because they had no choice. She couldn't ever remember even getting Christmas presents that weren't used clothes or broken toys left over from her cousin, Dudley, when she got presents at all.

Her first Christmas at Hogwarts had been the first time she could ever remember being happy for the holiday. She had friends, and Ron's family treated her as if she was one of them. She still had that first sweater Molly Weasley had knitted for her, not that it fit any longer, but she couldn't bear to part with it. That same Christmas Dumbledore had given her the invisibility cloak that had belonged to her father, and there had been candy and treats galore.

Every holiday since then had been special, and when Sirius had sent her a new Thunderbolt broom, it was the best present she had ever received. This Christmas though, she didn't want anything more than for Sirius to be there with her. To have someone she could call a family of her own. He was her godfather, and like her, he deserved a little bit of happiness. Twelve years in prison for a crime he didn't commit and three years on the run as an escaped convict had taken their toll. She wanted them both to be happy for Christmas. Hadn't the price they paid been more than enough?

"Lemon tarts," Harry uttered the password as she reached the gargoyle guarding the moving stairs to the Headmaster's office. Mounting the stairs, she had no idea what to say to Dumbledore, but knew he would have plenty to say to her. Knocking boldly, she waited for his response.

"Enter, Harry," Dumbledore's solemn voice came from the other side of the door.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster," she replied coming to stand in front of his desk. "I'm sure Professor Snape already told you I was coming and his version of why."

"Yes, Child, he told me all about your refusal to comply with his request to do your work until Mr. Malfoy apologized to you."

"Amazing," Harry brazenly remarked, "It's not like him to be so forthcoming unless he also left out part of the reason."

"He told me Mr. Malfoy insulted you and Mr. Weasley. He also told me you cursed Draco with poison ivy and a few other plant reactions. You know I will not tolerate such behavior, even from you. It seems to me you have been getting away with a lot of mischief lately. Perhaps I've been too lenient with you, Harry?" Harry was taken back by the Headmaster's attitude. He had always been fair and would listen to her side, but today he seemed to be favoring Snape. She opened her mouth to reply, but he motioned her to be silent. "I expect better from you, Child. Severus assured me that he was going to deal with Mr. Malfoy after class. Instead, you disrupted his lesson, and broke the school rule about using magic against another student. You are to go back to class, and apologize to Professor Snape. He will determine what detention you will receive after the lesson is complete. Do you understand me?"

Harry just stared at Dumbledore and managed to nod mutely. She was confused and hurt by his attitude. He had always been there for her and would at least listen. If he felt she was wrong, he would explain things to her. She had never known him to be unfair. 'Sirius, where are you? Even Dumbledore won't listen to me. I need you,' she thought as she turned to leave the office, fighting back tears. 'Can't anybody see how lonely I am?'

Leaving the office, she knew she should do as Dumbledore instructed, but she was too angry and hurt by his curt attitude and dismissal. Instead, she found herself going up into the next tower and onto the roof. It was cold, and she pulled her robes around her for some added

protection. Sitting down by the gargoyle, she started to cry. She began thinking about Halloween, when, after being sent back in time, her mother had held her in her arms. She had never told anyone about it, and right now, it was the only comfort available. Sirius was still in hiding, Remus was in the middle of a class, Snape was on the warpath and Dumbledore had all but shunned her away. She felt alone in the world...

Severus Snape was furious. Dumbledore had sent word down to his class that Harry would be returning and he was to determine her detention after the lesson, but she never showed up. As he strode swiftly through the halls towards the Headmaster's office, he was amazed at the temerity of the young witch, to blatantly ignore Dumbledore. He assumed she had gone to see Professor Lupin, and anticipated he would find him in with Dumbledore pleading the girl's case to him.

"Lemon tarts," Snape said sharply, uttering the password as if it were something to be avoided, and mounted the moving stairs to Dumbledore's office.

"Enter, Severus," Dumbledore's irate voice came from behind the door.

"I knew I would find you here," Snape addressed Professor Lupin irritably, "where is she?"

"She's not here, Severus," Lupin answered calmly, "and I haven't seen her since she left me following Defense Against the Dark Arts to go to Potions Class."

"Then where is she?" he demanded arrogantly, folding his arms across his chest.

"We don't know, Severus. No one has seen her since she left my office," Dumbledore explained worriedly. "I was very angry with her, but it is not like Harry to be openly defiant of my instructions."

"Potter is her father's daughter, and believes she can get away with doing as she pleases."

"You know that isn't true, Severus. She's headstrong, like James was, yes, but she knows her limits, and would never deliberately go against Albus."

"Then what do you think has happened to her?" Snape smiled contemptuously, "I don't believe she's foolish enough to leave the building; not with Voldemort waiting to try and kill her at any rate."

"Enough! I want the two of you to stop arguing, and find Harry. We all promised Sirius she would be safe and secure until he could return, and now we have no idea where she is. I am concerned that she may be injured, or perhaps fallen into the hands of some of Voldemort's spies."

"Headmaster, surely Hogwarts is secure and she is safe here," Remus remarked warily.

"We have been breached in the past by some of Voldemort's supporters, as well as the Dark Lord himself, prior to his resurrection. Evil has many faces, Remus, and we must be prepared for any possibility. I want the two of you to search the building; I will have Hagrid search the grounds. She's been missing for over an hour and the more time passes the more concerned I am becoming."

"You aren't coming with us, Headmaster?" Severus asked arching his brow. He was fully aware of the old man's affection for Harry, and was puzzled by his not joining the search.

"No, I need to stay here. I am awaiting an important message from the Order concerning the investigations into the information Pettigrew gave us. I will join you as soon as I hear from them, if you haven't already found her," Dumbledore looked at the Potions master over his spectacles. His face was grave and his eyes reflected the worry he felt for Harry.

"Very well, Headmaster. We will find her. Remus lets get on with it. If the castle has been breeched, Miss Potter is in grave danger." Severus turned on his heel and headed towards the stairs, the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor following worriedly in his wake...

Harry knew she was missing Potions, and after about fifteen minutes of sitting on the roof, she was freezing. Deciding she had better get going on down to the dungeon, she wiped her eyes on her sleeve, and went over to the door which exited back into the tower. Pulling on the handle, it didn't open, and trying again, she found that it was apparently stuck. Pulling out her wand, she uttered, "*Aolhomora*," and tried the door again. It wouldn't budge.

"That's funny," she said aloud to herself, "why can't I get back in? Maybe the wind distorted my voice, *Alohamora!*" she shouted at the door, pointing her wand at the lock, with still no result. The blue light from her wand just seemed to be absorbed into the door. "Oh, great, now I'm stuck up here in the cold, and Snape's really going to have a fit. Let me see if anybody is outside. Maybe if I yell, they'll hear me."

Walking over to the edge of the roof, she looked over the short wall, but didn't see anybody out on the grounds. Looking over to Hagrid's hut, she noted it was dark, and he didn't seem to be home. Harry considered climbing out onto the wall and working her way around the building to one of the other towers, but decided against it. 'If I only had a broom!' she thought. 'Then I could just fly down and go in through the main doors. Damn, I'm already in enough trouble, what am I going to do now?'

Going back to the door, she started banging on it and yelling, "Mr. Filch, I'm locked out on the roof. Please let me back in." The door was solid oak and must have been a foot thick, so she gave up and sat down. She didn't think Filch was nearby anyway. 'Don't panic,' she thought to herself, 'someone will come looking for you in a little while, just sit down and try to stay warm.' Huddling up behind the gargoyle to try to keep the wind off her she put her face down into her robes and wrapped her arms around her body in an effort to conserve body heat.

'You've really done it now. Dumbledore will probably really expel you this time, and it's your own fault for feeling sorry for yourself,' Harry chided as she sat and waited. 'Why didn't I just do as I was told for once, and go back to Potions? Now I'm locked out on the roof and nobody knows I'm here. I wonder what time it is. It would be a real joke if I froze to death up here, Voldemort would really love it. I could just hear him now, "Potter got locked out on the roof, and froze right under Dumbledore's nose. So much for that foolish Prophecy. She did me a favor."

Worry and fright began to overtake Harry's nerves, and she got up and again tried banging on the door. "Someone, please hear me," she sobbed as she skinned her knuckles, "the door is locked and I can't get back in," she cried sliding down onto the roof in front of the massive door.

She had to find a way to get someone to notice her. Her feet were numb, and her teeth had begun to chatter from the cold, as she sat huddled, shivering in a heap. 'Stay calm, and try to think. You know the Headmaster will send someone to find you when you don't show up for class. Just don't let your imagination run away with you,' she reasoned with herself. 'There has got to be a way to draw attention to your predicament. What would your father or Sirius do in a case like this? Or even Snape...that's it! Bless you, Professor; if this works, I'll never give you a hard time again. That is, if Dumbledore doesn't throw me the hell out of school first,' she smiled, drawing her wand...

"Which way do you want to go?" Remus asked, entering the hall by the Headmaster's office.

"Let's go to the unused classrooms off the third floor corridor. Perhaps she went up there."

"What reason would Harry have to go to the third floor? She was supposed to go back to the dungeon. Don't you think she would have started out in that direction?"

"I don't pretend to know what goes on in Miss Potter's mind. I do know that she was angry, and since the Headmaster was not his usual sympathetic self with her today, she may have decided to take a detour."

"Listen, Snape, Harry is a good person, and thinks the world of Albus. If he was short with her, she was probably upset, especially now. She was late for Potions because of me, and didn't want to wait for a pass. She's worried about the situation with Sirius. I know you and Sirius don't get along, but Harry is sixteen years old. Sirius is her only family, aside from Lily's sister and her family, and they don't want her around. She's getting impatient, and doesn't understand what is taking so long for his name to be cleared."

"Miss Potter is aware of the situation with Pettigrew and knows there are important people involved, so she should realize that these things take time. She did not need to be disruptive in class, or put that curse on Mr. Malfoy."

"Humph, from what I've seen of Draco Malfoy he's just like his father. It's no wonder she doesn't like him. I'm just surprised she hasn't been more aggressive with him."

"Don't judge Draco because of Lucius. The boy only knows what his father tells him. I've been trying to get through to him, but it isn't easy. His father's bigotry runs deep. I had hoped he would show some kind of improvement after he found out Harry was a witch, since it was apparent that he rather liked what he saw."

"Draco liked Harry? Now that's interesting, but I don't believe she would ever be interested in him," Remus told the Potions Master as they entered the third floor corridor. It was dusty and the dust on the floor showed no sign of anyone having come that way in quite some time.

"Severus, it's obvious that she didn't come up here," Remus pointed, indicating the undisturbed dust. "Let's try thinking like Harry. What would she do if she were upset or angry?"

"What do most adolescent girls do?" Severus asked impatiently. "My sister used to go up in our attic and sulk or cry."

"Severus, that's it! Where does Harry go when she's upset?"

"I'm sure I have no clue. She doesn't confide in me about her personal life all that much. I always thought she went to you, Black, or the Headmaster."

"Exactly! Let's see if she went to my office to wait till my class was done."

"Didn't you go to your office after your last class?"

"No, I went directly up to see Albus. I wanted to let him know that Harry was getting very impatient waiting for news of Sirius. That's when I found out about what happened during Potions."

"Very well, come on. If that doesn't work, we'll go down to the dungeon and work through all the empty rooms from top to bottom. Did anyone think to try her room?"

"Albus sent Minerva down as soon as you told him she didn't make it to class."

"All right, let's get on with it. I really don't believe she would leave the building alone, knowing how dangerous it is for her," Snape replied as they went down the stairs to where Professor Lupin's office was on the second floor. He was more than a little concerned that she was missing, and knew that she could be in a good deal of danger. 'Damn fool girl, I know you were mad, but you have to learn to let me handle the students in my house, in my own way,' he thought, 'Now look how much trouble you're causing. If anything's happened to you I'll never forgive myself,' Snape declared guiltily to himself, picturing her green eyes flashing at him in anger before she left his classroom.

"Harry," Professor Lupin called opening his office. Harry knew his password and had his permission to go in to find him if she needed him. "Harry!" he called more forcefully, looking around as they both entered, and was met by silence.

"She's not here, Remus," Snape said flatly, "we'd better go on down to the dungeons and start a methodical search."

"Do you think we should split up?"

"It might be best. We will be able to cover the building faster. Do you want to start upstairs? She may be in one of the second floor class rooms."

"It's a possibility. Why don't we ask some of the portraits if they've seen her?" Remus suggested, "she had to have passed someone."

"Very well, we could also ask the castle ghosts. You ask Sir Nicholas and I will go and find the Baron. Peeves may also have seen her," Snape curled his lip distastefully at the mention of the nasty poltergeist, "we'll meet back in the headmaster's office in fifteen minutes."

Both men parted and hurriedly searched the empty rooms, with no success. Snape questioned both the Bloody Baron and Peeves, who was only co-operative since the Baron was there, but neither had seen the missing witch.

Professor Lupin meanwhile searched the empty classrooms on the second floor and spoke with both Sir Nick and the portrait of the Fat Lady who guarded the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. The result was the same. There was no sign of Harry. He was growing increasingly

worried as he headed back towards the Headmaster's Office. Professor Snape had arrived ahead of him and was waiting by the gargoyle, his brow furrowed with worry. 'He cares for her too,' Lupin thought noting the expression on Snape's face. Snape immediately masked his features when he saw Lupin approaching him, silently cursing himself for allowing the other man to see his worried frown.

"Severus, I found no sign of her anywhere. Did you get anything from the Baron or Peeves?" he asked hopefully.

"No. She does not appear to be in the building. We had best report back to Albus, and see if Hagrid has returned yet. I hope the foolish child has not gone into the forest."

"I wonder if Minerva checked her closet to see if her winter cloak is missing."

"I don't believe so," Snape replied uncertainly, "we should do so before we tell Albus anything. At least it will help us to determine if she went out." Snape turned, moving back down the hallway towards the unused Prefects room that had been given to Harry in an effort to protect her from Voldemort. "Has she changed her password?"

"Puppy Prongs," Lupin replied, and they entered the room. Everything appeared to be in order, and they went immediately over to her closet. Her winter cloak was hanging neatly on a hook, along with her scarf and gloves.

"She doesn't appear to have returned here at all," Snape observed, "her textbooks are not here. Whatever happened, it occurred after she left Albus' office."

"Come on. We had better tell him. I know he's worried," Remus said as they left and sealed her door again.

Neither man was looking forward to telling the Headmaster that they had been unsuccessful, and uttering the password to his office, their expressions were grim.

"Headmaster...Albus..." Snape began gently. He didn't want the old man to feel any worse than he was sure he already did. "We were unable to find any sign of her. Perhaps Hagrid has been more successful?"

"No, I just heard from him. He searched both the forest and went into Hogsmeade; no one has seen or heard from Harry," Dumbledore told him, unable to hide his worried expression. "I fear something has happened to her, and it's my fault. If I had only taken a few minutes to listen to her..."

"Albus," Lupin laid his hand on the old man's arm, "Harry loves you and I'm sure that even though she was upset, she didn't mean to worry you like this. We'll find her."

"If she's fallen into Voldemort's hands..."

"Albus, Remus, look!" Snape interrupted urgently. "In the sky outside of the window," he pointed excitedly. The familiar symbol for the Death Eaters was hanging over the Whomping Willow, but there was a red circle around it with a slash going through the skull and snake. "I believe it is a Muggle symbol for no or stop. It appears to be directed from the roof by the next tower."

"Harry! She must be locked up there. She doesn't know about the charms you put on the entrances, Albus. How did she get out? The charm is supposed to work both ways?"

"We'll worry about that later," Dumbledore told them heading to the stairs, "we need to get her inside. She must have been out there since she left my office, well over an hour ago, and it's freezing outside."

The three men ran through the hall towards the entrance to the tower, which was the next one down from the Headmaster's office. Mounting the stairs to the tower door, which led out onto the roof, Dumbledore pulled out his wand, but the door was unlocked from the inside. He knew it should have been sealed from both inside and out, and would have to investigate why it had been possible to open it without the unlocking spell. As he pushed on the door, he could feel some resistance as it swung outward onto the roof, and a soft cry followed.

"Harry move back from the door," Lupin called, carefully edging out onto the roof through the narrow opening Dumbledore had made. "Oh, Merlin," he said grabbing Harry up into his arms, as Severus and Dumbledore came out of the stairwell to join him on the roof, "we've got to get her inside, she's half frozen."

"Here," Snape removed his outer robe, which covered his shirt and trousers, "Wrap her in this until we can get her downstairs where it is warm." he said helping Remus as he picked Harry up to carry her from the roof. "Headmaster, should I remove the symbol from the sky?"

"That won't be necessary, Severus. I rather like her idea. Perhaps we should adopt it as our logo?" He smiled following them back into the building. "*Ostium obsero*," Dumbledore pointed his wand at the heavy door as they began to descend the stairs, securely locking the tower door.

"Headmmaasster," Harry said through chattering teeth, "I'm ssorryy. I ddidnn't mean tttooo..."

"Hush child, don't try to talk. You will have plenty of time for explanations once we have gotten you warm. Remus take her to my office and put her on the sofa in front of the fire. I'll have the house elves bring her up some warm soup and cocoa."

"All right. Hang on Puppy Prongs, we'll get you warmed up and then you can tell us how you came to be on the roof instead of down in Potions where you belonged," Remus told her sternly, but his slight smile belied his anger. "Thank Merlin she's safe. Sirius would never forgive us if something happened to her while he was away. If nothing else, her explanation should be interesting. I hope Severus isn't too hard on her with the detention, being out on that roof all this time should be punishment enough, and I think Albus will agree with me."

"Lemon tarts," Dumbledore uttered the password to his office, and they mounted the moving stairs.

"Headmaster, we should be sure she doesn't have frostbite. She was outside for over an hour in the wind," Snape suggested as Remus gently placed Harry on the sofa, returning Severus's robe before wrapping her in the blanket that Dumbledore kept on the back of the sofa.

"Go ahead, Severus, I'll send for the house elves to bring up the food" Dumbledore agreed as he rang for the house elves, "do you have any frostbite potion?"

"I just made some and sent a batch up to the infirmary yesterday," the Potions Master informed him. "Remus help me to get her shoes off. Her hands seem to be okay," Snape told him checking all her fingers.

Remus gently removed her shoes and socks as Harry sat shivering violently, marveling at the gentleness of Professor Snape's touch as he examined her feet.

"You're very lucky, Miss Potter," Snape stated critically, "any longer outside and you would have been severely frostbitten. As it stands now, there doesn't seem to be any damage, but I'm going to give you some of the frostbite potion anyway just to be on the safe side," he explained sternly, as Dobby appeared.

"Headmaster," Dobby said jumping up and down excitedly, "can Dobby get you something?"

"Bring us up some warm soup and hot cocoa for Miss Potter and a pot of tea for myself and the Professors."

"Dobby will send Miss Harry's favorite chicken soup and cocoa along with tea for the Headmaster," he said blinking out as he snapped his fingers. The teapot appeared almost immediately along with a giant mug of cocoa and bowl of steaming soup.

"Severus, why don't you go and get the potion for Harry, while Remus and I get some warm food into her."

"I shall be back shortly, Headmaster," Snape nodded leaving the office, his movement's swift and silent.

"Now, Harry, let Remus give you some of that soup. You're still shivering violently, and we need to get you warm," Dumbledore looked at her, his expression serious, his blue eyes reflecting his inner worry. "I'll help you to get warm," he said sitting down beside her and pulling her up against him while doing a warming charm.

"Yeess, Sirrr..." Harry answered obediently, still unable to control her violent shivering, as Remus stirred the soup and offered her a spoonful. She took the soup as she nestled into the warmth of the headmaster.

"Everything will be all right, Harry," he said sensing her anxiety, "I may be angry with you, but I still love you and am relieved you're safe. We all are," he added as he heard the door open. He knew Severus had returned, even though his step was silent.

"Should I mix the potion with the soup?" Remus asked quietly, looking up at the Potions Master, as he continued to feed Harry.

"No, she needs to drink it undiluted." Snape handed her a small vial of purple fluid. "It will help if you drink it quickly as it is very bitter. It is not something that can be made more palatable without causing it to lose potency."

"I knnooww. It was mmmmy ccllaass that miixxed it," Harry reminded him through chattering teeth. Swallowing the potion, she was unable to hide the grimace on her face and the three men smiled in amusement.

"Headmaster, I'll pour out the tea," Snape filled the three cups, and placed them on the table, "why don't you let me warm her while you drink your tea, and then we can alternate until she has warmed sufficiently to stop shivering."

"Very well, Severus. Remus would you care to join me?"

"Of course, she's all done with the soup. We'll let her rest for awhile before she takes the hot chocolate." Professor Lupin took one of the cups from the table while Dumbledore and Snape traded places on the couch.

"Lay back, Miss Potter," Snape instructed gently pressing her head down onto his shoulder. "I don't generally bite, only when I'm particularly furious with little witches who don't show up for class or detention," Snape taunted sarcastically.

Harry just rolled her eyes, doing as he wanted, reminding herself of the promise she made on the roof. He put his arms around her gently, the warming spell helping her to relax. She continued to marvel at how gentle and delicate his touch was, and she sat studying his hands. They were long and elegant, and his nails were neatly trimmed. 'Much too nice for a man,' she thought. 'I wonder how much of a telepath he is. I don't think he can actually read my mind, but I'll bet he has a good idea of what's going through it.' Snape was watching her, and gave a low chuckle under his breath, so that only Harry could hear him. She jumped slightly and looked up at him; his left eyebrow was raised in amusement, his dark eyes glittering. She wanted to scan him, but knew better, so she just settled herself back against him, closed her eyes and soaked in the warming spell. She had begun to doze off, and her teeth had finally stopped chattering, when she became aware of Remus quiet voice speaking to her.

"Harry, Princess..." he touched her cheek lightly with his fingers to rouse her, using her pet name, "you need to drink this cocoa. You're skin is still quite cold."

Opening her eyes, she smiled feebly, and took the cup from his hands. "Umm...the Headmaster's hot chocolate is one of the best kept secrets in this school. I should get stuck out in the cold more often."

"Do you want to change off, Severus? I could warm her for awhile while you rest and enjoy your tea."

"No, she's finally beginning to relax. Just hand me my cup, and I'll manage quite nicely," the Potions Master replied.

Remus handed him his cup of tea, and pulled his chair up to the couch. "Harry, your feet are still like ice. I am just going to massage them for a few minutes to stimulate the circulation," Remus explained. Removing one foot from beneath the blanket, he began to knead it gently, moving from top to bottom with a slow rhythmic motion.

"Harry," Dumbledore moved to sit beside her on the sofa, "do you feel up to telling us how you came to be locked on the roof?"

Harry studied him intently for a moment, and he looked at her over his spectacles, his blue eyes warm, reassuring her that he was not going to be short with her.

"I'm not sure how I got locked out. When I left your office, I went up to the roof because I wasn't ready to deal with Professor Snape. I was upset that you wouldn't listen to me. You always did before, even when I was wrong," she said looking at him with a troubled expression.

"I apologize for that, Child; I was very busy with a very delicate matter. Your little antic could not have occurred at a worse time. I promise it will never happen again."

"Headmaster, we both know that's a promise you may not be able to keep."

"Then, if I'm so preoccupied again, I'll tell you to go back to class and we'll all discuss it in my office later. I didn't mean for you to feel you couldn't come to me with a problem," Dumbledore reassured her, taking her hand in his. "Now finish telling us what happened."

"I had no one to talk to who would listen to me. I couldn't go to Professor Lupin since he was in the middle of a class. I just decided to go up onto the roof and have a good cry. I felt alone, and that nobody really cared what happened to me. It didn't matter if I went directly back to Potions. Professor Snape was already mad," Harry peeked at Snape, who was listening with interest, "and I wasn't ready to apologize, even though you told me to," she said shame faced, unable to look at Dumbledore, as Snape sent another stream of warmth into her.

"Miss Potter, you are probably the most cared about student in this whole school. Black has numerous times risked capture for you. Professor Lupin goes out of his way to help you learn advanced magic to protect you from the Dark Lord and the Headmaster has been keeping an eye on you since birth. I have been protecting you from harm since you walked through the doors six years ago," Snape looked down at her seriously; his voice quiet and even, with no hint of anger or malice.

"That's the problem, Professor. I believe people look out for me because first I was the boy that survived. Then, when everyone realized I was actually a girl, I became the girl in the prophecy, the one who will defeat Voldemort. Nobody looks at me, as just plain old Harry, the orphan witch with a boy's name. You told me yourself that the only reason you're protecting me is that my father saved your life when Professor Lupin almost attacked you in his werewolf form. You have on more than one occasion pointed out to me that fame is not everything," Harry looked at Snape in confusion; she wanted him to understand her feelings, "nobody ever looks at me as a person."

"Child," Dumbledore began slowly, "we all look at you as a person; a very special person. I don't love you because you are destined for a great future. I love you because your father and mother were my friends, and supporters. You are kind, good, and generous, and your life has not been easy. I put you with your aunt and uncle because I didn't want you to be spoiled by what others believed. I wanted to protect you from the gossip and the spotlight as long as possible. Sirius has always loved you, he's your godfather, and he is so proud of you. Remus was your parent's good friend, and he doesn't teach you things to make you stand out. He genuinely cares about you. You never looked at him as if he's a monster simply because he's a werewolf. You care enough about him to want to learn to do a potion that even he can't mix, so that he won't have to worry about harming anyone during his transformations. I think I'll let Severus explain his actions and feelings towards you himself," Dumbledore looked at the Potions Master, his blue eyes mischievous behind his half moon spectacles.

"Headmaster?" Snape shifted uncomfortably.

"I think Harry should know how you feel, Severus. She needs to know you aren't tolerating her presence simply because she's James Potter's daughter."

"Very well," Snape replied reluctantly. "Miss Potter...Harry...what the Headmaster feels you should know is that I merely am pretending to dislike you for your own safety. If I'm in a bad mood, I have been deliberately taking it out on you in an effort to make people think that I am not your ally. Originally, I started out watching you to satisfy the debt I owed to your father, that part is quite true. I was also somewhat disappointed that you were placed into Gryffindor instead of Slytherin. I have never held any true animosity towards you despite the fact that James and I did not usually get along. Your father helped me to turn away from Voldemort, along with Professor Dumbledore, after I lost my own wife and child. You have many of his finer attributes, but you also have some from your mother, and she was always my friend. The plain fact of the matter is that I do like you. Your smart, and brave, and have an understanding of people that is rare, and not because of your being an empath." Snape released her gently, "Remus do you want to sit with her now?" he asked the other professor, guiding the conversation back to Harry and away from him, as he was uncomfortable talking about such personal feelings.

"Of course, Severus," Lupin traded places with the Potions Master, who took over rubbing Harry's cold feet. "Harry, you don't have to feel so alone. We all care about you because we know you. We know you hate being in the limelight and that you sometimes feel like you're carrying a terrible burden. The truth of the matter is that you are. People believe in you, we just want you to feel like any normal teenager. If you think for one moment we don't worry about you, you're wrong, but we worry simply because we care."

"Remus is right, Child. We don't love you because you survived the curse that killed your parents, or because a prophecy tells us how special you are. We all knew that from the beginning. We love you because we know you, the real you, not the celebrity Harry. We love James and Lily's daughter," Dumbledore beamed brushing the hair from her scar, "you see, you're our family too. Now have some more hot chocolate, and finish telling us how you got out onto the roof."

"I don't understand, Professor. What do you mean how I got onto the roof? I opened the door and walked."

"How did you open the door? It should have been locked with a locking spell. I had all unused and miscellaneous entrances and exits sealed following what happened on Halloween."

"That's why I couldn't get back inside! I had no idea why my magic wouldn't open the door."

"But Princess, how did you get out onto the roof in the first place?"

"Remus, the door was unlocked. I just went outside like I always have. I closed the door behind me. I tried to come back in and go down to Potions, but the door wouldn't budge," Harry said looking from one to the other. "Please believe me. I would never do something to deliberately upset you."

"We do believe you, Child. What concerns us is why the locking charm was not on the door from the inside. I made it emphatically clear the doors were to be sealed both inside and out."

"Headmaster, perhaps it was just an oversight," Snape suggested carefully, in an effort to avoid alarming Harry.

The Headmaster understood his meaning, and looked at him shrewdly, "It is entirely possible, Severus, but I will have Professor Lupin and Professor Flitwick double check all the sealed entrances and exits tonight. Harry was very lucky today that we found her when we did," Dumbledore smiled.

"Miss Potter, what ever possessed you to use the symbol for the Dark Mark in that manner?"

"You're not all mad at me for doing it, are you?"

"No, Princess, it was actually quite inventive. I just hope you didn't frighten anyone."

"Well, I thought that the Muggle born students would have some understanding of the symbol and explain it to the others. I knew not all the Muggle borns would know what the Dark Mark was, but they would understand what the red circle with the slash through it meant. I wasn't sure about the staff, but I was almost certain the Headmaster would be familiar with the way I used the symbol," Harry winked at him.

"How did you come up with the idea to use it, Child?"

"Professor Snape," Harry grinned tossing her head, as Snape finished massaging her feet and placed the blanket around them once more, settling himself into the chair.

"Me?"

"I just asked myself what my father or Sirius or you would do in a similar situation...."

"Not me, Princess?"

"No Remus, you're not stubborn enough to get into that kind of trouble and get locked out on the roof. From what I've heard my dad was, and I know Sirius is, and so is Professor Snape," Harry laughed, red faced, as Professor Lupin sent another burst of warming energy through her.

"So tell me just how I prompted you to come up with the idea," Snape inquired arching his left brow, and trying to keep his face neutral.

"Well, I kept thinking how Voldemort would laugh if I froze to death out on the roof under Dumbledore's nose, and then I came up with the idea. I thought of you, and the Dark Mark came into my head. I didn't want to use it; I was afraid I'd start a panic, so I modified it and directed it so it could be seen from the Headmaster's office. I knew there weren't too many class rooms beneath him, so I thought it would be relatively safe."

"It accomplished what you wanted, in any event Child. We all came to investigate. How did you know we were even aware you were missing?"

"Headmaster...if you think for one minute that I believe Professor Snape would not have let you know that I didn't come back down to Potions...well..."Harry shrugged as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better, and I'm more than relieved that you're safe and uninjured. You might have tried something stupid like working your way around the building on the wall," Dumbledore shook his head.

"I did consider it for a little while," she confessed, "but ruled it out as being too dangerous."

"Thank Merlin for that!" Remus exclaimed, helping her to sit and wrapping the blanket around her, having completed warming her sufficiently.

"Now Child, I believe you owe Professor Snape an apology."

"I know...Professor Snape I apologize for disrupting your class this afternoon," Harry admitted uncomfortable under the scrutiny of his gaze, "believe me, it won't happen again."

"How can you be so certain of that, Miss Potter?"

"Because I swore that if using the Dark Mark symbol to get off the roof worked I'd never give you a hard time in class again," she explained lowering her eyes in embarrassment.

"Well, that remains to be seen, Miss Potter. You still have to make up this afternoon's class. Headmaster, I think Miss Potter should have a quiet dinner in her room following a hot bath, and then put on some warm clothes and come to the dungeon to do today's lesson. I don't believe she should receive detention for missing the class. It was purely accidental. I do think she should give you a written apology as to why she will never leave your office again and do something else, rather than what you instructed her to do."

"Very well, Severus. How about her detention for being disruptive this afternoon, do you have something in mind?"

"Yes. I believe she should accompany me tomorrow. I could use her help."

"Interesting detention, Severus," Remus grinned, "you may be biting off more than you can chew."

"I think she will behave, Remus," Dumbledore laughed. "It will be good for her too."

"Very well then, I will see you promptly at seven P.M. for your lesson. In the mean time I will escort you to your room with Professor Lupin."

"Excuse me, Professors, but did I miss something here? What is the detention I have to do tomorrow?"

"I will tell you that tonight, after you complete your potions lesson," Snape said rising from his seat as Remus helped Harry to stand, and Professor Dumbledore winked in amusement.

Remus and Snape walked Harry downstairs to her room, and once she was safely inside, she did as she was told, and ran a hot tub. She enjoyed a long soak. Finally feeling warm again, she got dressed, and the house elves brought her up a dinner tray. After her meal of roast turkey, sweet potatoes, and salad, she had a glass of apple cider, and prepared to go on down to her Potions Class. Professor Lupin had informed Ron and Hermione what had happened, so they did not expect to see her until breakfast.

As Harry made her way to the dungeon, she was wondering what kind of detention Snape was going to give her for being disruptive and talking back to him in class. He had yet to say anything about how many points she would lose from Gryffindor, but she was sure there would be some. He was probably deciding how many to deduct, based on her performance and conduct earlier in the day. He was aware that she had felt offended by both Malfoy, and the Professor's supposed lack of action, so she assumed he was going to decide her points deduction with that in mind. Rounding the corner towards the Potions classroom, she ran headlong into Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were coming from the Slytherin Common Room.

"Well if it isn't Miss Potter, the Potion's Master's off hours friend," Malfoy sneered, as Crabbe and Goyle moving to stand on either side of her so she couldn't move.

"Knock it off, Malfoy. I don't like your implication, nor would Professor Snape."

"Snape's a coward, my dad says so, scared to death of the Dark Lord."

"I doubt it. More likely, your dad is the coward. I wonder what Lord Voldemort would do to him if he ever found out about your original Halloween costumes?" Harry responded smoothly, as Crabbe tried to shove her, but she resisted by stepping on his foot.

"Are you inferring my father has anything to do with the Dark Lord? He was cleared of those charges years ago," Malfoy said taken back by Harry's apparent knowledge that his father was actually a Death eater.

"Was he? Or is he still one of the faithful followers now that the Dark Lord is alive and well again? It seems to me Professor Snape is the braver of the two men, he had the good sense to see that the ways of the Dark Lord are a threat to both Wizard and Muggle alike. It takes a brave man to stand up for his convictions."

"My father is a brave man!" Malfoy spat angrily, as both Crabbe and Goyle went to grab hold of Harry, who offered no resistance what ever. She was frightened of what they might do, but she wouldn't give them the satisfaction of knowing it.

"No, Malfoy, your father is a bigot and a loser. He hates people just because he thinks he's better than they are. My guess is that his wizarding line may be long, but there are a lot of skeletons in his closet."

"And your father was a meddling fool. He didn't know how to mind his own business and it got him killed," Malfoy hissed. "The same thing will probably happen to you, if you don't stop snooping where you don't belong."

"My father," Harry began slowly, her voice low and threatening, "was a brave and caring man. He met his death unafraid and stood up for his convictions. I know....I was there thanks to Lord Voldemort. Why don't you ask your father? He helped to arrange it," she smiled malevolently, "of course, he'll deny it, but that's what cowards generally do, especially when they're licking the heels of their master."

Malfoy made to lash out at Harry, as Crabbe and Goyle pinned her up against the wall. She was unable to move or draw her wand, but didn't care; she was her father's daughter after all.

Malfoy went to strike her with his wand, but was stopped by a cold voice, as someone grabbed his arm in mid air.

"Mr. Malfoy, I suggest you put your wand down immediately," Snape told him as Crabbe and Goyle moved away from where Harry was pinned to the wall.

"Professor!" Malfoy gasped, "Miss Potter was trying to curse me again."

"I find it rather difficult to believe that Miss Potter was in a position to do you any harm what so ever Draco, since Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle were preventing her from moving," Snape glared at the three boys icily. "Now, I suggest the three of you go directly up to the Headmaster's office. I shall be there directly, and make no mistake, he will be expecting you." The three boys did not have to be told twice, and moved off towards the stairs swiftly, but Harry called after them.

"Draco...One day you will have to make a choice. Think about what I said. You can still make the right one. Don't do something just because it's what is expected of you. Use your mind and your heart, and look at what's going on around you while there's still time."

Draco Malfoy just kept going, his head held high, and his back straight, but Harry knew he had heard her. She had done what she could, but it was up to her rival to act upon it. She had just warned him, and hoped he would heed her advice.

"Miss Potter, follow me," Snape turned on his heel, striding swiftly in the direction of the classroom. Harry followed silently, expecting him to be furious, as they entered the Potions work area. He turned and studied her, before speaking, "You are unharmed?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Then I want you to lay out all of your ingredients and start preparing them, but do not light the cauldron until I return from the Headmaster's Office. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir...Professor...thanks for not...yelling."

"Miss Potter, you were being held against your will, and what the young men said was not to my liking at all."

"You overheard us?"

"When you were late for class, I came looking for you. Yes, I heard the whole thing. Now get started on the assignment, and if I see fit to do so we will discuss it later." He informed her stoically, as he went over to the fireplace to summon the Headmaster. After a few brief words with Dumbledore, Professor Snape made certain Harry was working on her assignment and then excused himself to go upstairs.

Harry worked quietly for nearly an hour, and had all her ingredients chopped and measured out to their precise amounts when Professor Snape returned. He came over to where she was working, and checked on her measurements. Making sure she knew the exact order they were to be brewed, he had her light the cauldron to allow the water to come to a boil.

"Are you satisfied with the texture of the toadstool root?" he asked as she began to add the ingredients to the cauldron in the specified order.

"Not entirely, and I think the oleander could be powdered a little better, but I had some difficulty chopping it. I think my knife is getting dull."

"Let me see," he picked up her knife and worked on some of the toadstool roots she had already chopped, "the knife does need some sharpening, but if you cut this way," he indicated a diagonal motion, similar to julienne, "you should be able to get a cleaner cut. Chop them a little better before you add them, then I will show you the proper procedure for using the knife sharpener," he said quietly.

Harry knew Snape did not allow anyone but seventh year students to use his sharpener, and looked up in surprise, "Professor, you know I'm only a sixth year. You never let anyone use the sharpener until their seventh."

"You have been doing well in your advanced lessons. I believe you can be trusted with supervision."

Harry smiled, and chopped the toadstool root as he had showed her, and then added it to the cauldron along with the oleander. He then took her over to his knife sharpener, which was entirely different from what would be found in a common kitchen, as the knives used to make potions were magically tempered steel. He demonstrated, and then helped her to try it alone. He had two other knives to sharpen and allowed her to do them with his supervision. The sharpener was clumsy in her small hands, but she got the idea quickly, and Snape seemed pleased with her progress. Her potion was completed shortly thereafter, and she had done it correctly. Bottling the mixture, she set it aside with the ones that her class had completed earlier, to be sent up to Madame Pomfrey.

"That's it Professor, can I clean up now?"

"You may. I'll expect you to make sure your work area is cleaned up for the recess. Then I will give you your detention."

"Yes, Sir," Harry replied, as she cleaned her worktable and dumped her cauldron, careful not to splash the boiling water. Scouring the cauldron until her hands were red, she dried it and then made sure she had left nothing out or unsealed. "I'm finished Professor," she told him moving away from her workstation so that he could inspect it. She waited patiently while he inspected the area, checking to make sure she had left nothing undone.

"Very well, Miss Potter, you have done well. Now sit down and we'll have a little talk."

"Yes Professor," she answered nervously, taking a seat in front of him.

"First of all, I don't ever want you to argue with my decision about how I conduct discipline in my classroom ever again. If you have a complaint, you can take it up with me following the class. Is that understood?" Seeing her nod in agreement, he continued on, "Next, you will have seventy-five points deducted from Gryffindor for your cheek this afternoon. I had planned to take one hundred but following the events of this afternoon, I have amended my decision. I also want you to write the apology for Professor Dumbledore tonight, before you go to bed, and see that he gets it in the morning. Is that clear?"

"Yes Professor Snape. Is there a specific amount of words you want me to adhere to?"

"Two hundred and fifty will be sufficient. Finally, you will do detention with me tomorrow. Be ready by eight o'clock and dress warmly. We will be going into London. I have to gather some supplies that I need for my private stock, which are difficult to obtain. I also have to finish my holiday shopping. You may also shop if you have not yet completed your holiday list, but you will not be allowed to do so without me, and until after I have finished. Do you have any questions?"

"What if you happen to be in a place where I wish to purchase something, or we are nearby a specific shop that I wish to go to. Do you want to have to go back later?"

"No, but I will expect you to inform me immediately should that be the case. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir. Will there be anything else?" Harry asked, amazed at her good luck. She was going shopping with Professor Snape in London for Christmas. If only she had news of Sirius, then she could get him the present she had decided on after Pettigrew had been captured. She made up her mind to visit the shopkeeper who could help her with her dilemma, knowing that he knew her.

"No. you are free to go. I would suggest you get that paper done, and get a good night's rest. The shops will be crowded, and we need to be very careful. We will not be going into Muggle London, so you need not worry about that, and don't forget your key for your vault in Gringotts.

"I won't," she grinned, good night Professor. Oh, Professor, what happened to Malfoy?"

"He will receive detention as will Crabbe and Goyle following the Christmas recess as they are all leaving for home on the train tomorrow."

Harry nodded in understanding, and left his office in a better mood than she had been in all day. Heading to her room, she sat down at her small desk and wrote her apology to Professor Dumbledore. Satisfied with her work, she put the paper aside to give to the Headmaster in the morning, and putting on her nightgown, climbed into bed. She was exhausted and fell asleep almost immediately, and dreamed that she and Sirius were together on Christmas morning, opening presents, and rejoicing in his freedom.

## ***Here We Go Again***

Harry was ready for breakfast early, and heading over to Gryffindor Tower, she found that Hermione and Ron had already gone down. She hurried to the Great Hall, and spotting her two friends, took her seat at the table.

"I'm sorry we didn't wait for you," Ron said taking a forkful of scrambled eggs, "but Hermione has to catch the express. She's going home for the Holiday's, and we weren't sure if you still had detention this morning. Snape was absolutely livid when you didn't show up for class after going up to see Dumbledore."

"He mellowed out somewhat after I nearly froze to death. How much did Professor Lupin tell you guys?"

"He said you got locked on the roof after you went up there to calm down when Dumbledore sent you back to class." Hermione explained matter of factly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but you know the frostbite potion we all made for Madame Pomfrey? It tastes really lousy," Harry laughed. "I have to finish my detention this morning. Professor Snape and I are going shopping to buy his potion supplies, and finish his Christmas shopping."

"You're going to Hogsmeade? Will you stop off and see Fred and George for me; I need to get some of their jokes to give as gifts to some of the first years," Ron told her gleefully, planning to test some of his brother's new wares from the magic shop on the unsuspecting eleven year olds.

"Sorry, Ron, he's taking me to London. He didn't say so but I think we're going to Diagon alley."

"London! That is twice he's taken you shopping. The only detention he ever gives me is gutting the salamanders or cleaning out the cauldrons," Ron moaned, "he must be up to something."

"And what Mr. Weasley do you think I would be up to?" Snape's voice came mockingly from behind them, causing Ron to spit his mouthful of eggs into his napkin.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," Hermione said brightly, "you're up bright and early today."

"It is the same as any other morning Miss Granger, and I always arise early. In fact this is late for me, but I thought Miss Potter could use the extra sleep or we would have been gone already," Professor Snape glared unblinking at them all, and Harry had to suppress a giggle.

"Mr. Weasley, I believe you haven't yet answered my question."

"Nothing, Professor, I'm sure the detention you gave Harry is within reason. I didn't mean to suggest you were doing anything wrong," Ron looked up at him nervously.

"Perhaps you would like to accompany Miss Potter and myself? It could be arranged."

"Er...no...I need to go and see my brother Fred in Hogsmeade today."

"I don't suppose you're planning on obtaining any of his Furry Fingered Foulies? I have already confiscated a number of them from the third years. I did not find them amusing when they crawled out of the cauldrons."

"Absolutely not, Professor," Ron feigned innocence, "I would never bring anything like that into class."

"See that you don't. If I find any more I will be sure to search you out Mr. Weasley, and the detention will be much worse than what you're used to," Snape looked at Ron over his long nose, his dark eyes glittering in anticipation of Ron's misbehaving. "Miss Potter, I will meet you in fifteen minutes in Professor Dumbledore's office. We will leave from there."

"Yes, Professor, I'll be ready," she replied as Snape strode out of the Great Hall with a flourish.

"Harry, how did he know I gave the Furry Fingered Foulies to the third years?" Ron asked anxiously.

"Ron you stupid git," Hermione shook her head, "he's not stupid. Snape knows your brother's started that magic shop in Hogsmead, and he knows what their pranks are like."

"Hermione's right, Ron, if I were you I'd be very careful around Snape. He will be waiting to catch you doing tricks. Fred and George may have finished here at Hogwarts, but you haven't. Snape knows they both love to test their inventions on the students, so he will assume you're helping them."

"Listen to Harry, Ron. Mark my words, Fred and George will get us expelled one day, and they don't even come to Hogwarts anymore."

"I don't think it will be that bad, Hermione," Harry grinned, "but I don't relish the thought of the detention Snape would give any one of us. Somehow I don't think it will be shopping."

"I still say he's up to something. Have you heard from Snuffles?"

"No, and I don't understand what is taking so long. Pettigrew has been in custody for nearly two months, and yet nothing has been said. I thought it would go much faster than this."

"Well, you know that they're doing everything by the book. That list of names had some very important people on it, including Draco's father."

"Speaking of the little creep, I don't see him this morning. I thought he was going home on the train?"

"He was, but I overheard Millicent Bulstrode saying that Mr. Malfoy arrived very late last night and took Draco home, Crabbe and Goyle went with them."

"Hmm...that's really odd. I had a problem with the three of them last night on my way to Potions. If it weren't for Professor Snape...well...he stopped them as they were going to try to beat me up. He took them to Dumbledore and told me that they were going to do detention as soon as the recess was over."

"What! Harry, why didn't you tell us this before?" Ron demanded, angry that she had almost been attacked.

"I didn't really get a chance, they cornered me. Crabbe and Goyle pinned me against the wall so I couldn't reach for my wand. Draco went to whip me, but Snape came and stopped him."

"That Draco Malfoy and his friends will come to a bad end, Harry," Hermione shook her head with disapproval, "you had better be more careful."

"Don't worry, I will be. I don't fancy having the three of them trying to get away with something like that, and I don't believe Professor Snape was very happy with them either." Just then, they were interrupted by the sound of several screeching owls, looking up, they noticed that the mail was arriving.

"Oh, good, the mail's here. I was hoping to get my copy of the Daily Prophet before I left on the train. It isn't the same without the two of you," Hermione smiled warmly.

"We'll miss you too, but have a good holiday and don't forget to tell your folks Ron and I said hello."

"I won't," Hermione answered as she unfurled the newspaper. "Harry," she gasped, "look, Sirius picture is on the front page, he's free!"

"Let me see," she grabbed the paper from Hermione and spread it out on the table in front of them. The headlines immediately jumped out at her, and her hands began to shake.

**SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT! PETTIGREW CONFESSES!**

**HOLIDAY RAIDS REVEAL FOLLOWERS OF THE DARK LORD!**

**MINISTER FUDGE AND OTHER OFFICIALS IMPLICATED**

In a stunning revelation, the escaped convict Sirius Black has been cleared of the murders of thirteen people. One of his former associates, Peter Pettigrew, believed to have been murdered in view of many witnesses has turned up alive and well. Apparently, Pettigrew was a follower of the Dark Lord, and faked his death following the betrayal of James and Lily Potter, who were murdered by the Dark Lord. Their child, Harry, survived, and for many years, it was believed that Harry was a boy, until it was recently revealed that Harry is in fact female. She is believed by many to be the child mentioned in the Mathias Prophecy who will defeat The Dark Lord. Black spent twelve years in Azkaban where he was sent following the above incident. He never received a trial and escaped three years ago. He was cleared when the

Auror Alastor Moody, also known as Mad Eye Moody, to whom Pettigrew confessed, apprehended Peter Pettigrew in November.

Following his confession Pettigrew has been held in a secret location to prevent being attacked by his associates to stop him from giving vital information. He has implicated several high-ranking officials within the Ministry of Magic, among them the head of the ministry, Cornelius Fudge. Also implicated is a high-ranking member of the Board of Governors, Lucius Malfoy. Minister Fudge was apprehended last night when he attempted to flee his home. Malfoy escaped and remains at large, along with several other ministry officials. Due to the upheaval within the Ministry, the famous wizard, Albus Dumbledore, and Mad Eye Moody, have been working quietly with the remaining loyal governors and have temporarily appointed Arthur Weasley, formerly in the Dept. for Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, to be acting head of the Ministry under the auspices of both Dumbledore and Moody. Moody will continue to work tirelessly as an Auror to apprehend and bring to justice those followers of the Dark Lord. Albus Dumbledore will remain on as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where both Harry Potter and two of the Weasley children are students. It has also been noted that Harry Potter is the Goddaughter of Sirius Black. There is no word as to whether the two will be reunited, and all parties involved were unavailable for comment.

"Wow, dad's the new Minister of Magic," Ron whooped with glee, "wait till Ginny hears, and the Malfoys have disappeared! That's why Draco's dad showed up to take him home, they had to get away fast. I'll bet You Know Who is not happy this morning."

"Ron, Sirius is free..." Harry whispered, afraid to believe it was true.

"Yeah, now you can have a real family again," Ron hugged her happily.

"Oh, Harry, this is just the best Christmas present you could have asked for," Hermione smiled taking her friend's hands in hers. "I just know he'll be back here to spend the Holiday with you. He wouldn't leave you alone after all that's happened."

"I don't know, Hermione. I haven't been told anything, and Sirius was only able to send a few brief messages through Professor Lupin."

"Don't worry, Harry, he'll be here. You mark my words, Sirius has never let you down yet," Ron said with a sharp nod, "he'll show up, and I'll bet Dumbledore knows when."

"Oh, shoot! I'm late; I was supposed to meet Snape in Dumbledore's office. Hermione, can I keep your paper?"

"Of course, Harry, you should frame it."

"I just might. I also have a present for you, but I'll send it by Owl Post. I have to run, Snape will be furious."

"My guess is he knew all about this morning's paper, and what was in it," Ron pursed his lips, "that's why he was in such a bad mood this morning."

"I think he knew, but I don't think he was in any worse mood than usual," Hermione corrected him. "You better get moving though, Harry, or he will be in a bad mood."

"I'm out of here right now," she remarked jumping up from her seat, "have a Happy Christmas and tell your folks I said hello."

Downing a glass of orange juice, Harry sped out of the Great Hall with the morning paper under her arm. She ascended the stairs two at a time, until she reached the Headmaster's office, where Professor McGonagall was just exiting.

"Miss Potter, slow down. What could be so important that you are running like a banshee?"

"Have you seen the morning copy of the Daily Prophet?"

"Yes, dear," the old witch smiled, "that's why I was with the Headmaster. He will be away a bit more frequently for a while, and he wanted to make sure everything was in order.

Professor Snape is with him now. I believe they're both waiting for you."

"Ouch, I'm late for detention shopping with Professor Snape."

"Then I suggest you get upstairs. Severus hates to be kept waiting," McGonagall tried to look stern, but failed, seeing how happy her student was. "Lemon Tarts," she said uttering the password for Harry, and stood aside so she could mount the moving stairs.

"Come in, Child," Dumbledore responded to her light knock. "How are you feeling today?"

"Now that depends," Harry teased, "on whether you're talking about the aftereffects of being locked on the roof, doing detention with Professor Snape, or this morning's copy of the Daily Prophet."

"Hmm...how about all three?"

"In that case, I'm fine after my little misadventure on the roof, Professor Snape had better wipe the scowl off his face, and I can't remember reading such good news in the Daily Prophet for some time," Harry beamed.

"Miss Potter, the scowl on my face is due to the fact that as usual you're late. I expressly told you to be up here in fifteen minutes. You are ten minutes late, which means that is ten minutes less that you will be allotted to shop for yourself."

"I guess that means I won't be able to get your gift. I had something special planned too," Harry teased mischievously.

"Careful, Harry, you don't want to upset Severus when he's in a bad mood," Dumbledore told her his blue eyes twinkling.

"Headmaster, Professor Snape is in a fairly good mood. His bad moods are enough to scare the bejesus out of Lord Voldemort. In fact, I'm surprised he didn't."

"What makes you so sure I haven't, Miss Potter?" Snape addressed sarcastically, his left brow arched and his lips curled into a thin smile.

"Harry, promise me you will behave for Severus," Dumbledore admonished with a smile.

"I will be the perfect angel."

"All right, now before you leave, I want to tell you to be careful and do as Severus says. I do not believe you will have any difficulty from any of Voldemort's followers as they are scrambling to remain hidden. However, should they come upon you accidentally, you will be in danger, and we do not need a repeat of your last outing to London. Do you understand me Child?"

"Yes, Sir, I understand you perfectly," Harry looked at Dumbledore over her glasses.

"The other thing you need to be aware of is that you may also be followed by reporters, should they find out you're out shopping. I can't tell you not to speak to them, but I believe you will use good judgment in this matter?"

"Professor, you know how I feel about reporters, especially after the Triwizard Tournament. I have absolutely no desire to speak with any of them."

"Very well, now go and have a nice day. I will see you when you get back. Do you have the key to your vault at Gringotts?"

"Right here," Harry replied showing him the gold chain around her neck, "but I need to ask you something before I go."

"Of course, Child, what is it?"

"Is it true what Ollivander says, that he never forgets any wand that he's ever sold?"

"You don't need a new wand, so I can only guess that you're going to buy a certain person a replacement for the one that was broken before he went to Azkaban."

"I think it will be a nice Christmas present," Harry admitted red faced.

"I will let Ollivander know you're coming," Dumbledore beamed handing her a handful of floo powder, "now get going before Severus, leaves you behind."

"He can't, I'm in detention remember?" she laughed following Snape as he stepped into the hearth.

They emerged into the Leaky Cauldron, and Tom waved in greeting, as he was busy with a customer. Snape nodded in acknowledgment, as Harry waved, following Snape out into Diagon Alley. They proceeded directly to Gringott's Wizard Bank, where they each withdrew

money from the assigned vaults. The Snape family vault was among the largest, and Harry, while not exactly poor, felt a bit intimidated by the Professor's wealth.

As they exited the bank, Snape steered Harry up the block and across the street to a rather grimy looking little shop called Abercrombie's Apothecary and Potion Supplies. They entered, and Harry found she was in a most amazing place. There were jars of all shapes and sizes containing almost anything you could think of that would go into a potion. They were in a variety of colors, and some were marked poison, while others said they contained dangerous materials. The shopkeeper was a squat bald man, whose face was beet red, and he immediately recognized Professor Snape.

"Greetings, Professor, I assume you're on a buying mission for the school?"

"Yes, and I also require some supplies for my private stores," Snape handed him a long parchment, "the items with the stars are for my personal supplies, so please don't mix them up with the school supplies. I will pay for those separately."

"This could take some time, Professor, do you wish to wait?"

"How long till you can have it all put together?"

"Half an hour at best."

"Very well, Abercrombie, we'll wait," Snape told him noting Harry's interest and hoping she would ask him about some of the things in the shop.

"And who might you're young helper be?" The shopkeeper asked cheerfully. "I see she's interested in my wares."

"Apparently so," Snape said looking over to where Harry was studying some jars of lizard bladders in a variety of sizes and types.

Harry sensed them looking at her and came back over to where Professor Snape was talking with the shopkeeper. "Professor, are all these things used in Potions?"

Potions, and medicines, Miss, er..." the man she had heard Snape refer to as Abercrombie, answered for him. "Oh, my...you're Harry Potter," he gasped noting the scar on her forehead.

"Who's Harry Potter?" she asked pretending to look innocent. "Professor, I think the shopkeeper has me confused with some one else," Harry looked at Snape, her eyes begging him to back her up.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Abercrombie. This is Jamie Evans, one of my sixth years at Hogwarts," Snape told the man coolly.

"Jamie Evans? But the scar..." He looked from Harry to Snape in confusion, but Harry was unable to keep a straight face, and Snape arched his brow as he watched her start to grin at Abercrombie.

"Snape, you devil, she is Harry Potter! Miss Potter, welcome to my humble shop. Please...if you have any questions, I will be happy to answer them for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Abercrombie, but I believe the Professor is in a hurry. If you could fill his order I would much appreciate it."

"Oh, absolutely....right away," he darted off with the list and began pulling items from jars and barrels.

"I thought you didn't want to be recognized?" Snape queried amused.

"I don't, but I felt sorry for the poor man. It was mean to tease him, although I did like the name you gave me," Harry smiled warmly at the combination of the feminine version of her father's name with her mother's maiden name.

Snape gave her a thin smile, "It was the logical choice, your middle name is James, and your mother's maiden name was Evans."

"I'll keep it in mind in case I ever do decide to change my name, although I really do like Harry, just don't tell Sirius, I like to tease him about naming me Harry."

"You like having a boy's name?"

"Yeah, it's different, gets people interested."

"I thought you didn't like publicity?"

"I don't," she protested with a smile, "but I do like the reactions I get when people realize Harry is really a girl. Some of them are very funny. Look at how Professor Lupin reacted; he was in shock. You were so amazed your whole demeanor changed from tolerant to cordial. The other Professors were the same way, and the students, well...their reactions varied from stunned to laughing hysterically."

"You seem to look at it as a joke, remember it was done as a means of protecting an innocent child."

"I know that, but they couldn't keep me a secret forever. Loosen up Professor; you need to enjoy life more. You're too serious; you need to look at things in a more positive manner," Harry tossed her head defiantly; "you worry too much."

"My dear Miss Potter, if you had done or seen some of the things I have, you would not be so lighthearted."

"You need to let go of your pain, Professor. You know that as an empath I've felt it. You need to start living again inside. I know you've suffered because of Voldemort. I don't know half of what you've gone through, but Dumbledore does. It's why he's so protective of you. You're angry and hurting, but you're not alone. Don't you think Professor Lupin hurts inside? He hates what he is, but he can't change it so he tries to make the best of an unhappy situation. I know you and Sirius don't get along, but my guess it's not just rivalry. You're jealous of one another. He's also in just as much pain inside as you are, but he's trying to deal with it and put it behind him."

"Since when have you received a degree in Psychology, Miss Potter?" Snape asked coldly.

"Since I received this scar on my forehead, Professor. You lost a wife and child. I lost my parents. We're two sides of the same coin. The difference is that you brood too much, and I try to pretend it doesn't really affect me. It does, every time I look in the mirror, or when people realize who I am, but I keep on going, hoping things will be better. People believe I'm the key to making things right again. I don't know if I am or not, I can only hope that things will work out okay, because if they don't I may never see my eighteenth birthday," she stared up at him, unable to hide the worry in her eyes, hoping he would understand.

'Damn, Severus, she's doing it to you again,' he reflected to himself. 'She's coming to you for understanding, but you can't give it to her, because you don't have all the answers yourself. You're as vulnerable as she is, even more so, since you're afraid of how you're beginning to feel about her.' "Miss Potter," he said aloud, "I believe Mr. Abercrombie has most of the order put together. Is there anything you would like to know while we're here? I'm sure he would like to tell you what the items are used for."

"Not right now, Professor," she replied unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. Harry had wanted him to open up to her. She didn't know why, but for some reason she really was beginning to like Professor Snape and wanted him to like her too. "I'll ask you about them later, although I didn't realize Lizard bladders were so popular an item."

"They're used for a variety of potions, one of which we will be making in class."

"What is it?"

"Skele-Gro, I believe you're somewhat familiar with it?"

"That's not funny, Professor, I actually drank that stuff a few years back. Please tell me you're joking."

No, Miss Potter, I'm quite serious. Now we'll see how well you are at making it. I understand you didn't particularly like drinking it when Lockhart failed to heal your broken arm."

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're evil, Professor?" Harry pursed her lips, and folding her arms around her chest, looked up at him tauntingly.

"Why thank you, Miss Potter, I thought you hadn't realized my true demeanor," Snape responded slyly, his brow arched, his eyes glittering mischievously. "Here comes Abercrombie with my packages. How much do I owe you Abercrombie?"

"Eight Galleons, two sickles for the school supplies, and ten galleons, four knuts for your personal items."

"Humph, highway robbery," Snape grumbled, paying Abercrombie. "Miss Potter, you get to carry the packages. Mind you, don't drop them; some of these items are in glass containers, you break it you'll replace it," he told her sternly. Now let's get going, I still need to go and get something for my sister for Christmas."

"Yes, Professor," Harry replied, thinking quickly. She needed to get Snape something for Christmas, and Abercrombie's would be the perfect place. Entering the street, she stopped suddenly, and Snape almost bumped into her. "Professor, I thought I saw McNair up by that alley," she told him hoping she sounded nervous.

"Get back into Abercrombie's now!" he hissed, "I'll go and investigate. If I don't come back in ten minutes, I want you to run back to the Leaky Cauldron and get back to school as fast as you can. Do you understand me?"

"Yes. Sir," Harry felt guilty lying to him when he was so concerned for her safety, but she needed to get back into the store without his asking questions. She immediately went into the Potions shop as Snape headed swiftly up the block."

"Mr. Abercrombie, I haven't got much time. I need to get something for the Professor for Christmas. Is there anything he particularly uses or wants but doesn't buy that frequently?"

"Yes, Miss Potter. He uses a variety of items, but they're very expensive. When I'm able to get it, he uses both Powdered Graphorn horn and Jobberknoll feathers. I have some of both, but they were set aside for another customer, but I could take some out for you."

"I don't want to deprive you of one of your regular customer's orders."

"Nonsense, for you Miss Potter, I will be delighted."

"Mr. Abercrombie, please I don't want any special treatment," Harry pleaded, looking out the window, knowing Snape should be returning any moment. "I probably can't really afford either one anyway."

"Have you three gold galleons?"

"Yes..." she replied suspiciously.

"Then you can afford both, and I don't want any argument. You just wait here while I wrap them up for you," he disappeared into one of the many crowded aisles in the store, and emerged a moment later with two small packages, each clearly labeled. "Three galleons are worth meeting such a special young lady," he smiled widely, taking her money, and putting them both into a small brown paper bag, which she slipped into her robes. "I don't know how you distracted the Professor, but here he comes now," he said as the door opened and Snape entered, looking relieved.

"Well thank you Mr. Abercrombie," Harry grinned, "your shop is full of some really neat stuff."

"It has been my pleasure to show it to you," Abercrombie answered following her lead, as he replaced a bottle on one of his shelves, giving the impression he was showing her the contents.

"Miss Potter, we can go, you were mistaken," Snape told her gently; concerned she was worried about thinking McNair had been following them.

He was aware she was scanning him empathically, but allowed her to do so. He believed she was just making sure everything was okay, but she was actually feeling guilty about deceiving him.

"Thank you, again, Mr. Abercrombie," she waved following Snape out the door, balancing his purchases in her arms.

"Now, I have to go to the jewelers. My sister loves earrings. I would like your opinion before I purchase some for her."

"Do you always give her earrings?"

"Usually, why?"

"Maybe she would like something else for a change instead," Harry explained. She had very little experience with buying gifts for other people, but felt that Snape's sister might be tired of the same old thing.

"What would you suggest?"

"Professor, I really don't have a clue," she told him uncomfortably. "I don't have much experience with buying gifts for people. Up until I came to Hogwarts, I never bought a gift for anyone in my life."

"Should I stick with jewelry?"

"Does she wear it often?"

"All the time."

"What does she wear besides earrings?"

"Bracelets, sometimes necklaces." Professor Snape told her as they entered the jewelry shop. It was not a large store, but the selection was impressive, and from what Harry could see, it was a very exclusive shop. She felt extremely uncomfortable, and for a change pushed the hair off her scar before the shopkeeper came over to help them, thinking they wouldn't look at her like she was too poor to be there.

"Severus Snape, how good to see you again. I suppose you are looking for the usual for your sister?"

"I was, but my student has succeeded in talking me into something else." Snape indicated Harry who was trying to remain behind him, feeling very insecure in such a fine store. He gently nudged her forward, aware of her discomfort.

"My word," the tall gray haired wizard in formal robes uttered amazed, "you're Harry Potter."

"Yes, Sir, It's nice to meet you Mr. Moonstone," Harry replied reading his nametag, which indicated he was the sales manager.

"Severus, I should have realized you knew Miss Potter, being a teacher at Hogwarts. Miss Potter, I am flattered to have such a prestigious customer as yourself come into our humble shop."

"Excuse me, Mr. Moonstone, but Professor Snape is the customer. I'm just here to give him another opinion," Harry said looking at some of the displays and both Snape and Moonstone were watching her. "Professor, was your sister in Slytherin?"

"Yes, she was Head Girl when she was at Hogwarts. She graduated a few years before I started, as she is quite a bit older.

"How much older is she than you?"

"Does it make a difference?" Snape asked curiously.

"I think it may. She wouldn't necessarily like the same type of jewelry that I would, so I have to think in terms of age and relationships. Is she married?"

"No, she has chosen to remain single, and she is ten years my senior."

"Okay, so I have a woman in her late forties, single, and devoted to her younger brother."

"How do you know she and I are close?"

"You're buying her an expensive gift. If you weren't close you wouldn't be putting so much thought into her Christmas present," Harry reasoned, surprised that Snape should have a sibling that he was able to demonstrate affection for, even on a limited basis.

"Miss Potter is very perceptive," Moonstone remarked casually to Snape.

"Mr. Moonstone, do you know the lady in question?" Harry looked up after studying something in a far case for a few minutes.

"She no longer lives locally, but yes, she still shops here when she's in London."

"Does she have a preference for any type of gemstone or precious metal?"

"She doesn't like yellow gold as much as white or platinum. She also will wear silver. She also likes onyx, emeralds, and of course diamonds. Of course, if you see something she might like, feel free to point it out."

"I believe she would like this broach, and I see there is a pair of matching earrings," Harry pointed into one of the glass display cases. Snape came over to see what she was looking at, as did Mr. Moonstone.

"You have excellent taste, Miss Potter," Mr. Moonstone complimented her.

"She certainly does," Snape agreed, admiring Harry's chosen items.

Harry stood looking quite pleased that they liked the items she had selected. She was certain they were quite expensive, but Professor Snape seemed fond of his sister, and he had stated she had been in Slytherin. Snape was quietly examining the broach and earrings. The broach was made of Jade, into which a platinum serpent had been inlaid, with a forked tongue of fine strings of onyx and emerald eyes. The earrings were two tiny serpents made of jade interwoven with platinum. The broach was made so that it could also be attached to a fine platinum choker, and worn around her neck, rather than as a pin.

"Do you wish to look at it closer Professor?" Mr. Moonstone inquired as Harry continued to roam around.

"Yes, and keep an eye on Miss Potter, and let me know if she appears to see something she likes," he told the manager quietly, so that Harry was unaware of their conversation.

"Of course, Professor, I shall be happy to do so," he replied unlocking the display and allowing Snape to examine the jewelry before going over to where Harry was looking at the crystal figurines. "They're very nice," he said to her, "would you like to see any of them?"

"No thank you, sir, but they are very pretty. I like the little castle. It reminds me of Hogwarts. I like the way the crystal is made to reflect so that it appears iridescent."

"It costs two gold galleons, if you're interested, or if you prefer there is another one which is inside of a globe that can be enchanted to reflect the weather and the seasons outside; it also changes according to the time of day."

"Really, it sounds interesting."

"Wait one minute and I'll get it out for you," Mr. Moonstone said going over to another display and removing the water globe for her to see. "It does resemble Hogwarts, doesn't it?"

"How much is this one?" Harry queried thinking Dumbledore would love it. The little castle was nestled in the middle and the weather was the same as outside. It was a typical sunny winter morning.

"Three galleons and two sickles."

Harry thought carefully, as she still needed to get the wand for Sirius and something for Professor Lupin. Fortunately, she had already purchased gifts for Ron and Hermione. Ron's brother's had helped her to purchase him some new robes, and she had gotten Hermione some of her favorite perfume and another one of the Romance Novels she so enjoyed.

"No, I'll pass, thank you anyway."

"It was supposed to go on sale tomorrow for two galleons, and one sickle," Mr. Moonstone smiled, "so I think I could make an exception for you and adjust the price a day early."

"In that case, I'll take it. I think our Headmaster will enjoy it," Harry grinned, paying for her purchase.

"I believe you're right, Miss Potter," Snape said over her shoulder. "Mr. Moonstone, will you wrap these up for me and see that they are delivered to my sister by tomorrow."

Snape gave the jade and platinum pieces Harry had selected to the sales manager, who bowed, smiling happily, having made such a good sale. She had not seen Snape indicate to the manager that he was also to wrap the little castle she had also admired.

Harry was growing tired, and her arms were beginning to hurt under the weight of the packages, which Snape made sure she was carrying securely. He made no effort to assist her and she knew it was because it was all a part of her detention. Still, she didn't complain as they headed further up the block. She had no idea where they were going, and started to fall behind him. She didn't want to become separated, and had to hurry her pace to keep up.

Rounding the bend, Snape stopped in front of a fine shop dealing in rare books. Holding the

door, he indicated that she should enter. It was an interesting shop, and she would have liked to look around, but Snape merely picked up a package, which he promptly gave to Harry to carry, and they left the store.

"Can I be nosy, and ask what it is you just got in the book store?" she asked curiously eyeing the package he had placed in her shopping bag with the other items.

"If you really must know, Miss Potter, it is a book for Professor Lupin for Christmas dealing with the Dark Arts. I believe he will find it very useful in his courses."

"His courses, or the special tutoring of a certain witch, who is about to collapse from exhaustion, trying to keep up with a certain temperamental Potions Master," she gasped.

"Both," he looked down at her arching his brow in amusement. "I believe we should go and eat lunch back at the Leaky Cauldron."

"That will suit me just fine," Harry responded, quickening her pace again. She didn't appreciate his purposely walking so fast just to annoy her, and she suspected he was doing just that. She had a stitch in her side by the time they reached their destination, and was glad to sit down.

"I see Snape has you on holiday detention," Tom laughed as he came to take their orders. "I always wonder who the lucky student will be each year, but this year I kind of had an inkling it would be you."

"Why Tom, don't you know our Potions Master just loves death by slow torture," Harry quipped still annoyed with Snape for making her walk so fast. She was still somewhat out of breath, and her pulse had finally slowed down.

"Miss Potter, you should be glad that I have only one more gift to buy. I did plan on leaving our packages with Tom and giving you a rest, but now I'm not sure you deserve it."

"Now Professor, it's Christmas, and I think Harry looks rather exhausted."

"Perhaps, but I'll have to think about it. In the meantime, Tom, I'll have the meatloaf special for lunch, and since I know Harry is not fond of meatloaf, she'll have the Cheeseburger with fries."

"What do you both want to drink?"

"I'll have a butter beer. Harry what would you like?"

"Cola will do fine."

"Coming right up," Tom grinned as the food appeared almost as he said it. "Enjoy your meal," he nodded going back to the bar to wait on another customer.

Harry sat eating quietly, she was more tired than she had thought, and still had to get Sirius his wand, and something for Professor Lupin. Snape was watching her, and he knew she was annoyed that he had made her walk so fast, so he decided to tell her why.

"I didn't just do it because you were on detention."

"Do what?"

"Rush you back here. We were being followed by a reporter from The Daily Prophet."

"Oh no...just what I don't need, some snoopy reporter asking me questions. Why didn't you say something?"

"I felt it would just get you angry. I know you like being out, and seemed to be enjoying yourself, despite having to carry everything."

"You know, a reporter may just make something out of me having to carry everything."

"Possibly, but more to get even with me. You see, he's a former student who also had to do Holiday detention with me, and I had far more shopping to do that year."

"Professor, if you do this to someone every year, how come this is the first I've heard about it?"

"Because it is always a sixth or seventh year that gets the lucky duty of helping me, by the time you're old enough to find out, they've usually graduated or moved on to some other assignment."

"I should have known there was a method to your madness," Harry smiled. "So who is the reporter that's following us?"

"You wouldn't know him. He finished at Hogwarts the year before you started there. His name is Phineas Phibes. I believe he was in Hufflepuff. I do recall he was not good at Potions, and had more meltdowns than Mr. Longbottom."

"It's no wonder you remember him. Does he have brown hair and a big nose?"

"He does, and he's wearing a gray cloak. Has he followed us back here?" Snape asked trying to sound casual.

"He sure has. Maybe he won't come over here. If we're lucky he may still be afraid of you."

"I'm sure I must still make him nervous, as he hasn't tried to approach you since we were in the jewelry shop."

"He's been following us that long?"

"Yes, but if he comes over you do not have to speak with him."

"Well, guess what, he's looking over here from the bar. I have a feeling I may not be having a peaceful lunch after all," Harry remarked with a shudder as the man started to come over to where they were sitting.

"Do you wish to try and leave?"

"I can't run and hide every time a reporter wishes to speak with me, Professor. I don't trust him though."

"Just relax and let me deal with him," Snape told her calmly, turning so that Phibes could see that he was aware of his presence.

"I do believe you're making him nervous, Professor," Harry grinned, as Snape gave Phibes his coldest stare.

"Do you wish to go back to school? We could be there in a few minutes. Tom will keep Phibes busy for us."

"No, I would like us both to be able to finish what we came to London for. Do you have much shopping left?"

"Only the Headmaster. I know you still need to go to Ollivander's. Is there anywhere else you need to go?" Snape asked as he continued to stare coldly at the young reporter standing by the bar.

"I need to get a gift for Professor Lupin. Any suggestions?"

"How about a collar?"

"Professor, that isn't very nice. If you had wanted to give him a collar you wouldn't have gotten him that book."

"Just because I bought him that book doesn't mean he shouldn't have a collar."

"Keep it up and I'll talk to Phibes," Harry countered getting angry that Snape still could not accept Remus' malady of lycanthropy.

"Very well, I believe Lupin could use a new suitcase. The one he has is quite worn."

"I know, but I think Sirius gave him that when he first started teaching. He may just want to be the one to give him a new one."

"Very well, then how about a new briefcase?"

"Do you know of a place where we could get one?"

"Yes, believe it or not, there is a luggage shop right next door to the boot maker I took you to on our last visit."

"You mean Coffee's Custom Shoes and Boots?"

"Yes, it is run by his cousin, Stuart Browne."

"Then let's go. Will Tom keep our things here?"

"I should make you carry them, but our reporter may just find too good of a story in that. So, yes, Tom will keep them safely locked up," he told her paying the bill that had magically appeared on the table, and then vanished just as quickly, appearing in Tom's hand.

"Do I have time to go to the ladies room?"

"I think we both need to use the rest rooms, but we're lucky they're located near the entrance to Diagon Alley," he said steering her in the direction of the public restrooms and the hidden entrance to the outside.

They each ducked into the bathroom and after relieving herself, Harry quickly fixed her hair, hiding the scar on her forehead, and then exited the bathroom. Snape had not yet reappeared, but Harry did not have a chance to duck back into the bathroom, as someone touched her on the shoulder from behind.

"Excuse me, Miss, but you are Harry Potter, aren't you?" A quiet voice asked, as she jumped in dismay.

"I'm sorry, but you have me confused with someone else. My name is Jamie Evans," Harry replied smoothly recognizing the young reporter. "People often confuse me with her though, so it is an honest mistake," she lied, giving him her best smile.

"Miss Evans, our trip does not include your flirting with young men," Snape's icy voice came from her other side, "you are supposed to be on detention."

"Professor Snape, you probably don't remember me, I'm...'

"Phineas Phibes," Snape finished coldly, "I believe you were in Hufflepuff. I would appreciate it if you would leave Miss Evans alone. She is doing the same detention that I believe you did your last year at Hogwarts."

"Uh...yes, Sir. I'm sorry...I thought she was somebody else."

"You thought she was Harry Potter. Miss Evans and Miss Potter look very similar, but Miss Potter wears her hair differently, and she is also not quite as pretty as Miss Evans is. It is a common mistake, Mr. Phibes. Now if you will excuse us, Miss Evans still must finish her detention," Snape angrily took Harry by the arm and pushed her back into Diagon Alley. As soon as he was certain Phineas Phibes was not following any longer he slowed down, and turned to Harry, "Are you all right? I didn't plan on taking so long in the rest room."

"I think Jamie Evans will come in very handy from time to time. I'm glad you invented her for me. I assume you heard me tell him that's who I was."

"Yes, I was just coming back into the hallway."

"Well, then you are the hero of the hour," Harry smiled broadly, "in more ways than one. Lets get moving and I'll tell you why. I need to get those two gifts and we both need to get back to Hogwarts."

"Very well," Snape responded suspiciously, "now tell me what is going on."

"I'm not certain, but I think he may be a Death eater."

"Phibes? What makes you believe that?"

"When he had his arm on my shoulder, his left sleeve was partially pulled up, and I saw the partial tattoo of a snake's tail."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, but it could just be a regular tattoo. I didn't see the whole thing."

"We should leave now," Snape told her taking hold of her arm in an effort to turn her back towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"No, Professor, you still need a gift for Dumbledore and I need two more. It will take Voldemort himself to try to stop me, and even he'll have a hard time. I'm going to Ollivander's and the leather shop. I don't know what you have in mind for Dumbledore, but my guess is you already have it picked out. So let's get going and then head home."

"Very well, but if I say we have to leave immediately I do not want any argument. I'm only allowing you to do this since we aren't sure about Phineas, and I know how much you want to give Black his gift," Snape growled, "if he knew I let you take this chance he'd be furious with the both of us."

"Good, when you're both angry enough you can duel it out and maybe then you'll get along. You two have more in common than you realize," Harry remarked as they entered Ollivander's.

"Ah...Miss Potter...Severus...Professor Dumbledore said you would be coming. I have the wand ready and waiting," Ollivander smiled, his silver eyes staring at Harry, "would you like to see it?"

"Yes, I would," Harry replied, Ollivander's stare making her nervous.

"I know every wand I have ever sold. Sirius Black's is maple and mahogany, fourteen inches long. It is wonderful for transfiguration and has strong protective powers. The core enchantment in his was the single tail hair of a Griffin. Very powerful and protective of what ever they are guarding," Ollivander explained as he showed Harry the wand she was purchasing for Sirius. "I am happy for him, my dear. He has suffered greatly, but he has protected you without fail. Even from Azkaban he waited and watched, enduring the suffering to prevent those who would harm you from doing so, until He Who Must Not Be Named was able to summon his minions once again. The day is coming when he will be vanquished by the phoenix."

"Thank you, Mr. Ollivander," Harry paid him quickly, and put the wand safely away until she could give it to Sirius. Ollivander had always made her nervous, and today was no exception.

"Good day Ollivander," Snape nodded as they exited the wand shop.

They then hurried over to the leather shop where Harry found a new brief case for Remus and had it engraved with his initials in gold leaf. A gold wolf's head was emblazoned below them. Next, they went into a small dusty store, and the proprietor handed Snape a rather unusual shaped package. She knew it was for Dumbledore, but had no idea what it could be, but she didn't ask Snape. She knew he wanted to get them both back home and had been watching stealthily since she had told him of her suspicions about Phibes.

When they reached the Leaky Cauldron, Phibes was not there, and Tom told them he had left as soon as they had returned to Diagon Alley. He told Snape the young man had been rubbing his left arm, telling him he had bruised it earlier in the day. Snape and Harry exchanged glances, but said nothing. Harry returned via the floo system first, with Snape following. As before, Dumbledore was waiting for them.

"Welcome home, Harry, did you enjoy your detention with Severus?" he teased, his blue eyes twinkling merrily.

"I may start a campaign to free the students from unscrupulous Potions Masters. Talk about slave labor," she grinned back at him affectionately.

"Severus, I know that scowl, what happened this time?"

"One of our former students is now suspected of being in league with Voldemort. What's worse is that he is working for the Daily Prophet."

Snape then went on to tell him all about Phineas Phibes, how he had followed them, and tried to talk to Harry. He also mentioned Harry's stubbornness and refusal to leave immediately following the incident.

"Harry, you should have left immediately," Dumbledore chastised her gently, "Sirius would have been very upset if something had happened to you. He could have picked up the wand himself."

"Headmaster, no one was going to stop me from getting this gift, not Snape, not Remus, not Voldemort, or even you. My mind was set, and you all would have had to use your best work to prevent me from getting to Ollivander's, and nothing would have worked!" she tossed her head stubbornly, facing off with Dumbledore, hands on her hips, challenging him.

"I could have stopped you very simply. All I needed to do was this," he said leaning over to whisper in her ear, and then kissing her gently on the forehead.

"Show off," she pouted, curling her lip, "I didn't think of that."

"If it makes you feel better, neither did Severus."

"Headmaster did I miss something?" Snape asked in confusion.

"No, Severus," Dumbledore beamed at him, "I'll tell you what I just said to Harry in a few minutes. In the meantime, I think Harry would like to go and spend some time with Ron and

Ginny. Their parents will be here tomorrow for Christmas Eve and will be spending the night as our guests along with Fred and George."

"All right, I know when I'm not wanted. I can take a hint," Harry picked up her packages, and winked at Dumbledore affectionately, "I need to go and wrap presents anyway."

"We will see you at dinner, Child, please try to stay out of trouble."

"I do try. I never look for trouble; it just seems to find me. Besides, I keep you young with everything that goes on," she laughed, descending the moving stairs to go and join her friends in the Gryffindor Common Room, allowing the two men time to discuss the day's events.

No one had yet to say anything about Sirius returning, but Dumbledore definitely knew something, as he didn't say he would not be there for the holiday. Harry was growing anxious though, and before going to join her friends escaped to her room, where she reread the articles about Sirius in the Daily Prophet and wrapped her Christmas gifts. She had one other gift for both Sirius and Dumbledore. Colin had taken two pictures of her, one standing with Fawkes, and the other with her Firebolt broom, the quidditch rings superimposed in the background. She had then made the frames for each photograph from wood scraps she had secured from Hagrid, decorating them with colored stones she had gathered by the lake. These she wrapped along with their other gifts, and tied them together with red and green ribbons. She then left to go and join her friends for the evening, and enjoy a relaxing game of Wizard's Chess with Ron, and some girl talk with Ginny. Her heart was light, and despite her anxiety over Sirius, she was happy.

## **Happy Christmas**

Harry stretched lazily in bed, the dull winter light shining through the windows. She had stayed up late last night with Ron and Ginny, and they had hung out talking and playing Wizard's Chess. Very few of the Gryffindors had not gone home for the Holiday, and there were only about ten students left in each of their respective houses. Harry liked the holiday recess, as the rules were less stringent and it gave the students' time to get to know the teachers better. She had always enjoyed Christmas dinner since the instructors and students would all sit together at the same table.

This year was going to be wonderful, and the articles in yesterday's Daily Prophet had everyone talking. It seemed that Sirius suddenly had many friends, most of whom claimed that they knew he had been innocent all along. 'Humph'...she thought, 'they didn't give a hoot about him a week ago, and if anyone had asked they would have denied knowing him.' She was nervous though, and her anxiety was growing since she still had not been told when he would be coming back.

Ron's parents and brothers would be here this evening, but Dumbledore had said absolutely nothing to her about Sirius. She hadn't asked him either, suspecting that he didn't want to tell her anything yet. She only hoped that he would be there to spend Christmas with her, and couldn't conceive of him leaving her alone, not after all she had been through. She wanted to send him an owl, but wasn't sure if she should do so. Professor Lupin had indicated he knew where Sirius had been hiding prior to his being declared innocent, but even he had told her absolutely nothing now that he was a free man. Her reverie was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Just a minute," she called, "who's there?"

"Professor McGonagall, may I come in?"

"Yes, of course," Harry called getting out of bed and putting on her robe to answer the door, "is everything okay?"

"Yes dear, in fact I was going to ask you the same thing," McGonagall's crisp voice responded as she studied Harry, "it's almost eleven and no one had seen or spoken to you all morning. The Headmaster and your friends were concerned."

"Oh my gosh! I didn't realize it was so late. I was up until almost one with Ron and Ginny. When I finally went to bed, I didn't fall asleep right away."

"Out past curfew again, Harry?"

"Oh, Professor," Harry grinned red faced; "you know the rules tend to be relaxed during the holiday recess."

"Just the same, do you think it's wise to admit it to the Deputy Headmistress?"

"Only on Christmas Eve," she laughed pulling clothes out of her closet. "I am grateful for the concern though. I'm sorry you were all so worried."

"Well get dressed and come on down for lunch. I'll tell the Headmaster everything is fine and that you just slept in."

"Professor, before you go, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, dear. Do you have some kind of problem?"

"What? No, nothing like that. It's about Transfiguration."

"What would you like to know?"

"Well, you're an animagus, and can turn yourself into a tabby cat."

"Yes, you've seen me do it a number of times."

"Well...how did you know to become a cat? What determines the animal you're going to become? I mean, did you want to turn into a tabby cat?"

"You're not trying to transform are you?" McGonagall asked eyeing her suspiciously.

"No, I was just curious," Harry lied taking her shoes out of the closet to avoid McGonagall's stiff scrutiny.

"The animal is both a matter of preference, ability, and what is in your heart or soul. Your father was a stag because he was the leader of his little group, and protective of them all. Your godfather is a large black dog since he's also protective of those he cares for, but was well...a bit wild and more impulsive in his actions. The headmaster has told me that Pettigrew is a rat. I don't think you need an explanation for that."

"Then you're a cat since you are usually patient, but can be aloof and sit and watch from a distance, like a cat would do."

"Basically, yes. You choose the animal but it must also be a part of you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think I do. If the animal you want to be isn't what's also on the inside, you won't be able to transform."

"Exactly. That's one of the reason's it is so difficult to become an animagus. Now I want you to promise me you aren't going to try something like becoming an animagus without either myself or someone else with you that is gifted with transfiguration."

"Yes, Ma'am," she responded unable to meet McGonagall's eyes.

"Harry did you lie to me a few minutes ago? I won't be angry with you if you tell me the truth," McGonagall gently tilted Harry's chin up to meet her gaze.

"All right, I've tried several times, but can't seem to get it right," Harry confessed.

"What animal did you select?"

"A hawk."

"Why a hawk? It seems like an unusual choice for you."

"I picked it for Professor Lupin. I told him a story about a princess who is a hawk by day and her lover who is a wolf by night. They were cursed by an evil wizard when she spurned him. That's why he's nicknamed me Princess."

"What a sad story. Does it have a happy ending?"

"Yes, the curse is broken and they live happily ever after."

"Is that the only reason you chose a hawk?"

"No, I also love to fly and a hawk is aggressive. Everyone expects me to go against Voldemort and to do so you need power and aggression."

"I see, but you need to realize that hawks are also birds of prey. They're hunters. How far have you gotten?"

"I can partially transform, but I'm sure it isn't a hawk."

"Do you have any idea what it is?"

"Some other bird. For a while I was afraid it was a chicken; the colors are all wrong for a hawk."

"Then you aren't meant to be a hawk. As I said before, a hawk is predatory. You're not hunting the Dark Lord; you will stand against him. Show me exactly how much you are able to do."

"Now?"

"Yes, now," she told Harry sternly looking at her over her glasses.

"Okay," Harry agreed reluctantly, taking a step back.

Closing her eyes, she did the complex series of spells in her mind. Her body immediately shrank to the size of a swan, and her arms turned into wings with brilliant scarlet plumage. Feathers of red and gold appeared on her lower body. Her feet were talons, but her head and neck remained human, as did her face, just smaller.

"Professor are you all right? You're looking at me funny."

"I want you to turn back, and then we'll talk," McGonagall instructed shakily. She was staring at Harry in disbelief.

Harry did as Professor McGonagall instructed her and then sat down on the bed, as the Professor did the same. "Professor, is something wrong?"

"Harry, how long have you been trying to transform on your own?"

"Since the middle of September."

"That's all, and you've gotten this far all by yourself in such a short time?" McGonagall questioned incredulously.

"Yes, Professor. I wanted to surprise Sirius and the others. Have I done something wrong?"

"Aside from your usual rule breaking, no," the Deputy Headmistress told her pursing her lips.

"Professor Dumbledore is unaware of your attempts?"

"I believe so, I never told him about it. I haven't even told Ron and Hermione."

"Very well. Now, you are not a chicken or a hawk. I want you to try again, and leave your mind free and think only about flying, the way it makes you feel, and what you can see from the air. Don't concentrate on the kind of bird, just let yourself go. You're almost there except for the final transformation. You're thinking about the wrong things and need to let the transformation take place on its own. Once you transform you will be aware that you're human, but will also start to develop the abilities of the animal you become. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, will there be anything else?"

"Just one thing, I want you to stand in front of the mirror so that you can see yourself after you transform. You may not get it on the first try, but you definitely have the ability. Now go ahead, and try again."

Harry got up from the bed and went to stand in front of the full-length mirror in her room. She was nervous, and licked her lips, her heart pounding in her chest. She wanted this to work, but was concerned that McGonagall had been looking at her so strangely. She had the impression that the Professor knew what kind of bird she was going to be.

"Go on, Harry, there is no need to be afraid. I think you will be very happy when you see yourself fully transformed," the Deputy Headmistress reassured her.

"All right," she smiled nervously.

She took a deep breath and began to feel herself flying. She pictured the earth below her on the Quidditch field and the wind rushing in her ears. In the back of her mind, she began the complex series of spells for transformation. She felt free and alive, and wanted to soar above the earth and then glide on the wind, looking down at the people and buildings below. She felt her body begin to change and could feel the joy and freedom of knowing she was one with nature.

She opened her eyes a few minutes later and looked in the mirror. Opening her mouth to speak, a soft crooning noise came out. She wanted to jump for joy. She had fully transformed, and studying the brilliant scarlet and gold plumage and listening to her soft trilling noises, she very slowly spread her wings, and flew over to land on Professor McGonagall's shoulder. The old witch smiled with delight, and Harry just trilled and crooned affectionately.

"Harry, I know you would like nothing better than to go outside and fly for awhile, but you need to turn yourself back. You have done a most amazing thing and the Headmaster will want to know about it."

Harry trilled and flew off her shoulder and back onto the floor, taking one last look in the mirror. She then did the reverse transformation and turned to Professor McGonagall,

"Professor, can we wait to tell the Headmaster until Sirius comes. I want to surprise them both. I don't know if he'll be here for Christmas, but he should be back soon."

"My better judgment tells me we should let the Headmaster know about this immediately, but I will defer for a few days. I don't know when Sirius is returning, but I believe it will be soon. In the meantime, you are not to speak of this to anyone, and I want you to come to my room to practice. Do you understand me?"

"Thank you," Harry hugged the stern old witch with delight, "it will be our secret. I promise."

"Then why don't you get dressed and we'll go on down to the Great Hall before the Headmaster comes looking for us both."

"I'll be ready in a jiffy," she replied grabbing her clothes and heading into the bathroom. She took a fast shower and emerged fifteen minutes later fully dressed, towel drying her hair.

"Come here, Child, your hair is growing like a weed. Let me show you how to braid it."

"Thank you, Professor; it is getting in the way," Harry said standing still while the witch deftly put her hair into a French braid.

"You look lovely, dear," she smiled. "Shall we go?"

"Just give me one more minute," Harry pleaded as she pulled out some mascara and lipstick. Applying the cosmetics, she put her glasses back on, and then they left together.

They swiftly made their way downstairs to the Great Hall where the staff and remaining students were beginning to gather for lunch. Harry was happy and grinning, and gave Ron and Ginny a big hug before sitting down. Professor McGonagall, just looked at her in amusement, and took a seat further down the table by Professors Dumbledore, Snape, and Lupin, who were sitting opposite Professor Flitwick, Sinestra, Sprout, and Trelawney, who had come out of her tower for the Holidays.

She was looking down the table towards Harry, who quickly turned towards Ginny and Ron, to avoid hearing any of her usual predictions of death, which she usually had for Harry.

Unfortunately, she was too late and the Professor rose from her seat and came over to where Harry was sitting.

"Miss Potter, and Mr. and Miss Weasley, I had a dream about the three of you last night which has me concerned. You were all visiting with Ron and Ginny's family, but there is a Grim in your future. I saw it plainly, when Mr. Weasley came into the room with your mother dear. The Grim was following Miss Potter. I am worried that this will not be such a happy holiday for you. Death seems to be stalking you."

"Thank you for the warning, Professor, I'll be sure to be careful," Harry replied politely, thinking that the Grim may in fact be Sirius in dog form.

Her heart was racing, and she could see Professor Dumbledore watching her with interest. Meeting his eyes from down the table she grinned mischievously and began helping herself to some of the sumptuous lunch dishes the house elves had prepared for them, dismissing Professor Trelawney.

"So lazy bones, you slept through breakfast and just left us poor souls to wonder what you were up to? You had us all a nervous wreck."

"I wasn't nervous, Ron," Ginny retorted. "Harry can take care of herself. Besides, I would have slept late too if you hadn't come and woke me up!"

"Ron just doesn't want to miss the action. He loves it when we have an adventure, and the last one was on Halloween when he wasn't with me," Harry laughed. "I guess I owe him some mischief."

"Can I come too?" Ginny asked her eyes bright. "I haven't been in on any of your adventures."

"Gee, Gin," Ron looked at her askance, "what about the Chamber of Secrets?"

"That was different, I was kidnapped by You- Know- Who."

"And very nearly ended up food for that damned big snake," Harry laughed, "along with me!"

"Yeah," Ron quipped, "and we also nearly had our memories wiped by Lockhart. It's a good thing my wand backfired."

"What ever happened to Professor Lockhart? Has anyone ever heard anything?" Ginny inquired.

"I believe he's still in St. Mungo's," Harry said thoughtfully, "Although I haven't really heard anything."

"Speaking of hearing anything, have you heard from Sirius?" Ron whispered.

"Not a word, Ron, and nobody has said anything to me either. I hope he'll be here for Christmas, but now I'm beginning to worry."

"Harry, if Sirius can't be here, he'll let you know. I can't believe he would just not show up or send word," Ron reassured her. "Sirius really worries about you, and how many times did he risk his own freedom just to make sure you were safe from You- Know -Who."

"Why don't you ask Dumbledore or Professor Lupin if he will be here?"

"No, Ginny, I don't feel I should. I'll just wait, Dumbledore would tell me if he knew anything. How about your dad, is he getting used to being named acting head of the Ministry of Magic?"

"Are you kidding? He was shocked. Mum was in tears she was so happy."

"Yeah, and Percy was strutting around like a peacock according to Fred and George. They'll be no living with him now," Ron groaned.

"How about Bill and Charlie, what did they say?"

"They were thrilled, and sorry they couldn't be here for the holiday. Bill couldn't get away and Charlie is going to a special seminar on the handling of Peruvian Vipertooth's. You know, the South American dragons they had a problem with for breeding too rapidly. They're really vicious and have a liking for human flesh."

"Ron, not while we're eating!" Ginny frowned.

"Okay you two, it's Christmas, no fighting is allowed."

"So what do you two want to do today?"

"We could go into Hogsmeade, and see if Fred and George need help in the magic shop," Ron suggested thoughtfully, "that should kill a few hours till Mum and Dad get here. We could all come back together then."

"I don't know if I can. You know Dumbledore doesn't let me go anywhere without someone with me, but you two can go. Don't think you have to stay here on my account. I can always find something to do."

"Oh, Harry, are you sure? Maybe Professor Lupin could accompany us."

"Ginny, take a good look at Professor Lupin this morning. The moon was full last night, and I do not think he feels up to spending the day with us in Hogsmeade. He will need to rest. Fortunately, last night was the last night for the full moon, so he should be able to enjoy Christmas."

"I'm sorry, I didn't really think. What about Dumbledore, could he come with us?"

"Gin, he's too busy with everything that's going on with the Ministry. Remember he and Mad Eye Moody are overseeing Dad with his new position."

"Well, there's always Professor..."

"Not on your life, little sister," Ron stated adamantly, "I do not want to spend Christmas Eve in Hogsmeade with Professor Snape!"

"Why is that, Mr. Weasley?" Snape's cool voice came from behind him. Harry and Ginny were laughing so hard their eyes were tearing, as Ron spun around in his seat so fast he lost his balance and fell off the bench.

"Professor Snape," he choked, "I ah...was just saying to Harry...that...ah...maybe you could...ah...go with us into Hogsmeade today?"

"I would be delighted to accompany Miss Potter, if she chooses to go with you," Snape smiled evilly, his dark eyes glittering dangerously, as Ron got up from the floor and sat back down at the table.

"Unfortunately, I would prefer none of the students goes into Hogsmeade today," Dumbledore said from his place up the table. "I am concerned that Voldemort may be getting ready to make trouble. Harry and the Weasley's will be particularly vulnerable due to all the changes at the Ministry of Magic."

"I understand, Headmaster. I'm sure these young Gryffindors can find something to do for the afternoon. If not I can give them some help with their Potions."

"That's quite all right, Professor, I'm sure Harry and I will be able to entertain Ginny."

"I do have something in mind, Professor. I also have to see Professor McGonagall later on as I did have a problem with some of the advanced transfiguration lessons," she smiled at the older witch who looked back at her conspiratorially.

"Very well, then, Potter, Weasley's, have a good day," Snape responded dryly and headed out of the Great Hall.

"Harry, why didn't you let me know Snape was behind me?"

"I thought you saw him get up to leave. You have the worst timing when it comes to Professor Snape. If you could have seen your face..." Harry started to laugh again and Ginny just shook her head.

"So what do you have in mind?"

"Come on, and I'll tell you," she whispered so the Professors could not hear, as she rose from the table, "just watch out for Snape."

"Are we going down to the dungeons?" Ginny questioned eagerly.

"No, we're going upstairs and explore some of the empty classrooms. I'm going to be very disobedient and try to find where Dumbledore has hidden the Mirror of Erised."

"Now that sounds like fun!"

"What is the Mirror of Erised?" Ginny asked eagerly. "I never heard of it."

"It's a mirror that shows you your secret desires. I found it in my first year, and showed it to Ron. Dumbledore moved it and made me promise not to go looking for it again, and up until today, I have kept my word. It's where he hid the Philosopher's stone."

"Harry, won't Dumbledore be angry with you if he finds out what we're doing?"

"Ginny, I have to look in that mirror. When I was eleven it showed me with my parents, but I know now that isn't possible. A person's desires change as they get older and I'm curious to see what the mirror will show me."

"Ginny's right though, Harry, you've never broken a promise to Dumbledore before."

"Then I'll tell him afterwards. I don't like keeping secrets from him, but I know he won't let me do this if I ask him," Harry told her friends as they climbed up to the third floor. "Keep a good look out for Filch and Mrs. Norris. I didn't see them down at lunch."

"Oh, Harry, do you Ron and Hermione do this sort of thing all the time? It's no wonder you three are always getting detention."

"Scared, Gin? You can always go back," Ron, taunted his sister.

"No way, I'm here for the duration. If we get caught, then I do detention too."

"We will get caught, if you two don't stop talking so loud. The sound really echoes in these empty rooms."

"Harry's right, Ron, and Mum and Dad are coming. All we need is to be caught where we don't belong. Mum will be furious and Dad will be so embarrassed," Ginny whined, starting to get nervous.

"Hush, both of you," Harry hissed stopping in her tracks, "I have the feeling we're being followed."

"Harry, you're daft. You're just feeling jumpy because you snuck up here with us. Keep it up and you'll sound like Ginny."

"No, Ron, I'm sure someone is here. I can feel them."

"What do you feel, Harry?" Ginny asked curiously. "Ron told me about your being an empath. Can you really feel other people's pain and emotions?"

"Yes, Ginny, and I know who's following us now."

"Who is it Harry? I don't see anyone. Do they have an invisibility cloak?"

"He doesn't need one. He is able to make himself appear to be invisible."

"Oh, no, it's not...?" Ron moaned curling his lip anxiously

"It is, and he's not exactly angry, but he's not happy with us either."

"Who is it you two? I still don't see anyone. If someone is really there we could be in danger. What if it's You-Know-Who?" Ginny wailed getting frightened.

"Don't be scared," Ginny, "it is definitely not Voldemort."

"Please don't say his name," Ginny begged her voice unsteady.

"Headmaster, please show yourself. Ginny's getting really scared. You may be angry, but I don't think you would ever deliberately cause anyone of us to be afraid of you," Harry said to the air, waiting for a response.

"Dumbledore!" she exclaimed; "now we're in real trouble. What will Mum and Dad say?" Ginny started to cry, and Harry began to get angry. Putting her arms around her friend, she spoke angrily to Dumbledore.

"Now see what you've done. Ginny's crying because she's afraid she's in trouble because she wanted nothing more than to be with us and have some kind of an adventure. I thought of something safe, where she wouldn't get hurt and now see what's happened. You may be unhappy with me for breaking my promise, but I'm just as unhappy with you. I never thought I'd see the day where you would hurt a person's feelings. That's twice now in the same week. Maybe you're not the person I always thought you were."

"You needn't shout, Harry, I'm right next to you," Dumbledore said appearing. "Ginny, Child, you're not in trouble. There's no need to cry," he told her gently. "Ron, why don't you take your sister back down to Gryffindor Tower? I happen to know there are some early treats set up in all the common rooms."

"Yes, Sir," Ron took Ginny by the arm and walked back the way they had come, leaving Harry alone with Dumbledore.

"Come with me, Harry," Dumbledore motioned as he turned and walked further up the hallway. "I am disappointed in you. Why do you feel you can't come and ask me things.?"

"I'm afraid to. I always seem to get no reply, or a negative answer when I do ask."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know. I feel like you're smothering me. I can't even go out without someone following me like a child. It's gotten to the point where the other students snicker behind my back, especially the Slytherins. Why don't you trust me anymore?"

"Is that what you think? That I don't trust you?"

"Yes, er...no, I mean, I don't know. I just don't want to be made to feel like a child."

"The mirror is in here," Dumbledore said opening the door to an empty room, "if you really want to look in it do so now. It's up to you."

Harry looked from Dumbledore to the outline of the mirror, which she could see in the gloom, before she spoke. "I don't need to look in the mirror, Professor. I know what it is that I truly desire deep inside of me, and I think you do too."

"Then be patient, Child, things happen in their own time," Dumbledore smiled tenderly as he put a locking charm on the door, and then embraced her. "I do trust you. What I want is for you to trust my judgment. I promised your parents that I would keep you safe, and that's just what I'm trying to do. I know Voldemort wants you and is growing more desperate. I'm not trying to keep you from growing up, I want to see that you do grow up."

"Headmaster, how can you say that, when we both know that I may not survive that final encounter with Voldemort? We both know that the prophecy was unclear on whether I survive. All we do know is that Voldemort won't."

"Then humor an old man, and let him see that you're given the skills which may help you to survive that final encounter. If need be, I would die in your place to stop him."

"No!" Harry said grabbing onto him fiercely. "Please don't ever say that. I know you have the power to stop him, I can feel it in you. I also know why you don't use it. You did so once, with Grindelwald, and understand how tempting it can be. That's why Riddle went bad. He wanted to use that same power for his own gain. You think I don't know how much power I really have, but I can sense it. I never asked for it, and would have been perfectly happy just being able to achieve Ordinary Wizarding Levels. I refuse to let anyone die in my place, besides, if I fail you'll be needed more than ever," she looked up into his blue eyes, and found they were moist.

"Harry, you are a very special person. You can see the good in everyone. It wouldn't surprise me if you found something good in Voldemort."

"There is, he never stopped loving his mother, even though he never knew her. The problem is, that he blamed her death on his father and it twisted his mind. He became a sociopath, and

now hates anyone who is able to love another person. That's one of the reasons he killed my parents, and why he made certain that Professor Snape became a widower. It's also, why he hates me. You see, I know more than you all give me credit for," she explained, as they both walked back towards the second floor.

Dumbledore stopped, and turned her to face him in the dim hallway. "Child, you are very perceptive. I know you want to know what is going on more often than I can tell you, but you're too young to take your rightful place among the Order, and you deserve the time to be a teenager. Don't grow up too fast; the world will be there when you're ready."

"The world may be there Headmaster, but I may not," Harry turned away from him, and began stalking down the hall.

She was angry and hated her life. She had no family, and no real home of her own. The people she depended on and trusted refused to confide in her about the things she most wanted to know. She was back to thinking that all she was good for was to defeat the Dark Lord. Nobody loved her simply because she was Harry. Even Sirius seemed to have abandoned her.

Harry had reached her room before she even realized that was where she was going. Unlocking her door, she entered and flung herself on the bed. She was crying again, and confused. She didn't like all these conflicting emotions. 'Why do I feel like this?' she asked herself. 'I wish I had someone to talk to who could understand how I feel. Even my friends don't understand. They all have families who care about them. I think I'm the only one in Hogwarts who's an orphan. God, maybe Voldemort felt like me, maybe I am going to turn out as evil as he is,' Harry sobbed aloud to herself, before she felt a set of strong arms around her. A soft familiar voice crooned comfortingly in her ear. Dumbledore had followed her without her being aware of it.

"Child, there isn't an evil bone in your body, and you have every right to feel unhappy. I know it hurts you to see the other students with their families. I've watched you with the Weasley's. I've seen the look in your eyes when Hermione goes home for the Holidays, and when Neville goes to see his parents in St. Mungo's with his grandmother."

"I have nobody, and all I want is to feel happy," Harry cried into Dumbledore's shoulder, "even Neville has his grandmother, and there's always hope his parents will regain their sanity."

"What did I tell you the other day? Didn't I say that I loved you as if you were my own flesh and blood?"

"Yes."

"And you know Sirius, and Remus care about you, as well as Severus, even though he will only admit it grudgingly."

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. I have no home except for the Dursley's and they don't really want me. I feel like I'm on the outside looking in. I think Tom Riddle must have felt the same way. The only difference is that he lived in an orphanage. The parallels scare me sometimes. He himself has often pointed them out."

"He does that to get you to believe you two are both alike. He wants you to believe in his power. He wants you to come over to his side. Has he not offered you sanctuary if you would just join him?"

"Why does he want me to join him? What difference would it make whether he tries to kill me or if I join him?"

"If you join him, he will have your power as well as his. He knows he will be able to achieve all his goals if you work together. If you stay loyal to me, it is too much of a threat. He knows I can stand against him. If you and I stand together, he will be defeated. The question is, will you do what is right, or can he persuade you to stand up to all that you believe in."

"He's tried to get me to come over to him a few times, but I have always refused. I could never hurt people the way that he does. He's insane."

"I know, Child, he has been for a long time. I believe his mind went many years ago."

"If I refused to stand up to Voldemort and wanted to go someplace far away, what would you say?"

"I would let you go. I love you enough that I would never force you to stay and confront him if you chose not to do so," Dumbledore brushed the hair from her scar, his blue eyes locked with her green ones.

He sat cradling her for some time, trying desperately to soothe the agony in her heart. He knew and understood her loneliness; he wanted her to be happy. It had been so much easier when she was younger, but adolescence could be a difficult time, hers made more so by the circumstances of her life.

"Professor," she said after awhile, "why does my life have to be so complicated?"

"Child," he smiled gently, "your life is no more complicated than mine is. You just feel like it is right now. It's called adolescence. You're too old for things that used to make you feel good, and too young to be treated as an adult. You're feeling things differently, and looking at the world in a new way. One day you're happy and the next day you're not. It will pass, Harry, and when it does you'll be a young woman."

"Professor..."

"Hmm...?"

"You sound like one of those old Muggle instructional movies that they show just before you finish primary school."

"Do I?" he laughed. "I suppose it's because I know how hard that time of life can be."

"Now, don't you dare tell me you remember what it was like when you were my age, because the world was a much simpler place then."

"In some ways, yes, but in other ways it has stayed the same. I do remember some of my youth. I'm not totally senile yet."

"You're not senile at all. You just like people to think you're a little crazy at times. I have you all figured out Albus Dumbledore," she said brazenly, "you are a master at manipulating people, especially the ones you care about. If it was up to you life would really be a bowl of cherries, and we would all live happily ever after."

"I'm working on it," he told her playfully, "except there is one little witch who never seems to follow the rules. What should I do with her?"

"Just keep making sure she knows there really are people who care about her, and maybe one day she'll walk into your office the young woman you are hoping she will become," Harry sighed, hugging him, as he kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Feeling better?"

"No, I miss Sirius. I was hoping he would come back for Christmas."

"Well, there is still time. It isn't Christmas yet. Maybe he wanted to do some Holiday shopping."

"Ha Ha," she said sarcastically, "he should know that all I want is for him to be here with us."

"He does know, and if it's possible he will be. You just need to be patient a little while longer. He will come back, if not for Christmas, than as soon as he can get here. He's taking care of personal matters and trying to get his life back in order. It hasn't been easy for him either you know."

"I know, but nobody ever tells me anything," Harry moaned, trying not to start sobbing again.

"I'm tired of always being patient. I want something in my lousy life to go right for once."

"Harry," Dumbledore looked down at her sternly, "you do not have a lousy life. I know that sometimes it feels that we are being unfair to you, but we don't want you to be disappointed either. I could tell you Sirius will be here, but the fact of the matter is I don't know myself. I told you that if it's possible he will be here, but I don't want you to sit and wait for something that may not happen. He misses you, and wants to make sure you will be safe and happy. Now

I want you to try to pull yourself together. Professor McGonagall is looking for you to go over the lesson that you had asked her about."

"Yes, Sir," Harry sniffed, getting up and going into the bathroom to wash her face. "I don't feel much like doing it though. My heart just isn't in it."

"Nonsense, it may be just what you need to feel better. It will help you to redirect your energy." Dumbledore steered her to the door, and escorted her to the Deputy Headmistress's quarters. "Now, I want you to try and stop fretting about Sirius. I know he will be very upset if he finds out you're feeling so unhappy, especially when he's working so hard at trying to make things better for the two of you."

"I'll try," she responded halfheartedly as Professor McGonagall opened her door to the Headmaster's knock.

"Come in Harry. You and I have some work to do if you want to get that transfiguration lesson just right. Albus, thank you for finding her for me. This is quite important and I want to make certain that she knows what she is doing."

"Then I will leave you two alone. Harry, I will see you at dinner. Remember what I told you. Try to focus your attention on your lesson. Minerva, try to get Harry to cheer up, she is feeling rather lonely today. I think what she needs is something to distract her from her troubles."

"I know just the thing, Albus. I have the perfect cure for a case of the 'holiday blues'."

"Very well, then I will leave you two alone. I need to go and see the Weasley children and reassure them that they are not in any trouble," Dumbledore winked at Harry, and then disappeared.

Harry watched in amazement. She knew he possessed the skill to make himself appear invisible, but had never seen him actually do it until today. She wondered if he could teach it to her. Professor McGonagall was smiling at the astonished look on her face.

"It's amazing how he can do that. It's one of his favorite tricks. He only does it for people he really cares about."

"Do you know how he does it?"

"It's very advanced magic and only a very few witches and wizards have ever achieved it. Even You-Know-Who can't do it, although I understand he can transform."

"I believe he can transform into a snake. Can the Headmaster transform too?"

"I think he used to, but he prefers to make himself invisible. He loves to see the look on people's faces when he just vanishes. Now, how about some practice. You need to work on getting faster and more comfortable with the transformation. You will gradually begin to gain the skills of your animal and you will be able to communicate with other animals. They will recognize that you are not a real animal, but if you are careful they will gradually begin to trust you."

"How long will it take before I get the skills of my animagus?" Harry asked curiously.

"I believe you already have some of them, but they are not yet fully developed. The more you transform, the faster you will adapt. I don't want you changing alone, though. It can still be dangerous, even though you have achieved the ability; you aren't yet skilled enough to do it automatically," Professor McGonagall explained and then transformed in one swift movement.

"Professor, you are a very pretty kitty," Harry laughed picking her up and petting her gently.

"Is your night vision really as good as a real cat?"

"Meow," the cat replied jumping back to the floor and transforming back into the older witch.

"Are you ready to try again?"

"I wasn't when I came down here, but after watching you I am."

"All right. Just relax and do I as I told you earlier. Let your mind become one with the animagus inside of you."

Harry closed her eyes and again felt the sensations of a bird in flight, the sun warming her and the wind rushing past. She was free, and could see how small the world really was. She felt the subtle change and let her mind and body become one. When she opened her eyes again, she had transformed, and Professor McGonagall was smiling down at her. She was happy and excited, spreading her wings; she flew around the room twice before lighting on the Professor's shoulder, and admiring herself in the mirror by her bed. She then flew to the floor and transformed back into human form.

"Professor, why is it easier for me to turn myself back to human form? Is there a reason?"

"Yes dear, it is because you are a human being. Once you perfect the ability to transform automatically, you will be able to do so without even thinking about the complexity of the spells you are doing. Now, I want you to try and do it again."

"Yes, Ma'am, but can I go outside and fly around? It's very crowded in here."

"No, Harry, I'm afraid not. I don't want you to go outside until you're comfortable flying with your wings. It will also be easier to fly outside when it isn't so windy. I think you should start gradually. Once we've let the Headmaster and your godfather know you can transform we can start you out by letting you fly about in some of the hallways for practice. When the weather permits, they can take you outside, and you can start to get the feel for flying in the air currents."

"All right," Harry replied somewhat disappointed. She hadn't thought that transforming could be so complicated, and imagined that part of the problem was the fact that she was not limited to the ground like most animagi.

She practiced with Professor McGonagall for about two hours, and then the witch decided that she should rest and proclaimed that the lesson was finished.

"We'll let the Headmaster know as soon as you're ready, Harry. I want you to come and practice with me every day until then, but we won't need to be as long as today. You are advancing rapidly, and I think in another week you will be able to transform as easily as any other animagus. The Headmaster will be very surprised and so will Sirius. This is a very special skill and only a very few are able to attain it. Use it wisely."

"I will. I love doing it and can't wait till I can get more flying time," Harry beamed feeling better than she had all day. Now I think I should go and get ready for dinner. Ron and Ginny's family will be here and they haven't seen me since they found out I wasn't a wizard, but a witch. It will be interesting to see their reactions to the new me."

"I think they'll be very impressed. Now go on and get ready. I'm sure it will be a fun evening. I believe the twins and Percy will be here also," Professor McGonagall told her thoughtfully.

"I will see you at dinner then Professor," Harry grinned as she left the Deputy Headmistress and went back to her room to freshen up.

She took a fast shower and changed into a skirt and blouse with her Gryffindor robes over it. The French braid in her hair was still wound tightly so she decided to leave it in and putting on some fresh makeup she surveyed herself in the mirror. Her green eyes sparkled against her fair skin and thick dark hair. Her face was flushed with excitement, and she hoped that Sirius would come back, but was trying hard not to get her hopes up after the afternoon's conversation with Dumbledore. At least she could spend time with the Weasley's as well as Professor Lupin. He rarely spoke about his family, and when he did it usually was just a brief statement. She wondered if he was as lonely as she was, and knew he missed Sirius also. Taking one final look at herself, she decided she was satisfied with her appearance, and headed to the Great Hall for dinner.

Entering the vast room, she noted that the enchanted ceiling was snowing, and realized she hadn't looked outside in some time. The hall was decorated for the Holiday's and the lights on the trees were twinkling along with the many decorations. The hearths were blazing, and she thought how beautiful the Christmas season really was and that it really did help to brighten up the otherwise dreary winter months. Looking around she spotted Ron and Ginny sitting

with their brothers. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were not there, and she wondered if they had arrived yet. Fred and George spotted Harry and motioned for her to come over and sit with them.

"Harry, I missed you the one time you came into Hogsmeade," Fred grinned, looking her up and down. "George didn't tell me how pretty you were after the whole story came out, now I know why. Trying to keep away the competition little brother?"

"Why not," George laughed nudging his twin in the ribs, "All's fair in love and war. Harry you look prettier than the last time I saw you. Come and have a seat beside me."

"I saw her first; she's going to sit with me and Percy," Fred said indicating their other brother, who worked at the Ministry of Magic with Mr. Weasley.

"Harry just ignore those two," Percy smiled admiringly, "and sit with me. I at least will behave like a gentleman."

"Yeah, because if you don't your fiancé will kill you," George quipped.

"Well, thank you all for the compliments, but I believe I will sit with Professor Lupin," she told them indicating the seat opposite Percy, where the Professor sat quietly watching the scene unfold with a smile. Sliding in beside Remus, she looked down the table to Percy, "Percy I didn't know you got engaged. Congratulations, can I assume the lucky girl is Penelope Clearwater?"

"Sure is," Ron chimed in, while Ginny nodded in agreement. "He gave her the ring yesterday for Christmas since he was going to be here and she was going to visit her grandparents in Wales for the Holidays.

"We'll announce it formally for New Years at her parent's house," Percy informed them pompously.

"When are you planning to be married, Percy?" Professor Lupin inquired.

"We haven't really discussed it yet, but probably sometime next year. We're hoping things don't get too bad with You Know Who. Penny is scared to death, but I told her everything will work out. She asked me if I thought Harry would be able to stop him, and I told her absolutely."

"Old Percy gave her an earful about when you saved Ginny, even though she was a student here too, when it happened. She hung on every word, it was absolutely appalling," Fred shook his head, "he's hen pecked already."

"Now, boys," Dumbledore's soft voice glided from further up the table, "you should be happy that Percy and Penelope are getting married. I'm sure your parents are thrilled."

"Thank you, Sir," Percy acknowledged the Headmaster. "Mother has been crying since we told her, she's so happy."

"Yeah, now she won't have to feed you," George teased, "she's thinking about all the extra money she'll have."

"Well, I want his room. I've always had to be stuck in the attic. Now with the two of you living in Hogsmeade, and Percy leaving home it will be like heaven. I'll finally get a real room with a closet. Now that Dad has been promoted to Minister of Magic maybe I will finally get rid of the hand me downs and get some new clothes," Ron shook his head with pleasure.

"Penelope has already asked me to be a bridesmaid," Ginny beamed happily, "of course I accepted. I can hardly wait."

"I'm sure you'll look lovely too," Harry smiled at her friend. "Where are your parents?"

"Dad is tied up at the Ministry, so he and mum will be here a little later this evening," Percy replied. "He's been busy since he became acting Head of the Ministry. He's had to work late, but it's for a good cause."

"Well I for one think the Ministry made an excellent choice, and I hope it becomes permanent. Your father is a fair and decent human being, and I'm sure he'll do an excellent job. He's unbiased and knows how to listen to people," Harry remarked quietly, thinking to

herself, 'I just hope Voldemort doesn't try to harm them. Lucius Malfoy is Voldemort's number one Death eater and he hates Mr. Weasley.' Hagrid interrupted her thoughts, as he entered the Great Hall.

"Professor Dumbledore, Sir. Molly and Arthur Weasley are 'ere. Just arrived and are waitin fer ya in yer office. They 'ave Professor Lupin's black dog, Snuffles, with 'em. Said you would understand."

Harry very slowly put down her fork full of salmon. She was aware that Dumbledore, Snape, and Lupin were watching her. Ron was laughing aloud, and Harry glared at him, "Did you know your parents were taking care of the Professor's dog?"

"Honest, Harry, I had no idea, but it really was the best place for him. I'm sure mum took really good care of him. He was rather scruffy looking."

"You don't know the half of it. Mum would talk to the dog as if he were human. She also kept feeding him. I thought she was feeling lonely now that we're all leaving home. For awhile I worried dad was too," Percy whispered across to his brothers a bit too loudly.

"I don't see what the problem is," Hagrid told Percy with a puzzled expression, "I talk ta Fang all the time, an' 'e ken understand me."

"Harry, would you and Ron like to come and greet his family with me. I know how much you care about them and I know you would like to see Snuffles. You could bring Snuffles down to Professor Lupin's room after you've said hello," Dumbledore's blue eyes were twinkling with mischief, and Harry didn't know if she should be angry at him or give him a hug.

"Headmaster, it will be my pleasure. I haven't seen Ron's parents in some time, and I have missed having that dog around," she smiled wickedly, meeting his gaze. "Professor Lupin, I will see that Snuffles gets safely to your quarters."

Harry rose from the table and walked out of the Great Hall with Dumbledore and Ron. Once they were safely out of the room, she broke into a run, with Ron right behind her.

"Children, walk!" Dumbledore yelled after them, knowing they wouldn't listen, shaking his head happily. Reaching his office door, he found the two of them waiting. "I see you found out I changed the password today," he chuckled looking at Harry over his spectacles.

"Chocolate Kisses," Dumbledore opened the secret panel and they all mounted the moving stairs to his office. "Molly, Arthur, welcome back to Hogwarts. Happy Christmas."

"Thank you, Albus," Molly Weasley beamed.

"Happy Christmas," her husband added.

"Mum, dad, how are you? The twins and Percy are waiting in the Great Hall with Ginny."

"We'll be down in a little while, son," Arthur Weasley hugged his youngest son affectionately, "first we promised to deliver this dog to Harry safely. Seems Professor Lupin said she'd be very upset if he wasn't well cared for."

"Woof!" Snuffles barked wagging his tail happily, but didn't transform.

"Harry, dear, it's good to see you. You are absolutely lovely," Molly Weasley smiled warmly, giving her a hug. "Albus Dumbledore you and Sirius Black should be ashamed of yourselves keeping her disguised as a boy for so long! Safety is one thing, but look at this poor child. You both did her a disservice."

"I don't know dear," Arthur Weasley told his wife, "I think they did one hell of a job. Can't be too careful now a days. Black is going to have his hands full with all the boys around here."

"Serves him right, too. I understand he was quite handy with the girls when he was a student here. It's payback time," Molly laughed looking at the black dog.

"Harry," Ron whispered, "do you think my dad knows about Sirius?"

"Yes, Ron, Dumbledore said from behind him, "Your father is aware that Snuffles is actually Sirius."

"Then how come he hasn't transformed back to his human self?"

"Because he knows that when he does I'm going to kill him," Harry smiled happily, taking the leash from Mr. Weasley's hands. "I can only assume you had him for the past few weeks?" she asked looking at Ron's parents.

"Yes, dear. Albus told us what happened and we agreed to look after him. We couldn't be happier for you that he's been cleared."

"I could never understand how he could have been the one to betray your parents. They were all so close. When Molly and Albus told me the whole story, I was horrified. Twelve years in Azkaban with no trial for a crime he didn't commit, and the real culprit was hiding in my own home all that time," Arthur Weasley shook his head, thinking about Peter Pettigrew hiding in his rat form as their son's pet, Scabbers.

"Woof, woof," Snuffles barked wagging his tail in agreement.

"Now, why don't you and Snuffles go down and visit with Professor Lupin while Ron and I take his parents down to the Great Hall for something to eat. I'll have the house elves send up some dinner for the three of you since I know Sirius is probably hungry and you had just started eating when they arrived."

"Yes, dear," Molly Weasley beamed at her, "visit with Sirius for awhile where you two can have some quiet time together. We can all get together later on this evening or tomorrow morning. We'll have plenty of time to visit since we'll be staying for a while."

"Come on, Snuffles, let's go and find Remus. I have a hunch he's already waiting in his room and that it's been set up with another bed for you."

"Woof," Snuffles led the way out pulling on his leash, tail wagging happily. He did not transform until they reached the door to Remus' rooms, and Harry took off the collar he was wearing. "Happy Christmas, Harry," he smiled hugging her tightly. "I'm sorry I couldn't talk with you or write too often, but we didn't want Arthur and Molly to be caught protecting me. Their son's didn't even know. I had to stay in my animagus form at night and when Percy was home in the evening. Forgive me?"

"I'll think about it," she replied pretending to pout as she hugged him back.

"Well think fast," Remus interrupted them with a grin as he opened the door ushering them into his rooms, "I'm still hungry. The salmon is excellent, and I was only just starting to eat when you arrived."

"I'm too happy to eat. I have my Christmas present," Harry looked happily at Sirius and Remus as they sat down at the table full of food, which had magically appeared in the middle of the room.

"Hmm...fresh salmon, mashed potatoes, carrots, and salad," Sirius inhaled the sumptuous odors, heaping his plate full of the food.

"I see Mrs. Weasley had been feeding you well," Harry teased, "You don't have that half starved look anymore. Maybe we should let her take care of Remus for a while. He could use some fattening up too."

"How about it Moony? I think you would love her home cooked meals."

"That's right, you know what Ron said the first time we ever saw you?"

"Wasn't it something like one good hex could finish me off?" Remus laughed shaking his head.

"Did he really say that, Harry?" Sirius asked studying his friend's pale demeanor.

"Yes, he did. It was when Remus first came to Hogwarts because everyone thought you were coming to kill me. We were on the train and Remus was sleeping."

"If I recall the moon had been full the night before, and I fell asleep in the compartment before you kids boarded the train."

"Yeah, but you woke up at just the right time."

"I only know a little of what happened," Sirius looked at her with interest. "What caused Remus to wake up?"

"The train was boarded by the Dementors," Remus explained as Harry shuddered visibly.

"Yeah, and I passed out cold when they came into our compartment, but not before I saw Remus stand up to the thing."

"Is that how you all really met for the first time?"

"It was, and I was more than a little concerned about the effect the Dementors had on her, although at that time she was still disguised as a boy."

"Well, just think, we all liked you. How could you not like a teacher who runs around giving out chocolates?" Harry laughed, remembering the cure for contact with a Dementor. "Could we talk about something else though, it's Christmas and I don't think Sirius wants to think about those creatures any more than I do."

"You're right, Harry, I spent too many years living with them, and too many Christmas's feeling their cold touch," he said taking her hand.

"Well, you don't have to any more. How does it feel to be free and not have to keep looking over your shoulder?"

"I'm still getting used to it. If it wasn't for you and Remus it may never have happened. Remus told me how you got Peter to confess. I'm very proud of you for being so clever."

"It was actually great fun. Especially when he thought I was going to let Snape poison him."

"I didn't hear about that, Remus just told me you had Ron pretend to be your father's ghost and scared him half to death."

"Oh, well, he left out the best part. I had a bottle of perfume in my pocket that I told him was poison and that if he didn't tell us what we wanted I would have Snape pour it down his throat."

"He was absolutely terrified when she tossed the bottle over to Severus and he got up and started going towards him," Remus recalled with a thin smile, "even I didn't know what was in the bottle."

"Did Severus know?"

"No, but neither of us really believed it could be poison."

"Then why did you both question me about it afterwards?" Harry laughed, delighted at his red face.

"We were just curious about what you had," Remus responded while she continued laughing and Sirius grinned at his friend.

"Well, I owe you both a great debt, and I love the two of you. You're my family, and I'm happy to be home," Sirius said getting up to hug the two of them. They all just reveled in each other's happiness and being together for a few minutes before Sirius broke apart from them and sat back down. "So, I hear you have also been up to mischief again with Severus. Remus said you were locked out on the roof after causing a problem in Potions Class."

"Big mouth," Harry frowned at the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, "and I thought you were my friend."

"Harry, you know we all love you, so wipe that scowl right off your face. You were a very bad girl and damn near scared the hell out of Albus, not to mention myself and Severus."

"You all need a good scare once in a while. It keeps you on your toes," Harry smirked.

"Oh, really," Sirius said getting up from his seat. "It seems to me you could use a good spanking, but since I don't believe in it I think I'll just have to punish you like this..." He laughed grabbing her around the waist and tickling her. She kept trying to get away while Remus sat laughing.

"Remus, help, I've had enough."

"Do you promise not to upset Albus any more?" Remus asked winking playfully at Sirius.

"I promise, I promise," Harry cried laughing so hard the tears were streaming down her face.

"Sirius, please stop!"

"You promise to be a good little witch and go to classes without being disruptive, and come to us when you feel angry or upset instead?" Sirius asked continuing to tickle her.

"Maybe," she gasped trying hard to catch her breath as Sirius eased off a bit.

"Only maybe, well in that case..." he resumed tickling her harder than before, "I need to be a bit stricter with you."

"No! No! Sirius I promise I'll be good," Harry squirmed trying to escape his grip.

"And you'll be more open with me and Remus when you have a problem?"

"Yes...yes...I'll come and talk about it. Just please stop tickling me," she said looking up at his soft brown eyes.

He was grinning so broadly she was reminded of the pictures of him at her parents wedding. She could feel how happy he was, and she hugged him close as he kissed her gently on the cheek, releasing her.

"Now that we have settled our little witch's behavior problems, let's have dessert," Remus smiled broadly passing out a tray of pastries. "Harry would you like some tea or coffee?"

"No, I'll stick with a glass of milk, thanks."

"Sirius? Do you want tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, preferably black," Sirius passed him his cup and Remus poured out the coffee and then poured himself a cup of tea.

"So what do you want for Christmas besides my being here, Harry?" Sirius asked as they moved over to sit on the soft chairs and small love seat by the fireplace in Remus sitting room.

"Nothing, all I wanted was for you to come home to Hogwarts," she smiled contentedly as she curled up on the love seat beside him.

"There must be something you want, Princess," Remus looked at her curiously.

"Actually, I did want to give you all a nice surprise, and I'm going to, along with the presents I happen to know you will be getting. Of course, after that tickling torture maybe I should tell Father Christmas to leave you coal instead!"

"What kind of surprise, Miss Puppy Prongs?" Sirius laughed.

"I see a certain wolf actually did deliver my message."

"Of course, and I like the Puppy Prongs as much as he did, now tell me what this big surprise is."

"Not until tomorrow. It's something very special," Harry said biting into a pastry filled with whipped cream and getting it all over her nose.

"She just wants to torture us by keeping us in suspense," Remus said as he reached over and wiped her nose with his napkin. "Maybe we should tell her what she's getting for Christmas from us and she'll let us in the big surprise early."

"Sorry, you'll both just have to wait. You're both like overgrown children. I think you just want the presents."

"Maybe I should tickle her again?"

"So help me Sirius Black, if you so much as try I'll put a spell on you to...to...I don't know, but I'll do something," Harry tried to sound angry, but failed as she broke into another smile.

"Oh, well, I guess we'll just have to wait. Here I was hoping for a treat," Sirius moaned feigning disappointment.

"Yes, you will, so don't go rolling those big brown eyes at me. It won't work, and the same goes for you too, my sometimes fluffy hazel eyed friend."

"In that case, have another glass of milk and some more goodies," Remus said handing her some more sweets.

"You're just trying to make me fat. That way Sirius won't worry about who I want to go out with."

"Great ideas, Remus keep feeding her."

"You two are crazy," Harry beamed shaking her head.

She hadn't been so happy in her entire life, and knew she would always hold this Christmas Eve in a special place in her heart. She did however, eat another cream puff and had some more milk. What she didn't know, was that Remus and Sirius had put a potion in her milk to

make her tired. Dumbledore was aware of their plan and allowed them to do it. Snape had provided the potion. They all had planned a special Christmas morning for her, and wanted it to be perfect.

"Harry, you're falling asleep, honey. Why don't you let me walk you down to your room so you can go to bed?" Sirius gently nudged her.

"I don't want to go to sleep. I might wake up and find out this was all a dream," she nodded sleepily, nestling into his shoulder.

"Sh...it's not a dream. I promise I'll be here when you get up in the morning," Sirius cuddled her gently as he picked her up in his arms. She had fallen asleep sooner than they had expected, making their plan even easier.

"I'll go and get Molly Weasley," Remus whispered conspiratorially, "you go and put her into the bed."

"I hope we didn't give her too much of that potion."

"No, if there's one thing Severus knows about it's how to mix potions. He's a real stinker about it with the kids."

"He always was a perfectionist," Sirius remarked as Remus exited and he brought Harry into the other room.

She looked innocent and pretty as he laid her down on Remus bed and removed her shoes.

'You just get prettier every time I see you. Your parents would be so proud of you if they were here. I know James would have loved watching you play quidditch; and Lily, she wanted so badly to dress you in little girl clothes. She would be so happy to see how you look now.'

Sirius whispered to the sleeping figure. 'I'm sorry I let them down. I promise I'll try and make you happy,' he said as he heard the door to the outer room open.

"Sirius," Molly Weasley poked her head into the bedroom, "I brought her a nightdress. Why don't you and the others start in the other room while I get her changed?"

"Sure, Molly. I really appreciate this."

"We're glad to do it for her. She's like a member of our family. No off with you and get that room ready, while I get her tucked in properly."

"I'm going," Sirius flashed Molly his best grin, and she blushed at the younger man's attention.

Molly Weasley changed Harry into the nightdress easily and then tucked her into bed, kissing her good night. She had always loved Harry, and was now even more maternal towards her, knowing what she had had to endure. She was glad Ron and Harry were so close and a part of her hoped one day, they would be more than friends, but her instincts told her it wasn't going to be. Going into the other room, she surveyed the work going on in there with a smile.

Dumbledore had put up a Christmas tree and was decorating it. Severus was putting presents out while Remus, Sirius, and her husband were redecorating the room to accommodate the two cots the men would sleep on. Dumbledore and Snape would join them in the morning to open the presents. Afterwards they would all meet in Dumbledore's sitting room for breakfast. All of the gifts Harry had wrapped had been delivered by the house elves to the proper rooms, as were the gifts Harry would receive. Molly laughed as the men each found a box with their names on it and acted like little boys. Severus kept shaking his curiously, while Remus gloated that his was the largest box. Sirius just kept poking his box and tried to sneak it under his robes, but Dumbledore stopped him. Dumbledore beamed when he found the presents she had gotten for him, but Snape whisked them away and put them towards the back of the stack beneath the tree with a wicked grin.

When they were all finished, Molly had tears in her eyes, knowing that this would be the happiest Christmas Harry had ever had.

## ***A Day of Surprises***

Harry woke to the sound of laughter, and she was wondering who was in her room as she rolled over in confusion. Opening one eye she was suddenly startled as she realized she was not in her own bed. The last thing she remembered was curling up next to Sirius on the love seat in Remus sitting room. Looking around she discovered that someone had changed her clothes, and this was not a woman's room. Her own clothes were folded neatly on a chair by the bed and a fresh outfit had been laid out for her.

Sliding out of the bed, she went over to the door and opened it to find out where she was. Remus and Sirius were stretched lazily on two cots, and Professor Snape was reclining in the chair by the love seat, which was occupied by Professor Dumbledore. They were all still in their nightshirts, Dumbledore and Snape also sporting bathrobes and slippers. Tea, coffee, and hot chocolate had been laid out on the table, along with some scones and muffins. What really caught her attention though, was the gaily decorated Christmas tree which stood in one corner of the room, with a myriad of gift boxes in all shapes and sizes beneath it, along with one fluffy little black puppy sporting a big red bow, happily chewing on a rawhide bone. The puppy barked happily, when it saw a new face, and waddled over to where she stood framed in the doorway.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," they all spoke at the same time as she bent down to pick up the pup.

"Come and sit by the fire, Child, and bring the pup with you," Dumbledore smiled brightly, his blue eyes brighter than usual as she clutched the little dog.

"I'm going to guess that this puppy is for me," Harry said moving over to sit with the Headmaster, as the pup licked her face, "she's adorable, but I always thought the students couldn't have dogs."

"Occasionally even I will break one of my own rules," Dumbledore laughed as she clutched the dog as if he was going to make her give it up. "Just train her to get along with the other animals or she will have to be kept at Hagrid's."

"I'll just have Sirius give her a good talking to," Harry grinned, "where did she come from?"

"The Headmaster got her for you. He is aware you have an affinity for canines," Snape shook his head in amusement, arching his brow.

"You got the dog?" she asked wide-eyed.

"Does that surprise you, Child? I happen to like dogs myself. I felt the puppy would make you feel better when you're unhappy or lonely."

"What are you going to name her?" Sirius asked. "Don't you dare tell me..."

"Snuffles."

"I was afraid you were going to say that. Can't we call her something else?" he groaned trying unsuccessfully to hide his smile.

"No, her name is Snuffles," Harry tossed her head as the pup wiggled out of her arms and tried to tug on Dumbledore's long white beard.

"No, puppy, that is not a good idea. Professor Dumbledore might just turn you into a cat," she admonished the dog. The men laughed while Dumbledore secured his beard inside of his robe, taking the pup in his hands.

"Now, little Snuffles, you had better behave. Your mistress will be very upset if you are sent down to Hagrid's, and I do not want to see her crying. Do you understand me?" he spoke to the puppy looking her in the eye. Harry had the distinct impression he could really communicate with her, and remembered that Professor McGonagall had told her that Dumbledore used to transform. "Now go on back to your rawhide chew so we can open our presents," he said setting the puppy back on the floor and she did exactly what he had told her to do.

"Now, wait a minute. How did you do that?"

"That, my dear Child, will remain my secret," Dumbledore replied, levitating one of the packages and handing it to Professor Lupin. He then sent one over to Professor Snape, and Sirius.

"I happen to know there are some there for you too," Harry told him following his lead and sending him over one of her gifts.

"Headmaster, thank you," Snape told him examining the contents of a large box.

"Well, let's see how it will look on you," Dumbledore beamed winking at Harry. Whatever was in the box Dumbledore knew Snape would never use it and had bought it just to see his reaction. "Come on, I am anxious to see. Hold it up in front of you."

"Very well," Snape sighed, willing to please the old man, but glaring at the others so they wouldn't say anything. It was a new set of dress robes in bright crimson with a large green serpent on the front.

Harry thought Sirius would suffocate he was holding his pillow so hard across his mouth to keep from laughing, and Remus tried to occupy himself with pouring a cup of tea.

"Headmaster," she began carefully, "I really don't think red is Professor Snape's best color."

"Perhaps you could help him out. I really think he should have something different to wear besides black all the time."

"Well, how about if we do this," she pulled out her wand, directing it at the robe Snape still held up in his hand. The robe turned a dark gray material that seemed to shimmer in the light and the serpent shrank in size until it was only over his upper right side where his usual serpent logo would have been.

"Bravo, my dear," Dumbledore clapped with pride. "I actually believe he may just wear it now."

"I just might, given the right occasion," Snape remarked inclining his head in thanks.

"Somebody else open something. I want to see what you all have," she said eagerly, getting into the spirit and curling up contentedly with Dumbledore, as Remus handed her a cup of cocoa.

"I'll open mine," Remus smiled, tearing the wrapping off a large box. Opening the lid, he let out a low whistle, and looked at Snape, "Severus, you shouldn't have gone to the trouble, let alone the expense." It was the book he had bought for him in London dealing with the Dark Arts. Handling it carefully, he gently flipped through the pages, scanning them.

"I hope you enjoy it, Remus. I believe you will find it useful. Some of the material will help us in our endeavors with Harry."

"I should say, so," he answered as he gently put the book back in its box.

"I want to see what's in this. It's one of the presents Harry got for me," Sirius said, tearing the paper from the photograph of Harry in her Quidditch robes. He was delighted, and smiled happily. "Now, I just want to see you play. How soon before you start again?"

"If the weather is good, we're scheduled to start practice in March and will begin playing in April straight through till the end of the year. I'm sure you'll be right in the front row."

"You bet I will."

"Harry, why don't you open one of our presents?" Remus asked handing her a box from him.

"You notice he gave me his gift. He must be anxious for me to see it," she chuckled, opening the package. "Oh how sweet," she grinned, "you knew about the puppy."

"Of course, we all did," he replied as she showed them the contents of the box. There was a dog bowl, collar, leash and a box of rawhide bones for the puppy to teethe on. There was also a book on training the puppy. "There is just one more thing I want to do." Taking out the bowl and leash, he took out his wand, and with a swift wave, 'SNUFFLES' was emblazoned on each. "How's that?"

"Cool," she smiled, visibly pleased with his putting the puppy's name on them.

"Hey, open mine now," Sirius begged, pouting.

"No, I will open Professor Snape's first. I'm saving yours for last."

"Saving the best for last, eh?" Sirius gloated.

"Professor Snape, would you please throw that pillow at Sirius for me? He is in need of a good thrashing. He's starting to sound like Lockhart."

"With pleasure, Harry," Snape's eyes glittered, pleased that she wanted him to knock Black down a peg for the remark, as he flung the pillow at him.

"Missed me!" Sirius said, as he ducked and the pillow sailed over to land by the puppy, which promptly began to play with it."

"No, puppy Snuffles!" Harry exclaimed looking worriedly at Dumbledore, relieved to note that he was smiling.

"I can help," Sirius immediately transformed and barked at the puppy, which wagged her tail and brought him the pillow. "Here Severus, catch!" he said throwing the pillow back at the Potions Master, who deftly caught it in one hand.

"Professor Dumbledore, did they behave like this when they were in school together?"

"Child, they're just getting started. So far they haven't come to blows."

"Did they ever?"

"Once in a while, but not too often. I did give them detention quite frequently though," he smiled in remembrance, as Sirius blushed and Snape arched his brows.

"How about if I open my present from you, Child. I see you have given me another one besides the one I haven't yet opened."

"I've been waiting for you to open them."

"Are they edible?" he asked hopefully.

"No, they aren't candy. You eat enough of it as it is. If you keep it up you will look like Father Christmas," Harry gleefully patted him on his belly, as the other three men snickered. "Now open your presents."

"Yes Headmistress," Dumbledore replied, pretending to act chastised as he untied the packages. "Child, I shall treasure this picture of you with Fawkes," he beamed, holding up the photo of her with his Phoenix. "How did you ever get it done? Someone had to have helped you."

"You know how you have a secret about puppy Snuffles doing what you told her to do? Well, this is my secret."

"She's got you now, Albus," Remus teased, offering him a cup of tea and a muffin, which he gladly accepted. "What else did she give you?"

"I'll tell you shortly," Dumbledore said, opening the other box, "Harry, it's wonderful. I shall keep it on my desk," he laughed with pleasure at the water globe containing the castle which so resembled Hogwarts. "Look! It's enchanted to do the weather like the ceiling in the Great Hall."

"I thought you would like it."

"Child, you just like to spoil me. Perhaps you're up to some sort of mischief?"

"Well, I do have a special surprise for everyone, but it has to wait until later." Harry eyed them with a mysterious smile. "In the meantime I will open Professor Snape's gift which was interrupted before with a minor pillow fight," she stated ripping off the paper. "Oh, Professor, how did you manage to get this without my seeing you?" Harry asked holding up the small crystal castle similar to the one in Dumbledore's globe.

"It was a simple matter. When you admired it and got the other one for Albus I merely nodded to the store manager to wrap it up."

"Thank you, I really love it."

"What did you give Snape and Remus?" Sirius asked curiously. They hadn't opened them yet.

"Then we had better do so, or I believe the Headmaster will be very disappointed. He just loves presents," Snape smiled wickedly. Both he and Remus tore open their packages at the same time. "Harry, how did you know I used these two items for Potions? They are only used in advanced mixtures."

"I asked Mr. Abercrombie."

"When did you ask him? I was with you the entire time we were in the shop."

"Were you?" she questioned her face-turning beet red.

"You sent me on a wild goose chase when you told me you thought you saw McNair," he looked at her sternly, "I trust you'll never do it again?"

"I wasn't happy about doing it, but I needed a way to get you out of the shop for a few minutes."

"Harry," Dumbledore admonished, "you really shouldn't have done such a thing, but since it's Christmas I'll let it slide. Besides, I know Severus is quite pleased with that gift."

"I am not only pleased; I can't believe you were able to get them."

"He had them on special order for someone else, so he took some for me."

"Indeed?" Snape arched his brow with interest, "did he say who they were for?"

"No, why?" Harry asked, getting worried that he knew something he wasn't telling her.

"No reason, I was just curious. It's not often I am able to converse with another Potions Master who would know how to use these items," Snape responded in an off hand manner, but the others knew he was concerned it may have been someone working with Voldemort.

"However, you shouldn't have gone to such an expense."

"They weren't as expensive as you would think. Sometimes this scar can be very useful,"

Harry grinned indicating that she had been given a discount simply because of who she was.

"I'll have to bring you with me more often then," his sardonic smile indicating he understood.

"Remus, what did Harry give you?" Sirius asked, seeing the pleased expression on his friend's face.

"She gave me a new brief case to carry my supplies in. It's very reminiscent of the suitcase you gave me when I got my first teaching position," Remus held up the black case for them all to see. "I especially like the symbol she had emblazoned with my initials," he smiled, indicating the gold wolf's head. "Thank you, Harry. You have excellent taste."

"You're welcome, I'm glad you like it. What did Sirius and Dumbledore give you?"

"Our Headmaster has given me two sets of new robes," he indicated the brown and navy blue robes, each with matching trousers. "Thank you, Albus."

"Wear them well, Child. I know you try and save your money in case you should fall on difficult times again, but I want you to be able to look nice," Dumbledore told him affectionately. "What did Sirius give you?"

"Well, it seems that Sirius and Harry think alike. He got me a new suitcase, just like the one he originally gave me all those years ago. If I didn't know better I would swear the two of them planned this."

"Honest, we didn't. We just know you well enough to know what you like and what you need, old friend," Sirius shook his head, holding up his hands, while Harry nodded in agreement.

"Sirius, what did you get from Dumbledore?" Harry asked curiously.

"I'll tell you in a jiffy," he laughed tearing the paper from another package. "Headmaster, thank you," Sirius smiled affectionately at the old man, holding up a new set of dark brown robes. "Now open your gift from me and Remus."

"I don't suppose there are any lemon drops in here?"

"I'm afraid not, Headmaster, but I suspect you'll still be happy," Remus laughed.

"Gentleman, you have outdone yourselves." Dumbledore beamed holding up a new set of dress robes in royal blue covered with silver stars and crescent moons, along with a matching wizard's hat. "I shall have to arrange an occasion to wear them. Perhaps we should have a feast sometime in the spring?"

"How about a 'Welcome Spring Dance? You could decorate the Great Hall with all kinds of flowers and rainbows," Harry suggested playfully.

"Child that is a magnificent idea! I will have Minerva and Professor Sprout start to plan it as soon as the New Years Holiday is over. Now hand me that other group of boxes from Severus. I can't imagine what he bought for me."

"I bet I know," Harry grinned levitating a group of boxes tied into a large tower and topped with a bow. "Professor Snape did you go to a certain store we found shopping in Muggle London that time?"

"I did," he nodded, his eyes glittering happily, aware she remembered the candy store with the ludicrous name of 'Dentist's Delights.'

"Severus, you have outdone yourself," Dumbledore laughed like a small child, his delighted expression making them all smile with affection. "It's a tower full of my favorite candies. There are lemon drops, toffee, chocolate mints, and candy watermelon slices."

"Enjoy them, Headmaster," Snape smiled, and Harry noted how much he truly cared about Dumbledore. She also wondered about the other package he had picked up when she had done her own shopping while on detention. She knew it was for the Headmaster, but perhaps it was not his Christmas gift, or maybe it was something he wanted to give Dumbledore in private. "Rrruff...ruff." Harry was distracted by the puppy playing under the tree and coming out with a long narrow package.

"No Snuffles! Drop that!" The puppy ignored her as the others grinned and Remus reached down to scoop up the playful pooch. Taking the package from her mouth, he handing the pup to Harry.

"Ah, the present is for Sirius. No wonder she wanted it," Remus chuckled teasing his friend. "It's from Harry."

"Now what else did you get for me. I was perfectly happy just having that picture of you in your Quidditch robes," Sirius smiled fondly at her as he tore open the paper. He recognized the style of the wooden box immediately, and removing the lid, he carefully lifted the wand from its box, "Fourteen inches, maple and mahogany with the single tail hair of a Griffin. Harry, how did you know what kind of wand I had?"

"Ollivander never forgets. He had it ready when I got there. He told me it's excellent for transfiguration and the Griffin's tail hair and mahogany are for protection. Why don't you try it out?" Harry asked, growing concerned that Sirius expression was unreadable.

"Go ahead, Sirius, Harry went to great lengths to secure you a new wand. She wanted you to have what should never have been broken in the first place," Dumbledore spoke reassuringly to Sirius, with a nod to Harry.

Sirius stood up and thought for a minute, then pointed the wand at the Christmas tree.

"*Ornatus transfiguro in aureus cervus et argentum lilium*," he spoke the words slowly and softly. A brilliant blue light emanated through his wand as the power poured from his life force, directing itself towards the Christmas tree. Almost immediately the ornaments transformed into golden stags and silver lilies. "Happy Christmas, honey," Sirius said coming to kiss her on the forehead, "and you're not allowed to cry. I did that little trick for you," he smiled, wiping a tear from her face. "Besides, you'll upset puppy Snuffles," Sirius indicated the state of confusion the puppy was in looking from one to the other with a whine.

"It's okay, puppy," Harry crooned to the little dog, which wagged her tail happily, and licked her face. "That was some little trick. I guess the wand is going to be fine."

"Feels even better than the original," Sirius flashed his best smile, and scratched the puppy's ears before returning to his seat. "Now open my present. I bought it for you a long time ago when you were born. I was originally going to give it to you for your sixteenth birthday, but circumstances prevented me from doing so. It has been locked in my vault at Gringott's. I hope you like it," he handed Harry an odd little box, and she tore off the paper, her hands shaking.

"Sirius Black, that's not funny," Harry yelled, pulling back in surprise. From out of the box, two of the Furry Fingered Foulies crawled onto the love seat.

"Ruff, ruff," little Snuffles barked, sniffing the little furry black fingers, no bigger than the size of a caterpillar as they wriggled around trying to escape.

Sirius was laughing gleefully, while Snape just shook his head. Dumbledore's blue eyes were twinkling, and Remus came over to see the Foulies.

"Harry, can I have them for Defense class? The first years could use them to practice their spells. How long do they last?"

"Once their out of the box they are good for about three days before they dissipate," Snape replied. "I had some come out of the cauldrons. The third years thought it was hilarious."

"Until they saw the detention Severus gave them," Dumbledore smiled pleasantly, picking one of the Foulies from out of his beard, where it had managed to crawl from the love seat.

"Here, take them," Harry handed them to Remus, who continued to play with the odd little fingers.

"I see you're still the practical joker," Snape remarked dryly to Sirius, "somehow I don't think Harry appreciates the humor just now."

"Honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I thought you would find them funny," Sirius soothed, noting the bewildered look in Harry's green eyes. "Here is the real present. Everything I told you is true," he came over to where she was sitting, and handed her a long narrow box. "Go on, open it. I promise there are no more Furried Fingered Foulies."

"Snuffles puppy, is there anything in there that crawls?" Harry asked the pup on her lap, who sniffed the box curiously.

"Ruff."

"Ruff."

"Okay, let's see if Padfoot will be allowed out of the doghouse in time for Christmas dinner," she told the puppy as she carefully removed the box from its wrapping. Opening the lid, she blinked twice, and looked over at Sirius in awe, "Sirius is this really for me?"

"Yes, do you like it?"

She nodded mutely, stunned by what she had found in the box. It was a string of perfectly matched pearls, about sixteen inches in length, and polished to reflect an iridescent pink.

"I have no place to wear them."

"So, who says you need a place to go?" Sirius teased taking them from the box. He gently put them around her neck, and fastened the small diamond and silver clasp.

"Child, they're lovely."

"You do have excellent taste in jewelry, Black"

"Princess, you look lovely."

"I guess Padfoot has redeemed himself, huh Snuffles?" Harry asked as the puppy wagged her tail so hard her little body went along with it, and Sirius gave Harry a hug.

"Now I suggest we all get dressed as we are meeting the Weasley's for breakfast in half an hour. Harry, I believe there are some additional gifts for you from the Weasley's still under the tree, and something from Hermione.

"Actually Headmaster, there is a box for all of us from Molly and Arthur. I suggest we open them now, so Molly won't be disappointed."

"Now Severus, what could Molly have gotten for all of us?"

"I bet I know, and Professor Snape is right. You had better open them, and wear them," Harry laughed opening the box, which contained the annual sweater. This year the sweater was trimmed with lace, and knit in pale pink wool. The traditional HP was still in the upper corner, done in a dark cranberry.

Professor Dumbledore's sweater was pale blue and Albus was knitted across the front in Navy. The headmaster was absolutely delighted. Sirius sweater was done in white with a black dog on it, and Remus had one in brown with his initials RJK done in tan. Professor Snape kept his face neutral as he opened his box and was pleasantly surprised. His sweater was black with the traditional green serpent for Slytherin interwoven with his initials of SS.

"I believe Molly will be very happy to see us wearing these at breakfast," Dumbledore stated to make sure they would not hurt Mrs. Weasley's feelings by failing to wear her hand made gifts.

"Harry, here are the gifts from your friends," Sirius stated, handing her the three small boxes. Opening Hermione's she found some new cosmetics and nail polish. Ginny's gift was a group picture of Harry with the entire Weasley family that had been taken over the summer. Ron's gift proved to be quite interesting. It was a small painting of a young woman with red hair, standing with a dark haired child by a stream. Above them on a small knoll stood a large stag. "I wonder where he ever found this." Harry asked aloud without realizing it.

"Found what, Child?"

"I'm sorry; I didn't realize I had spoken out loud. Look at this gift from Ron," she passed the small painting around, and they all understood its significance.

"Harry, Ron is your best friend. I have a feeling he went looking for a gift and found this purely by accident. He was probably as delighted as you are," Remus smiled, studying the small painting.

"Well, I'm going to put it on the mantle in my room, along with the one Ginny gave me," Harry said as she gathered up the pile of gifts to bring back to her room.

"I will meet you all shortly for breakfast in my sitting room. Harry, I think little Snuffles will need to go out before you come upstairs, and yes you can bring her along."

"I don't suppose she's housebroken yet?"

"Actually Albus and I have been working with her. She only needs some papers at night since she's so little. We'll all help to see that she gets out during the day while you're in class," Sirius informed her, petting the puppy. "You go and get dressed and I'll take her out for a quick run right now. Molly left your clean clothes on the chair by the bed. Oh, and in case you were wondering, it was Mrs. Weasley who undressed you last night after we put you to sleep to set up this room."

"Professor Snape, kindly throw that pillow at my godfather again on your way out," Harry instructed red faced.

"Hey, he supplied the sleeping potion," Sirius retorted ducking as the pillow came sailing back at him.

"Well, in that case," Harry said as she picked up the pillow, "he needs to be properly chastised too!" She then flung the pillow at Snape who caught it and threw it at Lupin. They then all started grabbing the loose pillows, throwing them at each other, with the puppy trying to catch them, while Dumbledore just shook his head and laughed.

"Enough children, *pulvinus haesito*," he called with a wave of his wand and the pillows stopped in mid air. He then slowly lowered them to the floor. "Now shall we all go and get ready for breakfast?"

"Our apologies, Headmaster. We didn't mean to be disruptive," Snape spoke for all of them.

"Severus, you don't need to apologize for having fun, but we are running late, and I don't want our guests to be kept waiting. I will see you all shortly in my sitting room," he smiled pleasantly, and winking at Harry, left to go and get dressed.

Snape and Remus picked up the pillows while Sirius transformed and took the puppy out to do her business. Harry ducked back into Remus' bathroom and pulled on the gray slacks that Mrs. Weasley had laid out along with a white blouse. She then pulled on the new pink sweater. Gathering her belongings, she then put them into a neat pile with her gifts. She knew the house elves would see that they got to her room. She hoped Dobby had gotten the new shirt and socks she had bought for him.

Returning to the sitting room she found Remus was waiting to get dressed and Snape had left. Remus ducked into his bedroom just as Sirius returned. Handing her the puppy he went into the other room. Harry could hear the shower running as Remus returned wearing slacks and his new sweater. Sirius was happily singing, and Harry couldn't suppress a giggle. He

returned to the sitting room a few minutes later, fully dressed, and sporting his new Weasley sweater, towel drying his hair.

'How handsome he is,' she smiled to herself. 'I'll bet if he fills out some more and loses the haunted look in his eyes half the girls in this school will be mooning for him.' Suddenly she was afraid. She didn't want to lose him, and she was confused by her feelings. 'Harry, snap out of it. He's your godfather, not your boyfriend. What would your father say?' From somewhere inside of her a little voice spoke, 'Your father would want you both to be happy. If he's meant to be with you it will happen.'

"Princess, are you all right?" Remus asked, watching her expression carefully.

"Oh, Remus, yes I'm fine. I was just letting my mind wander."

"You're sure? You had a strange expression on your face."

"I'm fine, really. I was just thinking how much I love you two."

"We love you too," Remus relaxed. "Sirius, are you ready? We're ten minutes late already."

"I'm all set. Harry, you look adorable. I see you left on the pearls, I'm glad."

"I hope nobody thinks I'm being snobbish."

"Nonsense Princess, they're a special gift from your godfather. Everyone will understand."

I hope so," Harry fretted, picking up the puppy as Remus locked his door.

They were the last ones to arrive and the others had already started eating, but Mrs. Weasley was fretting over all three of them like a mother hen. It may not have been her kitchen, but she was still running the show, much to everyone's amusement.

Harry had given both Mr. and Mrs. Weasley a Christmas gift, and both told her how happy they were. Mrs. Weasley had received a new winter cloak, which Harry had assured her she had gotten on sale. She had given Mr. Weasley a CD player with extra batteries and two CD's of classical music. He was having a great time with the Muggle Music Player as he called it and was asking her all kinds of questions through breakfast. He was thrilled to discover that it would also work on electricity with a special adapter, which prompted a myriad of all new questions. Ron was more than happy with the new robes she had given him, and Ginny liked her gifts too. She was also impressed with the pearls Sirius had presented to Harry, as was Mrs. Weasley. It was a wonderful Christmas morning and one Harry would never forget. Ron and Ginny were especially fond of little Snuffles. She was also having a great time lying under the table where Ron and Ginny were sneaking her treats.

"Ron, she's only a baby. All this extra food will make her sick," Harry warned him.

"She'll be fine. I won't over feed her," Ron whispered.

"Well if she gets sick, you're going to clean it, young man," Dumbledore whispered from his other side, and Ron flushed. He had no idea that the Headmaster knew he had been feeding the pup.

"You're right, Harry, all this rich food may be too much for her," Ron responded, and Dumbledore smiled. "Can I take the puppy outside for awhile?"

"Me too," Ginny chimed in, "she is just so cute. Why did you name her Snuffles?" she asked, unaware that Sirius was an animagus.

"She sniffs a lot," Harry said with a straight face, as Ron snickered into his napkin, and Sirius tried to hide a lopsided grin.

"We'll come too, if you're going to take her out," the twins chorused. "We could have a snowball fight."

"Honestly," Percy shook his head, trying to act mature, "you wouldn't believe that they're almost twenty."

"Knock it off, Perce, you're just missing Penny," Fred quipped.

"Yeah," George agreed, "If she were here you would both be joining us and you know it."

"Did I miss something?" Sirius asked puzzled.

"Oh, Mr. Black, Percy and Penelope Clearwater just got engaged," Ginny explained excitedly.

"Congratulations, Percy," Sirius nodded, "and do convey my best wishes to the future Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley suddenly burst into tears, and her husband moved to comfort her. "Now, Molly, you knew they wouldn't stay babies forever."

"I know," she sniffed, "but I just can't help myself. Our little Percy is getting married. The next thing you know Ginny will be finishing here at Hogwarts."

"Gee, Mum, at least Ginny isn't getting married," Fred laughed making a bad attempt at levity, and Mrs. Weasley started to cry again, "Oh, Fred, that isn't funny. Ginny is my baby."

"Mum, I'm not a baby!"

"Of course not, dear. Your mother just means you're too young to be getting married," her father responded calmly.

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry started carefully, "why don't you think of it as adding a sister for Ginny, rather than Percy leaving home. Look at our Headmaster. How many generations has he seen come and go, including you and Mr. Weasley. He loves watching us all grow and learn and finally we all leave, but somehow we all manage to come back here to where we started. Percy isn't going anywhere. He's just coming back with another addition to your household."

"Does that mean I don't get his room?" Ron moaned, and they all laughed.

"Come on, let's go and have that snowball fight," George suggested. "then we can all build a snowman."

"Go on, children," Dumbledore smiled, "there will be hot chocolate and snacks when you all come back. Christmas dinner will be this afternoon. Go out and get some fresh air while we old folks sit and talk."

"Headmaster, should Miss Potter and the younger Weasley's be out alone?"

"I think it will be all right so long as they confine themselves to the grounds, and that doesn't mean the Forbidden Forest or using any of the hidden passages," Dumbledore stated firmly eyeing the twins and Harry.

"We understand, Professor," Fred smiled mischievously.

"We give our solemn word," George agreed, looking at his brother.

"Harry, I'm waiting for your answer."

"I promise not to leave the grounds. Besides I have to take care of Snuffles."

"Very well, off with the lot of you. That includes you too Percy."

"Sir?"

"I think you will be quite bored with our conversation, besides I expect you to make certain our three mischief makers behave themselves."

"Yes, I understand perfectly," Percy replied importantly, "I'll be happy to accompany them." He rose from the table and ushered the others out ahead of him.

Harry would never forget that afternoon. Snuffles loved the snow and kept getting stuck in the drifts. Percy got together some of the other students who had stayed behind for the holidays and actually organized the snowball fight. It was Gryffindor and Ravenclaw vs. Slytherin and Hufflepuff. There was no clear winner, and all the students had a wonderful time. Harry got hit in the face with a snowball, and when she ducked, she landed on top of George. They both laughed and then he just looked at her strangely.

"You have the most marvelous green eyes, Harry. I think you're one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen."

"Thank you, George," she blushed lowering her eyes.

"I wish you would come into town more often."

"I can't. I'm under super protection because of Vol...I mean You- Know -Who."

"I wish I could be of some help."

"Maybe you can. Why don't you listen and watch for anything or anyone who seems out of the ordinary who may come into Hogsmeade? You could get word to me or Ron and we could tell Dumbledore."

"Hmm....a silent spy. I like that."

"Just don't do or try anything foolish. I would never be able to forgive myself if anything happened to you or Fred. I still feel guilty that Cedric was killed because of me."

"Trust me, I won't. Not when it involves You- Know -Who," George said tilting her chin up to look at him. "It's nice that you're concerned though."

"Of course I am!" she smiled up at him.

"I'm glad." He gently brushed the snow from her hair, and lowered his mouth onto hers. Slowly pushing his tongue into her mouth, he realized this was probably her first real kiss. Harry responded, and met his kiss awkwardly. She had a knot in her stomach, and was suddenly very confused. Pulling away from him, she got up from the snow.

"I...I have to go inside. The puppy is getting cold," she didn't give him time to answer, just scooped up little Snuffles and ran as fast as she could back into Hogwarts, George staring after her, a slight smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

Harry went directly to her room and closed the door. She was confused and didn't know what to do. A part of her was upset that she had kissed her best friend's older brother, someone she had gone to school with. George had been her friend and they had been on the Quidditch Team together. She liked his sense of humor, and was one of the few people who could tell him apart from Fred. She had always thought of him as Ron's brother and felt like he was hers too. He had changed all that in one moment. His kiss hadn't been unpleasant; indeed, she had enjoyed it. Most of the other girls at Hogwarts were now experienced with kissing, Ginny among them, although Harry suspected her brothers were unaware of it.

She knew she liked George, but was unsure of what to do. She couldn't ask Sirius. If anything she wished he would kiss her like George had done. The only thing she was certain of was that she was more confused than ever. She would just have to be patient and see what developed.

"Ruff, ruff, ruff!" Puppy Snuffles was barking at the door, and she realized someone was knocking.

"Who's there?" she asked hoping it wasn't George or Sirius, her heart pounding.

"Professor McGonagall, dear. May I come in?"

"Yes, of course," Harry opened the door, pulling off her heavy cloak at the same time. "Happy Christmas, Professor."

"Happy Christmas, Harry. I was just going to go outside and look for you when I ran into Ron. He said you had come back into the building. He said his brother told him you wanted to bring the puppy inside."

"Yes...yes I did. Professor, this is Snuffles," Harry said, picking up the puppy. "Snuffles, this is Professor McGonagall. She is the Deputy Headmistress and can turn herself into a gray tabby cat. So make sure you don't chase her or we'll both be in the doghouse!"

"Hello, Snuffles," McGonagall laughed, "you are one adorable pup. Albus told me he had gotten you the puppy, and I happen to have a little something for her. I have an old pillow which she can use as a dog bed."

"Thank you, Professor. I appreciate it."

"Now, the rest of the family is having an afternoon snack with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. I think it's the perfect time for us to go and see the Headmaster for your special surprise. He has agreed to meet us back in his office with Sirius and Professors Lupin and Snape."

"I'm ready whenever you are, but what if I can't do it?"

"Harry, you learned how to transform in three months. That has to be some kind of record. Just relax and let yourself feel your animagus the way I showed you."

"Then let's go," Harry replied, scooping Snuffles up into her arms, "I can't wait to see their expressions."

"I'm sure they will be more than amazed. I know I was," the older witch remarked as Harry followed her back to Dumbledore's sitting room.

"Child, did you have a good time outside? I understand you left before the others."

"Snuffles was getting cold, so I came back inside," Harry answered, noting that Snape was looking out the window and realized he could have been watching the whole time. He merely turned and looked at her without saying anything.

"So, Princess, what is the big surprise?"

"Where's Sirius? I don't see him here yet."

"I'm here," he said, coming out of the bathroom, "sorry to keep you waiting, but I couldn't," he smirked. "I am really curious though as to what you have for all of us."

Fawkes suddenly let out a screech, glaring at Snuffles, who was sitting by his perch, wagging her tail.

"Oh, no, puppy. You can't play with Fawkes, he's a bird."

"Well, little Snuffles," Dumbledore smiled picking her up, "Fawkes does not like to be woken up from his nap. Fawkes, this is puppy Snuffles. As you can see, she's very young, so be patient with her. She is a friend and will be staying with Harry, just like you stay with me," he told the phoenix, giving him a treat. Fawkes immediately began to trill contentedly and the puppy tilted her head, wagging her tail fiercely. "I think they'll be quite good friends in time," the Headmaster beamed, putting the little pup back down. "Now, Harry, what is the big surprise? You have had us all in suspense and Minerva is fit to be tied."

"Then sit down, and I'll show you," she directed. "That includes you too, Professor Snape."

"What could be so shocking that you would want me to sit? The last time I did you turned out to be a witch. I doubt you could top that."

"Don't be so sure, Professor," Harry said imitating his usual stance. As soon as they were all seated, Professor McGonagall nodded to Harry to begin.

"Harry, honey, what are you..." Sirius never finished his sentence. Harry had transformed and had flown over to sit on the perch with Fawkes. She was an animagus. She was also a Phoenix! This was the rarest ability among animagi and hadn't been done in generations. She then flew over to Dumbledore and very gently lighted on his shoulder, while Fawkes was trilling loudly with pleasure. Snuffles just sat, tilting her head and wagging her tail. Dumbledore very gently reached out and had Harry climb onto his arm so he could look at her.

"Harry," he smiled with awe, "I want you to change back and then we will talk. Minerva, I don't want this to leave this room. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Albus," the stern witch nodded. She knew this was something special and wonderful, and Dumbledore would deal with letting people know when it was time to do so. "I think you will want to talk with Harry alone. I will be in my quarters if you need me." Dumbledore merely nodded, waiting until she was gone, and then turned to Harry who was looking on puzzled.

"Professor, have I done something wrong?"

"No, Child, you haven't. In fact you've done something very wonderful."

"I don't understand. All I wanted to do was transform. I thought it would make you all happy, but you're all looking at me so strangely."

Sirius rose from his seat, and put his arms around her, "Harry, what you just did hasn't been done for generations. It's the rarest of all the animagi. You can transform into a magical animal. You're a Phoenix."

"I know I'm a phoenix. But why is that so important?"

"Because it means you are pure of heart. You will not kill and are able to heal," Snape's voice came very softly, from where he had sat down by the fireplace.

"If I can't kill, then how am I supposed to take care of Voldemort?"

"Severus did not say you couldn't kill, Child. A phoenix will not kill unless it is forced to. Its song will increase the courage of the pure of heart. You are pure of heart because you can become as the Phoenix, yet you are human. In time, you may be able to appear and disappear at will, just as you have seen me do, and we already know you are a natural healer. You will always protect those who are loyal to you, without question. Just as Fawkes came to you that time in the Chamber of Secrets, you would do the same for those you love. It makes sense that you're an empath, you can feel what's in the hearts of others."

"Princess," Remus looked at her, his hazel eyes wide, "how long have you been able to transform?"

"How long have I been able to do it, or how long did it take me to learn?"

"Why not tell us both? What prompted you to try and transform?" Snape asked, staring at Sirius suspiciously.

"No, Professor, Sirius had nothing to do with this," Harry shook her head amused by Snape's belief that her godfather had encouraged her to try to transform.

"She's right, Snape. I would never have allowed her to try such a thing."

"Why not? If I recall correctly, you, James Potter and Pettigrew all tried and succeeded. It would make sense that Harry would try to do so under your tutelage."

"Stop it, both of you! I did this all by myself. In fact, I originally started trying for Professor Lupin."

"What! Harry I never asked you to try to transform. I shouldn't be surprised though, your father and Sirius both did it for me."

"Well, their reasons were different than mine. They did it to help you control the wolf, which I think I probably could do too, going by what you've all just told me. However, that is not what prompted me to try."

"What then, Princess?"

"Do you recall the story I told you about the princess and the wolf?"

"Yes, she was a hawk by day and he was a wolf by night. You wanted to turn into a hawk?"

"I thought it might make you feel good to know another Potter liked you enough to turn into an animal to keep you company when you needed it, but I couldn't get it right."

"Child, how long have you been trying?"

"I guess since the end of September, maybe a little later."

"Did Minerva help you, I see she was aware that you could transform?" Dumbledore inquired with interest.

"I have only been able to do it since yesterday. She helped me with the final stage. I questioned her about it when she came to my room after I had slept late and you wanted to be sure I was all right. She was not happy that I had been trying, let alone by myself."

"Honey, you've only been trying for less than three months and just succeeded yesterday?" Sirius questioned, amazed.

"The next thing you know she'll be able to apparate," Professor Snape's familiar sardonic voice remarked from where he still sat by the fire.

"Hmm...now there's an interesting idea," Harry looked brightly at Professor Snape.

"Not until you're eighteen, Child, do you understand me?" Dumbledore eyed her sternly, and there was no mistaking the authority in his voice. He had denied Snape and Lupin's request to teach her early.

"I understand, Headmaster," she grinned up at him, her green eyes bright with laughter, unable to hide her smile.

"Harry, I am not playing. Under no circumstances are you to try and apparate."

"What if Professor Snape is bleeding profusely from being tortured by a group of Death eaters, or Voldemort is trying to kill him and I need to get help fast?"

"Why is it, that I am the one who is being tortured and not you?"

"I can get away faster since I can fly," she replied contritely.

"But I can apparate."

"Maybe they have you tied up and took your wand away."

"And maybe they broke your arms so your wings are useless."

"All the more reason to learn to apparate!"

"Are you both quite finished yet, or am I going to have to put a silencing charm on the two of you in order to finish this conversation?" Dumbledore asked, looking at the two of them and trying to appear angry. He didn't wait for a reply, but continued to speak, "Now, Harry, I love you dearly, but I do not want you to apparate. I have no doubt the skill will come quite easily to you, but unless I say otherwise I expect you to respect my decision. Is that clear?"

"Yes. I won't try and apparate unless you tell me I can."

"Honey, don't sound so disappointed. We just don't want you leaving a piece of yourself in one place. It can be very nasty. I don't like to apparate. That's why I used to ride the motorcycle. When you're old enough either Albus or Severus will teach you. They both do it often and are skilled enough to apparate another person at the same time."

"Sirius is right, Princess. I don't like to apparate either and prefer other means of transportation when I can use it."

"Now, you said Minerva helped you with the final stage. Why didn't you both come and tell me you were able to transform?"

"I asked her to wait until after Sirius returned so I could tell everyone at once. I thought it would be a nice surprise. She knew he would be coming back soon, so she agreed to wait. You're not angry with her are you?"

"No, I'm not angry. She would have told me herself if she thought you were deliberately keeping it a secret like certain other young Gryffindors did a few years back." Dumbledore arched his brow at Sirius, who was grinning and blushing with embarrassment.

"She was the one who explained why I was having so much trouble with the final transfiguration. I was trying to become something I wasn't meant to be. I knew the bird wasn't the right color for a hawk, and believe it or not I was worried it was a chicken for a while, but it was too big. Once she showed me what I was doing wrong, I fully transformed. That's when I saw that I was a Phoenix. She had the same strange expression on her face that the four of you did."

"It's because it hasn't been done since before I was born," Dumbledore explained. "The last wizard to do it was one Ezekiel Sprague. He could transform into a winged horse, the Aethonan, the breed native to Britain."

"Harry this is such a wonderful thing," Sirius beamed, "that none of us ever expected it. When you said you had a surprise, and Minerva came up with you, we thought you were going to show us how well you were doing with the advanced transfiguration lessons we have been teaching you."

"Does it top finding out I was a witch, Professor Snape?"

"Tenfold, Miss Potter. You're really starting to impress me."

"Good. You've been bored for too long down in that dungeon," Harry remarked, pleased that she could impress the Potions Master. She wasn't sure why, but his opinion mattered to her a great deal.

"Professor Lupin, I'm sorry I didn't turn into a hawk, but if you don't mind a phoenix keeping you company from time to time I'll be happy to do so."

"I like it even better than the hawk. I think I'll give you an assignment for your next detention in Defense class to write a story about an evil Wizard and a Phoenix."

"Professor, there are two problems with that. You never give me detention since I don't misbehave in your class and there is already a story in progress about an evil wizard and a witch who can turn into a phoenix. The story just isn't over yet."

"I'll bet it will have a happy ending when it is," Remus smiled kindly, knowing she had been referring to herself and Voldemort.

Harry just smiled back and looked up at Sirius, who smiled down at her, "Albus told us you were special, now we're beginning to see just how special. He was right, you know."

"I'm not special; I'm just plain old Harry. I like it that way too. There isn't anything I can do that any talented witch or wizard hasn't already done at one time or another. There are also plenty of things I'm not very good at."

"Name one."

"Divination. It's boring and stupid."

"It seems to me Professor Trelawney predicted a Grim in your future yesterday," Dumbledore reminded her.

"That wasn't a Grim, it was Sirius. If she were really any good at divination she would have known that."

"How do you know she doesn't, Child?" She has been right a number of times."

"I'm amazed she didn't say she wasn't any good at Potions," Professor Snape grinned evilly.

"Because, as you yourself said, and I quote, 'she's quite good, Black, when she wants to be,' besides, I like doing Potions when the instructor isn't on one of his tirades!"

"Ruff, ruff, ruff..." The puppy had come over and was barking at Snape, and started to pull on his bootlaces playfully.

"Well now, Little Miss Snuffles, it is not nice to chew on people's shoes." Snape picked up the puppy and was holding her in one hand above his head.

"Professor, don't hurt her," Harry panicked, moving over to try and reach them, but was held back by Dumbledore.

"Miss Potter," Snape lowered the pup into his lap, "I have never in my life harmed an innocent animal. She merely wants to play and she knows what I have in my pocket."

"I don't understand."

"She wants a treat," he reached into his robes and pulled out a puppy treat, which the little dog took greedily, her tail wagging. "Who do you think kept her hidden from you for the Headmaster for the past week? In fact, I have the basket she has been sleeping in down in my quarters. I shall see that you get it," Snape said as the little dog tried to lick his cheek.

"Professor McGonagall has a pillow for her too. I'll set her up a nice cozy bed in the corner by the fireplace."

"Harry, now I want you to listen to me very carefully," Dumbledore put his hands on her shoulders, "you are at present an unregistered animagus. Mr. Weasley is aware of Sirius unregistered status and he agrees with me that he shall remain so until the situation with Voldemort is resolved. It gives Sirius an advantage, as he is able to go and listen to others without their being aware he is a member of the Order. I am going to tell Arthur that you are also now an animagus. I am going to see that you also remain unregistered for the time being. You may have need of the skill in the fight against Voldemort and it is better if no one beyond Minerva, Arthur, and us know you can transform for the time being. I don't want you to tell anyone, not even your closest friends."

"I had no intention of telling anyone. I was sort of thinking along the same lines as you. Besides, sometimes even my friends don't feel comfortable with some of my abilities."

"I know Child. Now if you want to practice you may do so, but only with the supervision of either Sirius or Professor McGonagall. They will go with you to a quiet place where you will not be seen. You may also fly around in the building when I am present, as people will think it is Fawkes," he smiled, moving over to give the Phoenix a treat as he began to trill happily. "I want you to promise me that you will do as I have asked. I will be away from Hogwarts more often with the situation over at the Ministry and overseeing the Order."

"I promise. I'll just torment Professor Snape instead so he keeps me on detention. Then I'll stay out of trouble," Harry teased, as the men laughed.

"I seem to recall you said you would behave in Potions if you got off that roof without freezing to death," Professor Snape arched his left brow quizzically.

"I must have been delirious from the cold."

"In that case, Miss Potter, I hope you like mashing flobberworms, since we will need quite a few for my third years."

"Yech, never mind, I'll torment Sirius instead."

"Does this mean you have heard about my new position here at Hogwarts?"

"What new position?"

"Albus, should we tell her?"

"I think we should, she will find out shortly anyway."

"Honey, with Albus being away so much it will put an extra burden on Professor McGonagall. In order to help her out, I've been hired as an adjunct Professor to teach Transfiguration, since she will be functioning in the capacity of Headmistress when he isn't here."

"Please tell me you're not teaching the sixth years?"

"That hasn't been decided yet, Child," Dumbledore chuckled, his blue eyes bright with amusement.

"You don't want me for your teacher?"

"Sirius, I love you dearly, but I don't want you for my teacher. I already do advanced tutoring with you."

"Here, I thought you would be happy," he pretended to pout.

"I am very happy that the Headmaster has seen fit to give you a position here. I just don't want to be in one of your classes. I already have all I can do to deal with your best friend and your old nemesis."

"I'll keep that in mind when Minerva and Sirius plan the schedule," Dumbledore beamed at her over his glasses, "in the meantime, why don't we go down to the Great Hall? It's almost time for Christmas dinner."

"That is an excellent idea, Headmaster. I have been looking forward to it all day," Professor Lupin rose from his seat and rubbed his stomach in anticipation.

"Now that you mention it, I'm starved," Sirius agreed. "How about you, Severus?" Sirius questioned, using Snape's given name in a show of Holiday cheer."

"I am a bit hungry, ah, Sirius," Snape answered, trying to accept his rival's show of friendship.

"Then we are all in agreement," Dumbledore looked at them all fondly.

"Wait, I need to speak with the Headmaster privately for a few minutes."

"Honey, is something wrong?" Sirius queried with a worried look.

"No, it's something personal. I will tell you about it later on."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, it will only take me a moment, but I prefer to speak with Dumbledore alone right now."

"All right. We'll meet you down at dinner."

Harry waited until she was sure the three men had left the office and then turned to the Headmaster, "Professor, do you remember what I said about my father's letter?"

"Yes, Child, you wanted to wait to read it until Sirius returned."

"Do you still have it?"

"You know that I do. Do you want me to get it out?"

"Yes, but I also want to go to the cemetery. Will you still be able to take me? I know you're very busy."

"You just tell me when you want to go and I'll make the time."

"This may sound crazy, but I'd like to go on New Years Eve."

"Why then, Child?"

"I would like to end the year knowing that my parents would want me to look forward, not back. I need to say good-bye. It just seemed like a good time to do it. You know, Auld Lang Syne, and all that."

"I think it's a very good time, Child. It will be good for Sirius too. Do you want anyone else to come?"

"I think maybe Remus and Professor Snape, if they really want to. I know we all have guilt, and need to deal with what happened in our own way and time, but I think they also need to put my parents to rest."

"I shall ask them then. Are you going to read the letter before you go?"

"I haven't decided yet. I may wait and read it at the cemetery, or I may read it alone first, and then read it for everyone else."

"Whatever you decide, we will all be there to support you," the old man hugged her.

"I know. Will you be gone often?"

"At least three days a week. I will be here as much as possible. If you feel you need me, you just send me an owl. I won't lie to you Harry, there are going to be some difficult days ahead."

"I understand. I should be all right. Sirius and Remus are here along with Professor Snape. Just remind them not to make me feel like they're smothering me."

"I will. Now here is your father's letter. If you want to read it and need someone with you I will be happy to help."

"I'll let you know," Harry replied placing the letter in her pocket. "Now why don't we go down to dinner before the Weasley boys and Sirius eat everything in sight?"

"That, my dear, is an excellent idea," Dumbledore hugged her close before they left together for the Great Hall.

Christmas dinner was a pleasant and happy affair. Harry sat with Sirius and Ron, and fully enjoyed her meal of roast goose, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, carrots, broccoli, and biscuits. Dessert was a variety of puddings, and pumpkin or sweet potato pie.

Harry knew George Weasley had watched her through out the meal, and she was aware that Sirius was watching them both. She wondered if Sirius realized that George liked her, and if he had seen how she had blushed when he had greeted her at dinner. She sensed that Sirius was feeling very protective, and something else, but she wasn't sure what it was. One minute he seemed jealous and the next protective. Did Sirius have feelings for her too? She was more confused than ever, but determined to just wait and see. She wasn't ready for a long-term relationship but at least she had finally had her first kiss.

Following dinner, the students went to their common rooms and Harry joined Ron, Ginny, and Sirius for a quiet evening of conversation in Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's rooms. Sirius and Ron enjoyed a game of Wizard's chess, and Ron was surprised at how good Sirius still was, even after being in prison and in hiding for so long. Sirius just laughed and said he had been brushing up during the time he was with Remus.

Percy had to get back home, as he had to go to work in the morning, so he left early, and the twins returned to Hogsmeade by ten o'clock as they were going to open the magic shop early in the morning. Before he left, George warned Harry that the boys still in school were going to be competing with him for her affections, and that he hoped to see her again soon. Sirius just watched from a distance, but Harry had the idea he could sense her discomfort. Finally, Harry rose to go and walk little Snuffles, and Sirius accompanied her. Once they were outside, he turned to her, his expression serious.

"Do you like him?"

"Who?"

"George Weasley."

"He's just a friend from school and Ron's brother. We used to play Quidditch together."

"Are you planning on seeing him again?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I know he would like to see me again, but right now, I'm not ready for any kind of relationship. I may date him though, but I don't like the idea of getting involved with any of the Weasley's."

"Why not?"

"Ron is my best friend. If I date his brother and it doesn't work out it could cause hard feelings. I would rather we just stayed good friends."

"I understand, and I think that would be a good idea," Sirius remarked and Harry noted the relief in his voice.

Was he jealous, or just acting like an overprotective parent? She wasn't sure, but did not want to think about it. Sirius was in his thirties and she was only sixteen. Wizards and witches never seemed to be concerned with age differences and she was glad, but she was still underage. She knew that even if Sirius liked her he would not do anything about it until she turned eighteen.

"Sirius," she began in an effort to steer the conversation away from the Weasley's, "I wanted to talk to Dumbledore about my parents."

"Honey, you could have asked me about them. I know as much as Albus."

"That's not what we were discussing. I asked him about my father's letter."

"You still haven't read it?"

"No. I wanted you with me when I did. I am planning to go visit their graves. I would like you to come. I've never been there. Up until a few weeks ago, I didn't even know where they were. I may read the letter before I go, but I may not. I asked Dumbledore to ask Remus and Snape to come too. We all need to burn our bridges and go forward."

"Honey, you know I have never been there either, even as an animagus. I will be happy to go with you. I would like to visit them. We both need to say good-bye," he hugged her gently, stroking her soft hair. "Come on, it's getting late and little Snuffles may not be tired but Padfoot is. I'll walk you upstairs and say good-night."

"That sounds really good," she smiled picking up the puppy.

They both returned to Hogwarts, arm in arm, and content with each other's company. Sirius kissed Harry gently on her forehead after he was certain she was safely tucked in for the night. As Harry drifted off to sleep she couldn't remember being so happy in her entire life. Sirius was home, and would be teaching at Hogwarts. Remus was happy to have his friend back and free, even Professor Snape seemed to have mellowed towards him. She had also had her first real kiss, and was now able to transform. It had been a wonderful magical holiday season, and she would remember it fondly for many years to come.

## ***Auld Lang Syne***

Harry was flying in her animagus form up in the unused third floor hallway, with Sirius following along as Padfoot. She had stopped calling him Snuffles when he transformed to avoid confusion with her puppy. She had learned that little Snuffles was actually going to be quite large, and was a Newfoundland. They loved water and had originally been used to rescue drowning victims. The puppy was running behind Sirius and jumping mischievously trying to catch Harry when she would fly low, but Harry made certain not to let her do so. The little pup learned quickly and seemed to realize that the Phoenix was actually her mistress, and enjoyed the game she was playing with her. Reaching the end of the corridor, Harry almost swooped into Professor Snape. Landing on the windowsill, she quickly transformed, the puppy running up to Snape, her chubby little body wagging with her tail. Sirius transformed in front of the Potions Master.

"Professor Snape," Harry laughed, "I'm sorry, I almost flew into you, but I didn't expect to see you when I came around that last bend."

"You should watch where you're going, Miss Potter." Turning towards the other man, he frowned, "Black, the Headmaster is looking for you. He wants to go over your schedule with Minerva before we leave for the cemetery."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I have to go. Maybe Professor Snape will stay with you a while so you can practice flying. I think you have the transformation just about perfect."

"It's almost automatic now, I love changing. When do you think I can start to fly outside?"

"Don't rush it, Miss Potter. The Headmaster will tell you when he feels you are ready."

"Snape is right, Harry. Albus doesn't want anyone to know about this. If you go outside, you're more likely to be noticed. Besides, it's cold out, and I have to try and run in the deep snow," Sirius grinned, "while you can stay nice and dry in the air."

"I may be dry, but I'm sure the wind isn't exactly warm this time of year. I'll wait. Are you going to stay, Professor Snape? I really would like to fly some more."

Snape studied Harry intently for a moment, before replying, "Unfortunately, Miss Potter, I need to finish my lesson plan for the upcoming semester. The Headmaster wishes to see it before he leaves tomorrow evening after dinner. Why don't you seek out Mister Weasley and amuse yourself with a game of chess?"

"Ron and Ginny went out with their parents to Hogsmeade for lunch, and then they are going to do some shopping. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley will be going home this evening, since they are announcing Percy's engagement tomorrow with Penelope's family. I was invited to go along with them, but I decided not to intrude."

"More likely you are avoiding a certain young man," Snape remarked, looking down at her.

"I am not!" Harry exclaimed blushing.

"George Weasley," Sirius said flatly, and Snape nodded. "Harry has told me she would prefer that they just remain good friends."

"I think George will be a rather persistent suitor. He appears to be quite smitten with her."

"I'll keep that in mind," Sirius replied.

"Excuse me, but I don't believe how the two of you are acting. He gives me one kiss and you're both acting as if we're going for a roll in the hay! There is such a thing as trust you know!"

"You kissed him?" Sirius asked looking at her sternly. "When was this?"

"I did not kiss him, he kissed me. And it is really none of your business," Harry stamped her foot angrily, and the puppy whined in confusion.

"As your godfather it is my business," he stated firmly as she bent to pick up Snuffles.

"If I'm not mistaken he kissed her on Christmas. I saw them from the window in Albus office when I got up to check on them."

"You were spying on us! Who do the two of you think you are? I don't invade your privacy."

"Harry, why didn't you tell me George Weasley kissed you?"

"What difference does it make whether I told you or not? George and I are friends, nothing more. I can't believe we're having this conversation. I didn't do anything wrong!" Harry yelled angrily, turning and running down the hall towards the stairs. Sirius didn't trust her and Snape had the nerve to tell him about something that was none of his business.

She had been so happy all week long, and now this! Today of all days, when they were going to the cemetery to visit her parents grave. She had needed and wanted their support when it came time to read her father's letter, now she didn't even want to go.

Harry was so angry she hadn't been paying attention to where she was going, and ran head long into Hagrid, who was coming up the stairs to see Professor Dumbledore.

"Whoa, Harry," Hagrid laughed as she bumped into his huge form, "yer runnin' like yer being chased by a ragin' dragon."

"I'm sorry Hagrid; I wasn't looking where I was going. I have other things on my mind just now."

"Yer not havin' a problem with yer pup are ya? She seems happy enough."

"No, Hagrid, Snuffles is fine," Harry replied looking over her shoulder, to see if Sirius and Snape were following her. "Look, I can't talk just now; maybe I'll come down and see you later. We haven't had much of a chance to talk lately."

"Sure an' I'll be glad ter spend some time with ya. Bring the pup an' she can play with Fang," Hagrid said, referring to his boarhound.

"I will," she agreed, moving away rapidly. She knew Sirius and Snape would be along shortly, and she wanted to be away before they showed up.

She was so angry and wanted to talk to someone, but she didn't know who would listen. She couldn't go to Dumbledore; he would just smile and tell her it was a part of growing up, that Sirius was just looking out for her. She was also sure Snape hadn't been looking out that window by accident. Dumbledore was extremely protective of her too. Besides, he was leaving tomorrow and had enough on his mind right now. Ron and Ginny were out of the question. She had already told Ron she would not date him, and here she was kissing his older brother. In any event, they were still in Hogsmeade. Hermione would listen, but she would not be back until tomorrow, when the Hogwart's express arrived.

All these ideas were flying through her mind, when she found herself in front of Remus' office door. Incredibly, she found herself knocking., 'I must be mad,' she thought. 'Remus is Sirius best friend. He'll just stand up for him.'

"Harry," he smiled opening the door, "come on in."

"I'm sorry, Professor, you're busy. It's not important anyway," Harry replied trying to leave, but Remus caught her by the arm.

"First of all, I'm just reviewing my lesson plans for the semester. Secondly, I am never too busy to listen to you. I can tell you have something on your mind. Now come in and sit down. I was beginning to get bored anyway and could use a little diversion," he steered her inside and sat her in the seat by his desk, placing Snuffles on the floor. "Now how about having a cup of tea with me?"

"Thank you, I will."

"Good. It's always nice to talk over a relaxing cup of tea. I believe it helps one to really see things as they are."

"Before or after you've read the leaves?" she shook her head beginning to feel better.

"Both. The tea helps one to relax, and then you can determine the possible cause or outcome of the problem by reading the tea leaves," Professor Lupin grinned handing her the cup of tea.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

"I don't know that you can do anything for me."

"Well, what is the problem? I can almost assure you that it's nothing that I haven't heard before."

"Sirius and Snape are my problem!"

"Really?" he questioned mildly. "What are they doing, fighting again?"

"No, Snape is spying on me and told Sirius George Weasley kissed me," Harry blurted out and Remus sat back in his chair laughing.

"I don't think it's funny!"

"I'm sorry, Princess, but Snape has always been a bit of a spy, that's how he ended up going to the Shrieking Shack when I nearly attacked him in wolf form. As for Sirius, payback really is a bitch. He knows what he was like at George Weasley's age, and he's probably terrified. He's just not used to having the responsibility of a teenaged girl."

"So why would Snape tell Sirius he saw us kissing?"

"Snape has sworn to protect you, and if he feels you may be threatened, he'll act on it. He may just be concerned that if you become involved with George it will distract you too much, and it may further endanger the Weasley's."

"So what should I do?"

"Nothing," Remus folded his hands under his chin thoughtfully.

"Nothing, why? Sirius is fit to be tied and I can't have Snape following me around all the time."

"Sirius needs time to adjust and so does Severus. They both worry about you. Sirius trusts you, but he's afraid of letting you down. He's also more than aware that you may one day decide to take a lover. I know he would rather you wait until you're married or at least of legal age," Professor Lupin explained calmly, but he was blushing. "As for Severus, be glad that he's keeping an eye on you. Remind him that you're aware of his concern, but he also needs to give you a little space. If he knows you appreciate his concern, he'll be more forthcoming."

"I'll try, but you make it seem so simple," Harry smiled, as Snuffles went over to the door and began wagging her tail. "You have another visitor. It's probably Sirius. I left him and Snape up on the third floor."

"Enter," Remus responded to the knock on the door.

"Ah...Child, I suspected you might be here," Dumbledore looked concerned as he entered the room. "Severus and Sirius are worried. They said you were angry with them and took off after your transfiguration practice. They checked your room and you weren't there."

"Did they tell you why I was angry?"

"All they told me was that you were upset over a young man."

"No, I'm upset because Professor Snape saw George Weasley kiss me on Christmas, and he told Sirius, who was not exactly happy. I got the feeling he doesn't exactly trust me."

"Nonsense Child, he's just being overprotective. He's worried you'll get too involved at a young age. You've been very sheltered and have had to deal with not being allowed to express your femininity until a few months ago. He just doesn't want you to be hurt. As for Severus, he watches you to keep you safe from Voldemort. He is also acutely aware that you are vulnerable to your emotions."

"I have been telling her pretty much the same thing."

"Well I expect some privacy and a little trust. Sirius needs to realize that he can't protect me from growing up, and if Professor Snape insists on playing sleuth, he should realize that not everything I do is subject to his approval."

"You're quite right, Child, but somehow I don't think I was the one to help you realize that under the circumstances their behavior is quite normal," Dumbledore mused, looking at Professor Lupin with a twinkle in his eye. "It's good to know that while I'm away Remus can be someone you can turn to for advice and guidance."

"I'll do my best, Headmaster," Professor Lupin nodded, acknowledging the older wizard's compliment.

"Now, Child, if you'll allow me to open the door, I know two very anxious people are probably there waiting to see if you'll accept their apologies for causing you such embarrassment."

"Don't bother, Professor," Harry replied getting up to open the door herself. Snape and Sirius were both waiting on the other side as Dumbledore had predicted. Sirius was pacing nervously, while Snape was standing as still as a statue, arms folded across his chest. Harry stood framed in the doorway staring at them in exasperation, "Well, what do the two of you have to say for yourselves?"

"Miss Potter...Harry..."Snape began, staring right back, his dark eyes unreadable.

"May we come in, honey? It's rather uncomfortable talking in the hall," Sirius asked giving her his hurt puppy expression.

"That's not for me to say, this is not my office," she remarked knowing that Remus had gotten up to stand behind her.

"Seems to me, that talking in the hall can't be anymore uncomfortable than making a person feel they're not trusted and being spied on. How about it, Princess, should I let them in?"

Professor Lupin asked trying hard to look annoyed at his friend and co-worker, but failing miserably.

'God bless you, Remus,' Harry thought before answering, "No. If they have anything to say to me, they can do it from out there. If I feel their remarks are worthwhile I'll let them in."

"Very well, Miss Potter," Snape began, staring back at her, his dark eyes challenging her to refute his remarks; "I merely told Black about the Weasley boy since I know how fond you are of them. I did not mean it to be an invasion of your privacy. When I was watching you over the holiday, I had merely looked out the window to be certain everything was all right, as my mark was burning slightly."

"Fair enough, I don't mind you watching my back, but I expect you to respect my privacy."

"I shall do so, unless I feel you are endangered, should that occur, I will intercede."

"Okay, you can come in if you still want to," Harry told him moving aside for him to enter, as Dumbledore nodded to the Potions Master, unable to hide his pleasure. "Sirius, what's your excuse?"

"Harry, I didn't mean to upset you. I just...well...don't want to see you in a situation where you may be hurt. I trust you, and I didn't mean to make you feel that I thought you were doing something behind my back," Sirius explained uncomfortably.

"Sirius, do you really believe I would have a relationship I wasn't ready for? I'm not about to enter into a relationship with anyone seriously right now, but I do expect to be able to spend time with my friends. I also expect that I will date from time to time, but I do not intend to get involved emotionally or sexually for quite a while. I have too many other things to worry about."

"Harry, I..Oh, Merlin," Sirius ran his fingers through his thick dark hair, "you have no idea how foolish you just made me feel. You're just like your father. He could always make me see his viewpoint. You both have a great ability to put things into the proper perspective."

"Ruff, ruff!" Snuffles came out of Remus office and began tugging on Sirius' robe. "Ruff, ruff, ruff," she barked, tail wagging madly, as Harry bent to pick her up.

"So, Snuffles, should we forgive Padfoot for acting like a fool, or should we let him feel guilty for awhile?" Harry asked the puppy as she licked her face.

"Ruff, ruff!" Snuffles barked, squirming to get out of Harry's arms and going to Sirius, as Remus stood laughing.

"I think she wants you to forgive him, Harry," the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor smirked. "Sirius has begun to understand that you have your father's sense of responsibility and your mother's temper."

"Please can I come in, Wings?"

"Wings?"

"Uh huh," Sirius grinned, "Remus is Moony, I'm Padfoot, and I've decided you will be Wings."

"You know, he can be quite impossible to deal with at times," Harry threw up her hands, looking at Remus with a smile.

"He just gets carried away when it comes to people he cares about. That's why he was so upset when he thought I was the one who was spying for Voldemort. He and your father had always tried to protect me from feeling bitter about being a werewolf. Sirius thought all they had done had just not been enough, so that Voldemort had been able to bring me into his circle."

"But I was wrong, and my damned stubbornness had blinded me to the real weak link in our little band of Marauders. If I had just listened to James..." Sirius voice trailed off at the memory.

"Okay, you're forgiven," Harry said hastily, to stop Sirius from feeling guilty. "Come on in before the Headmaster gets a chill from the draft."

"Thank you, Child," Dumbledore beamed as she pulled Sirius into the room.

"Miss Potter, you do have a knack for bringing people together."

"Does this mean you and Sirius are becoming friends?"

"Miss Potter, you are asking for a miracle," Snape sneered disdainfully, "you would have better luck chasing rainbows."

"Oh, I don't know, Professor. Any leprechaun will tell you there is a pot of gold at the end of that rainbow, if you just know how to look for it."

"Severus, I believe you may have met your match with our little Phoenix," Dumbledore's blue eyes glinted with mirth, "I'll bet she even gets that N.E.W.T out of you at the end of the semester."

"Do you really believe she will mix the Wolfbane Potion correctly?" Snape asked mildly, his dark eyes challenging his mentor.

"I not only believe it, I will bet you a pound of lemon drops against a bag of your favorite peaches that she does it."

"Can I get in on some of this action?" Sirius asked excitedly. He was pleased that Albus had such confidence in Harry.

"What would you wager, Black?"

"I'll bet you a good dinner out at the restaurant of the winner's choice."

"Very well, and do you wish to wager too, Professor Lupin?" Snape asked with animation.

"As a matter of fact, yes. After all, she's doing it for me," Professor Lupin winked at Harry with a smile, "how about if the loser covers the other's classes on the Friday of his choice for the next school year?"

"Hmm...are you up to covering Potions? As I recall it is among your least adept abilities."

"I won't have to worry about it since you'll be covering Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Remind me to come down with a case of the flu on that day," Harry groaned, knowing how much Snape would enjoy tormenting her in Defense class, as they all laughed. "I don't suppose I can get in on this, since I'm the one who has to mix the potion?"

"Sorry, Miss Wings," Sirius patted her head, "but you shouldn't be betting."

"No, Black. Let her do it. I'm curious to see what she'll bet."

"Albus? Do you think we should?" Sirius deferred to the Headmaster.

"There's no money involved, so why not. I'd like to know what she'll wager myself."

"Okay, if I mix the potion correctly, you will promise me that you'll be nice to Neville Longbottom for his entire last year at Hogwarts. If I screw up and don't get it right, I'll clean the dungeon on Fridays for the same amount of time, but there is a catch to the wager."

"Really Potter, and what might that be?" Snape asked arching his brow, arms crossed in his familiar sardonic stance.

"The Headmaster has to be on hand to make certain that everything is in order."

"You think I would cheat?"

"Let's just say you might make it a bit more difficult than it should be," she chuckled impudently.

"She's got your number, Snape. Are you willing to take her challenge?" Sirius taunted his former adversary.

"If Albus agrees to be the intermediary I will be more than happy to meet her terms."

"I'd be delighted," Dumbledore beamed with pleasure.

"I thought you would. Professor Snape will win either way."

"What makes you say that, Miss Potter?"

"If I mix the potion correctly, you only have to give Dumbledore a bag of lemon drops, Sirius gets dinner, but you do too, even if you don't like the restaurant, and you will be ecstatic to teach defense class."

"Interesting assessment, but what about you?"

"Then you have the satisfaction of knowing you did your job well, something that I know means a lot to you. If I don't get it right, you get a free helper for the year, and still have the time to work with me to mix it properly. If anyone ever thought you didn't belong in Slytherin, they were mistaken. You come out on the winning end no matter how you look at it," Harry informed him smugly.

"Princess, sometimes I think you're far older than sixteen."

"She certainly has a sense of what makes people tick," Sirius shook his head with wonder.

"That, my dear young ones, is because she cares about others more than herself," Dumbledore hugged her fondly. "Now I suggest that we finish going over the lesson plans so we can get to the cemetery by two o'clock as we had planned. That is, if Harry still wishes to go."

"I almost did change my mind, thanks to two certain people who almost ruined my good mood," she tossed her head indicating Sirius and Snape, "but yes I still want to go."

"Then I shall meet you by the main door at one thirty. You and I will go on ahead and the others will meet us there," Dumbledore stated looking at her seriously. Harry understood that he felt she should have some time alone first.

"I'll be there on time," she replied, looking wickedly at Snape, who always made it a point to mention when she was late.

Sirius, Snape and Dumbledore left for the Headmaster's Office while Harry and Remus resumed their tea.

"Are you sure you don't want me to leave so you can get your work done?" Harry asked as Remus placed a sheaf of papers in his drawer.

"Actually, I was just finishing when you came in. I am enjoying the company. It's not often that I can rescue a damsel in distress."

"In that case, Captain, I am in your debt," she grinned, pretending to curtsy, and the puppy wagged her tail in agreement.

"What do your tea leaves say?"

"Lets see," she said studying them with a frown, "that's really odd."

"What? Do you see something dangerous?"

"There appears to be a deer and some new friends, but there is also a snake. Do you think it's Voldemort?"

"Perhaps, but it could actually be anyone in Slytherin or even an encounter with a real snake. Is there anything else?"

"A woman, but she is by the snake. Maybe Voldemort has a girlfriend," Harry said in an attempt at levity.

"Or maybe you will have a conversation with a snake. You know I have never heard you speak Parsel Tongue."

"Neither has Sirius. Maybe when the weather gets warm we can find a snake and I'll ask him how he is doing."

"Would you really? I'd love for you to do it for my first years," Remus said, excited at the prospect of having her talk to a snake in his class.

"Professor, consider it done. I'll just leave it to you to procure the snake and make the necessary arrangements for me to be able to sit in on your class."

"Princess, the Captain will be forever grateful."

"I'll remember that when I take your next pop quiz," she teased playfully. "What do your tea leaves say?"

"I see a Grim, but it might be Padfoot or puppy Snuffles too. I also see a bird with wings outspread. Maybe it's you," he smiled, putting his cup on the table. He didn't want to worry her, but he had a snake in his tealeaves too, wrapped around a woman. "It's almost time for you to meet Albus," he remarked checking his watch, "so I would suggest you hurry along and I'll see you in a little bit."

"Then I'd better take the pup out for a quick walk since I think I will leave her home, and I will see you later," Harry replied.

Scooping up the puppy, she left Remus to his thoughts. She didn't see him studying his cup again or the deep frown on his features.

Harry hurriedly took Snuffles for a brief walk and then returned the puppy to the basket she used as a bed beside Harry's fireplace. Curling up with a large stuffed animal, which one of the other students had given her to act as a surrogate mother when Harry could not be with her, the little dog promptly fell asleep. Harry ran a brush through her unruly hair, and pulling on her heavy winter cloak and a pair of gloves, she went downstairs to meet the Headmaster, the letter secured in her pocket.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Professor, but I had to make sure Snuffles was secured before I came down."

"I only just arrived myself, Harry," Dumbledore smiled, greeting her with a kiss on the forehead. "We don't have too far to go, it's only a brief walk, but since there is still snow on the ground I thought we would just apparate," he said as they left the building, the winter sunshine bright against the snow.

"Headmaster, you know I can't apparate."

"No, but I can, and it's a simple matter to bring you with me," he replied, his blue eyes twinkling.

"You just want to tease me since you told me under no circumstances was I allowed to even try and apparate," she pouted, curling her lip.

"And I meant that. We are going to apparate only to save time. If it were spring, I would enjoy the walk. Besides, I thought you would like to be alone with them for a little while,"

Dumbledore gently tilted her chin up to study her face.

"I would like that."

"Then come over here, and hold onto me as tightly as you can," he instructed as they reached the path which led towards Hogsmeade. Harry put her arms around the old man, and was surprised at the warmth and strength emanating from his body. "All set?" he asked kindly, raising his wand into the air.

"Yes, Sir," Harry nodded, remembering the time Snape had apparated them back to the Leaky Cauldron, following their encounter with the Death eaters. A moment later, she felt herself moving through time and space, and found herself standing at the gates of the cemetery.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore inquired studying her intently.

"Is it always so disorienting when you apparate?"

"You get used to it," he smiled in amusement, "but that is one reason you need to be eighteen and have a license to do it. Just like driving a car in the Muggle world."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said following him through the gates and into the graveyard. They walked for a few minutes in silence, when Harry suddenly stopped, frozen in her tracks.

"Professor Dumbledore," she cried shakily, "this is the same cemetery where Voldemort was returned to his body."

"Are you sure, Child?"

"Yes, I remember that odd marker over there. I was tied up to that tall monument two rows up. He said it was his father's grave." Harry paled at the memory of her encounter with Voldemort two years earlier, which had cost the life of another student following the Triwizard Tournament. "This is where we dueled and the wand streams arced," she pointed nervously, "and there is the place where I was able to use the port key and get back with Cedric's body. That bastard used this cemetery on purpose. He must have known they were buried here," Harry sobbed, realizing she had begun to cry.

"Hush, Child. Voldemort is not here now, nor will he return. I have put blocking spells around it to keep his evil presence away."

"You knew it was this place?"

"It was the closest and easiest cemetery for his needs at the time. He moved his father's body from the cemetery in Little Hangleton where he had been buried originally. I came as soon as I was certain of what had happened, while you were under the influence of Severus sleeping potion. I had hoped you wouldn't realize where we were. I'll understand if you wish to leave."

"No. I came to say good-bye and now I need to more than ever, but I always thought they were laid to rest in Godric's Hollow. How did they come to be here?"

"I led everyone to believe they were in Godric's Hollow. I did not want to see any of the Death eaters try to desecrate their graves by using their remains for dark magic. Only a select few knew this was where we actually buried them."

At least now, I understand why my parent's presence was so strong when the wand streams connected," Harry wiped the tears from her eyes, "how much further is it?"

"Just a short distance," Dumbledore took her hand and began to lead her through the maze of headstones until they reached a secluded area beneath a large oak tree. There was a small stone bench there, and the grave had been covered with a fresh grave blanket. Harry thought she saw a movement out of the corner of her eye, but no one was there, yet she could sense that they were not alone. "Professor, there is someone else here," she kept glancing around cautiously, but could see no one.

"You're quite right, Harry. I have a special surprise for you." He stopped and sat down on the bench. "Artemis, I want you to meet Harry Potter," Dumbledore said quietly watching the tree.

A small figure seemed to emerge from the tree. She was about the size of a ten year old, and her hair was pale violet and her eyes were the same. Her tiny ears were pointed and peeked out from beneath her hair. Harry knew she was one of the watcher elves Dumbledore had told her about the night she had read the Prophecy.

"Hello, Miss Harry, I'm Artemis," she said shyly. Her voice reminded Harry of tiny bells. "I watch the place of those who have the endless sleep."

"Hello Artemis, it's nice to meet you. Have you always watched this place?"

"No, only since the Evil one came two years ago. I used to watch the woods nearby, but I saw what happened that night and sent word to the castle. You are very brave."

"Thank you, Artemis."

"I wanted to tell you that we all believe in you. I have seen you many times since you came to Hogwarts. Dumbledore always treats us well. We live here in peace, but the Evil one has caused us all to be afraid. He enslaves our children, and kills us when he can find where we blend with the scenery. You have a great power within you and an aura unlike any I have ever seen, except for maybe Dumbledore. Hermes and Thera have asked me to give you a great gift." The elf pulled out a small talisman attached to a cord, "This is a talisman of the elf god, Luna. She will protect you by night and keep your dreams free from strife. Should you ever be in need of help you are to say *Luna Servo* three times and those of us who watch will send

you protection and help," the talisman then magically disappeared from Artemis hand and reappeared around Harry's neck.

"Artemis, this is a great gift you have given me, but I'm not sure I am worthy of such an honor," Harry responded with awe, as Dumbledore looked on approvingly.

"You have the power and the heart. We of the woods can see that, but you are very young and must face great Evil. If we can help you to overcome it then please do not refuse our gift."

"Then I promise to try and live up to your expectations, but why do you talk about yourself as if you are an old woman. Surely you can't be much older than I am?"

Artemis laughed, and looked at Dumbledore in amusement. "I am older than the wise one who brought you here today. I was fifty years when he was but a babe in his mother's arms. We of the wood live a long time, Miss Harry, and we age differently than other beings. We do not reach maturity until we are seventy-five of your years. Thera and Hermes are my parents, and I will lead the colony with my mate when they have gone to the long sleep."

"Artemis, you are two hundred years old?"

"I am little one, and I hope one day to be able to watch the children of the child I see before me now grow and be free to explore the wood without fear. I must go now," she smiled, "but I will be watching." Artemis then vanished back into the tree, as Harry just stood with her mouth open.

"Professor, why do I feel like something very special just happened to me?"

"It did, Child. Artemis does not usually show herself, but she wanted to meet you. She would not have given you that talisman if she did not believe you were capable of handling Voldemort. Luna is a very powerful goddess. Use it well."

"Does she always stay by my parents' grave?"

"I don't know, Harry. She watches the entire cemetery, but I do know that she always sees to their graves. Your mother was her friend."

"My mother knew her?"

"Yes. She met her when your mother was just a little girl coming to Hogwarts for the first time. Your mother happened to get a glimpse of her and thought she was a lost child who had gone into the forest. She tried to find her and got lost in the forest herself. She was frightened, but kept trying to find the little girl. I believe she thought that they would be able to comfort each other. Artemis was so impressed with her tenacity that she showed herself and brought her back to school. They were friends ever since. One of the hardest things I ever had to do was to tell her that Lily and James were killed."

"How did she react?"

"She asked about you. She knew I believed you would be special, and she had seen you before your parents went into hiding. I often suspected she knew you were a girl, but she never said anything. I told her you were alive and had been sent to live with your mother's family until you were old enough to come to school. She has been watching you since the day you started here."

"Headmaster, do watcher elves live in the cities too?"

"Yes, Child they do. Have you ever had the feeling you saw someone out of the corner of your eye, but no one was there?"

"Yes, I felt that way today, when Artemis was watching us."

"Then it is usually a watcher elf. I believe your talisman will be of great value to you even in the city."

"I see," she replied looking over at the grave, solemnly.

The marker was simple polished granite with their names and dates of birth and death engraved on it. A simple inscription read, '*They died for what they believed in, and for their beloved child, Harry.*' Moving over to the grave Harry took out her wand, and with a wave, produced a bouquet of lilies. These she placed on top of the large wreath covering the grave,

what Muggles called a grave blanket, and then moved over to sit with Dumbledore on the bench.

"It's peaceful here, I'm glad."

"I selected this site myself. I made sure they were together. Your aunt did not want any part of the arrangements."

"She probably didn't even come to the funeral," Harry remarked bitterly.

"You're wrong, Child, she came and so did your uncle. I brought them. If it is any consolation to you she cried."

"My aunt Petunia cried at my parent's funeral?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Harry, your aunt and your mother were sisters. It is true that your aunt was jealous and afraid of your mother's powers, but that did not mean she didn't love her."

"Yeah, well she certainly hates me."

"No, Child, she's afraid of you. She knew from the beginning you would have the same ability, but she still took you in. She and your uncle treat you unfairly, but it is because they fear what they do not understand. I have told you that before. They hoped they could keep you from the magic, but saw it in you even when you were unaware of the things you were doing. However their fear has also been a benefit to you."

"I don't understand. How could their being afraid of me have been beneficial?"

"It has made you independent and resourceful. You care for the people around you and do not wish to see anyone hurt. You never put yourself first. Look at your cousin, Dudley. How do you think he is turning out as a person?"

"He's a bully. He is spoiled and arrogant and has no respect for anyone or any thing. I think he uses my aunt and uncle unmercifully...Headmaster, now I think I see what you're saying."

Dumbledore smiled, "I knew you would. Now, I see the others have arrived," he nodded towards the path, "they will be here shortly."

"I'm sorry we're late, Headmaster, but Minerva needed to make a last minute change with Black on his schedule. It appears there was a conflict with the sixth years," Snape arched his brow at Harry.

"What kind of conflict?" Dumbledore asked watching Harry. He knew she did not want Sirius to teach her class, but had a feeling that he would be doing so.

"We had to change our sixth year schedule;" Sirius said quietly, "Minerva needs to be in the office on Wednesdays."

"Story of my life, nothing ever goes the way it should," Harry muttered to herself.

"Honey, Minerva and I tried every other combination so that I would not have to teach your class on Wednesdays, but there was always a conflict. Remus and Severus both tried to work it out too."

"Princess, Sirius really tried. We all know how much you don't want Sirius to teach your Transfiguration class."

"Miss Potter, I even tried switching my Friday Potions class to Wednesday, but then there was another conflict."

"It doesn't really matter. I'm going to fail anyway."

"Harry, you don't have a problem with transfiguration. What makes you think you'll fail if I teach the class?" Sirius inquired, his face etched with concern.

"I can't pass it if I don't go," she replied sarcastically. "I'll just cut class and hide somewhere, so you won't be able to find me."

"Child, why is it so important to you not to have Sirius for your instructor?" Dumbledore inquired patiently, ignoring her last remark.

"Because everyone knows he's my Godfather. If I do well they'll say he's been helping me or being easier on me than the rest of the class. If I don't, then I might start to feel he is deliberately being harder on me because he expects more from me because of Voldemort."

"Harry, I promise neither of those things will happen, and if they do, then I will change my days at the ministry so that Minerva will be available on Wednesdays," Dumbledore looked at her over his half moon spectacles, his blue eyes serious. "In the meantime I want you to promise me you will go to class as usual."

"I'll try it, but the minute I think there's a problem I will not go," Harry answered, meeting Dumbledore's stern gaze with one of defiance.

"Very well, but if there is a problem you are to notify me by owl immediately."

"Fair enough," she said, a trace of a smile playing about her lips. It was rare for Dumbledore to give in so easily, and she felt he was only doing so to make her feel better.

"Miss Potter, I believe you have cast a spell on our Headmaster."

"No, Professor Snape, he just doesn't want to go away and see me miserable and upset. So he gave me a bit of a concession," Harry told the Potions Master, as Dumbledore put his arm around her shoulders, giving her a brief hug.

"Harry, did you put the lilies on your parent's grave?" Sirius asked, looking at the grave sadly.

"Yes, and I believe the watcher elf put the large wreath on it."

"Watcher elf, which one?"

"Artemis," Dumbledore answered for her.

"Lily told me about Artemis, but I never met her. It is a rare occurrence to see a watcher elf. I have only glimpsed them myself."

"I've never even had that experience," Remus remarked, from where he was standing looking at the grave. "How about you, Severus?"

"I have seen them on a few brief occasions, but it was with the Headmaster, and we were on business concerning the Dark Lord."

"Harry has had the unique experience of not only speaking with Artemis; she has been given one of their most powerful amulets."

"Which one, Princess?"

"Luna."

"Whew, that is a real honor," Remus whistled in amazement, "may I see it?"

"It is around my neck. She put it on me," Harry indicated the amulet of a small woman impressed on an orb, which appeared to be the moon.

"Princess, did you know that the elves believe Luna controls the phases of the moon. It's where we get the term lunar. She looks with favor on those who have been attacked by the night creatures. An old story goes that she once had a lover but the sun god was jealous, so he sent a wolf to attack him. Luna found out and went to rescue him, but when she arrived, he was dying. She used her healing magic to save him, but the sun god refused to give up. Therefore, when Luna was at her strongest her lover would become a mad wolf. The sun god condemned him to do so for the rest of his life, and anyone he met would suffer the same fate, if they survived his attack."

"Do you think they know you are a victim of the sun god's curse?"

"Probably, the few times Sirius ever thought he glimpsed them, was when we would explore the forest during my transformations."

"Sirius, did my father ever see them?"

"Your father once told me that Artemis came to them the day they were married. She gave them a moonstone as a wedding gift. It was the only time your father ever saw her, and he never said if he ever glimpsed any of the others during our marauding days."

"Miss Potter, you have gained the trust and affection of the watcher elves. It is a very rare and unusual experience. They have their own magic and knowledge, just like the house elves. You are to be commended."

"Thank you Professor, they're really interesting beings. I would have liked to speak with Artemis longer, but it seems that she set the parameters for our conversation."

"Maybe she will visit you again, Child."

"I would like that. I still don't believe she's older than you though," Harry laughed shaking her head, and for a split second she swore she heard Artemis bell like laughter, as Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled.

"This is a nice place, Albus," Sirius remarked taking a seat on the bench beside Harry, while Remus laid some yellow flowers on the grave.

"I see Remus has his own way of saying hello," Harry observed quietly.

"Indeed, Miss Potter."

"Does it bother you that I put Wolfsbane flowers on your parent's grave, Harry?" Remus asked with concern. "If you like I will take them away."

"No, I think it's a nice way to say you have come to visit," Harry assured him reaching into her robe pocket and retrieving her father's letter.

"Are you ready to read James letter, honey?" Sirius questioned, his brown eyes filled with concern.

"I'll never be ready to read it. It is just something I have to do. If I don't read it, I'll always wonder what it said. This letter is the last thing my father did before he died. It was important for him to let me know what he felt. The only problem is that if I read it I will have to admit to myself they're dead. That's always been something I have tried to avoid," Harry explained looking at the grave. She couldn't make eye contact with any of them, or she would start crying.

"Miss Potter...Harry...You yourself stated that you need to let go," Snape spoke quietly. He moved to stand in front of her, blocking her view of the gravesite to make her look up. "You were right; we all need to be able to go on. We can't carry our guilt and pain forever. Your father would want you to go on. He would like you to remember him, but not to grieve. Your mother would feel the same way. She loved you very much, they both did. They would be very unhappy knowing you felt guilty about their deaths. I know James would want Sirius and Remus to remember him fondly, and not to feel they failed in their endeavors to protect him. Lily always cared about what happened to them and she would be so unhappy to know her friends and only child were still grieving so long after her passing."

"And what would they say about you, Professor?" Harry asked looking into his dark eyes. Snape could not bring himself to answer that question, and turned away, since he did not know, but Sirius answered for him.

"James would say that Severus had more than redeemed himself, Harry. He has watched over you since you arrived at Hogwarts. He sent for Dumbledore when Voldemort went to Godric's Hollow, risking his own life to try to stop his killing them. Severus has spied on Voldemort, and has risked torture and death innumerable times; yet he remains loyal to Dumbledore. Lily would tell him to be your friend and ally, because she would know you could trust him."

"Child, Remus was James' best friend, and he loved Sirius like a brother. True, he did not get along with Severus, but they respected one another, and Lily loved them all. Like you, she could see the good in all people. They would both want you all to move on," Dumbledore gently stroked the hair from her forehead, exposing her scar.

Harry didn't respond right away, but just sat staring at her parent's final resting place. Her face was a myriad of expressions as she fought a silent war with her emotions. Finally, she sighed, and tore open the letter. She carefully unfolded it, and laying it open upon her lap, began to read.

*Dear Harry,*

*By the time you get this letter, your mother and I will have been gone for fifteen years. I asked Dumbledore to hold it until after Halloween following your sixteenth birthday. He alone knows why.*

*I am writing this while you're hiding in the garden. I was both shocked and amazed to see you tonight. My little girl, now almost grown. How lovely you are. If you only knew how badly I want to hold you and tell you things will be different. That your mother and I will leave before*

*Voldemort arrives, but that will not happen. He is evil and cunning. He must have realized you would warn us. I'm sure he has some other plans to destroy us all if we survive the night. He sent you back to die as a visitor, but must have also realized that if we escaped he could kill us some other way later on. I'm certain he knew something to take such a risk. Please understand that we both love you more than life itself. You have a great destiny and God has allowed us a brief glimpse of it. Your mother is also aware of your identity as she returned after you left the house. I told her everything since we have never kept secrets from one another. We reread the Prophecy together. She too, has chosen to remain and protect you, even though she is aware of the consequences.*

*No parents were ever more proud of their child than we are of you. You have risen above every adversity Voldemort has set in your path, and will continue to do so. Do not worry, little girl, for even though we are physically gone our spirits will be with you. You are a survivor, Harry, and will win in the end. I will sign this off now as your mother wishes to add a postscript.*

*Your Loving Father,  
J.P.*

*P.S.--I knew in my heart you were special the first time I ever held you in my arms. Tonight I got a brief glimpse of how special. My little girl, who had to be disguised as a boy. I may never have been able to put pretty pink dresses on you, but I promise I'll be there when you become a young lady. I'll watch over your first kiss, and cry with you should you ever have a broken heart. When you find your true love, I'll rejoice in your happiness. I'll cry, as mothers do, on your wedding day. Finally, when you hold your first born, as I have held you, my soul will sing with joy. Whenever you think of me, remember to say "Abra Kadabra." You just can't seem to say it right, with your garbled little baby voice twisting the syllables, and your chubby little face twisted into a frown. You see, there really is a magic to it, since it has always made me smile. Love,*

*Mama*

Harry just sat, tears running down her face, unable to speak, shaking emotionally.

Dumbledore and Sirius attempted to hold her and offer her comfort, but were unable to do so. Her mother's last words had been her salvation. Dumbledore understood, but she had never spoken about it to the others. Did her mother have a premonition of what was to come, or was it merely a coincidence? She would never know. She was vaguely aware of someone taking the letter from her lap, but paid no attention. As she sat, trembling, her attention wandered towards the woods on the edge of the cemetery. Amazingly, a large stag stood watching.

"Albus, when was the last time anyone saw deer in these woods?" Sirius asked following her gaze.

"There haven't been deer in these woods for over twenty years," he whispered.

"Well there are now," Remus stated quietly.

"What are the three of you talking about?" Snape asked puzzled. "Where do you see a deer?"

"On the edge of the woods, by that large birch tree," Harry sobbed looking from Snape and back to the stag. "Don't you see him?"

"No...I don't see..." Snape suddenly inhaled sharply, as he caught sight of the large animal. The stag then leaped into the air as if to run and vanished!

"Please, someone, tell me that I didn't just see what I thought I saw," Harry begged shakily, but no one answered, for they all felt the same way.

Slowly, Dumbledore rose from the bench, "Harry, we need to be getting back," he said gently taking her by the arm. "It's getting late, and I want to be sure the school is secured before I leave."

"Headmaster, may I fly back? I need to be alone right now."

"I do not want you to return to Hogwarts unaccompanied. Sirius will follow you just as in the building. Be certain no one sees you transform when you get there."

"I will fly directly to your office. If anyone spots me they will think it's Fawkes," she remarked quietly, the tears still running down her cheeks. Harry did not wait for his reply, but transformed and took off, gliding on the wind, as if she had done so all her life. On the ground, Sirius also transformed and took off running behind her.

Harry's heart was in turmoil, but flying made her soul feel free. Had the deer been the spirit of her father, or was it just an illusion? Snape didn't see the large stag until she pointed him out, and even then he almost missed him. Perhaps the deer was real and had just migrated back to the woods, maybe they all thought they saw him vanish into thin air. She had no answers.

Sirius transformed in a secluded area behind the castle and used the main entrance to enter the building as soon as he saw Harry's Phoenix, tapping gently on Dumbledore's window, and Snape allowing her access to his office, as the others had apparated and arrived first. Racing up the stairs, he uttered the password and joined them in Dumbledore's sitting room. Harry was sitting on the love seat with Snape, who was gently rubbing her neck. Remus was pouring the tea, and the Headmaster was sitting opposite her, a worried frown on his face.

"Harry, honey, are you feeling any better?" Sirius asked, worriedly, eyeing Snape. 'He cares about her too; otherwise he wouldn't be trying to make her relax and feel better,' Sirius remarked to himself, pulling up a chair.

"I'm just tired, that's all. What happened to my parent's letter?"

"I have it here, Child."

"I promised Ron that when I had read it I would show it to him," Harry answered taking the envelope from Dumbledore and putting it back in her pocket. "Well, Remus, so far part of my tea leaves was right," she directed her attention to the Defense Professor.

"I should say so. You made a new friend, and there was a deer in the woods."

"Really, Harry? What else did they say?" Sirius questioned trying to draw her out of her low mood.

"Nothing much, there was a snake with a woman. That could be anything. Remus wants me to speak Parsel Tongue to his students, so maybe that's it. Of course, it may also be another encounter with Voldemort. I don't usually put much stock in what my tea leaves say. It's all a matter of interpretation."

Ignoring the possibility of an encounter with Voldemort, to prevent her becoming more despondent, Sirius looked at her with interest. "You're going to speak Parsel Tongue for one of Remus' classes. Can I sit in?"

"Well, soon to be Professor Black, you will have to take that up with your colleague, Professor Lupin," Harry replied, her mood beginning to brighten.

"Remus, can I? I have never heard Harry speak Parsel Tongue; I think it would be fascinating."

"Of course, Sirius, I can hardly wait myself. Now I just have to find a snake."

"Ask Professor Snape. He's quite adept at conjuring them. I should know, since he threw one at me once."

"Severus, when did you throw a snake at Harry?"

"I did so in Harry's second year during the dueling club when Lockhart was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. I wanted to see Potter's reaction to an unexpected danger."

"Actually, he told Malfoy how to do it. However, I dodged the snake and it almost bit another student. That's when everyone, including myself, learned I could speak Parsel Tongue. Up to that time I thought I was speaking in English to the snake."

"Did you not have another episode before you started at Hogwarts?" Dumbledore asked with mischief in his blue eyes.

"Now Headmaster, you know that was purely an accident. I had no idea I had any powers that day at the zoo with my cousin. I couldn't help it if I made the glass disappear around the Boa Constrictor's display and Dudley fell in. Besides, the snake was happy he was free," she smiled wickedly, as Snape arched his brow and the others laughed.

"I will be happy to supply the snake for your class, Remus, but if you would really like to hear her I could do so now provided Albus doesn't object."

"So long as Harry feels up to it," Dumbledore nodded.

"Nothing poisonous please, I wasn't too pleased with the cobra you threw at me that time."

"How about this?" Snape smiled pointing his wand at the floor. Almost immediately a large python appeared. The snake appeared confused and frightened, and began climbing up the leg of the table.

"Don't be frightened," Harry said quietly to the reptile, "no one will hurt you here."

"You can understand me?" The snake questioned. "Why am I here?"

"So that I can speak to you. My friends are unable to do so, and think it is amazing that I can talk the language of the snakes."

"I want to go home, can you send me?"

"I will have the wizard who brought you here send you back," she replied, turning to Professor Snape. He had been watching her along with the others, completely fascinated.

"Professor, the snake would like you to send him back now."

"Very well, Miss Potter," Snape replied, his eyes glittering. Moving towards the snake, he uttered the reversal spell and the animal disappeared.

"Now, is everyone happy? I talked to the snake for you."

"Miss Potter, you have an amazing skill. It is rare in a Slytherin, and almost unheard of in someone from another house."

"According to our Headmaster it is just a little present from Voldemort. I inherited it from him the night I acquired this scar."

"Even so, you had to have had some ability to be able to do it so easily."

"Snape is right, Harry. I am fascinated at how you just talked to the snake," Sirius grinned. "I wish I could do something like that."

"Well, I wish someone would get a Muggle tape recorder so I could hear how it sounds. I only hear English when I speak to them."

"You really don't know how you sound, do you?" Professor Lupin inquired.

"No, I don't. Ron says it sounds like a snake, but since I've never heard myself..." she shrugged. "In any event, if I decide to work with animals I have a great future as a herpetologist in the snake section of the local zoo," Harry quipped rolling her eyes playfully.

"Now if you will all excuse me, I have to see to Puppy Snuffles. She is probably hungry and needs to go out to relieve herself."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Sirius asked his brown eyes still filled with concern.

"No, I think I want to be alone for a little while. I will see you at dinner. We can sit together since after tomorrow you will be up on the teachers table, and I will be back with the Gryffindors."

"Promise you will sit with me?"

"I promise. I will sit with you on one side and Ron on the other. We can all face Remus and Professor Snape."

"And where will I be?" Dumbledore questioned his blue eyes twinkling.

"You my dear Headmaster will be on the other side of Professor Snape since I see Trelawney has been coming down during the recess. Everybody knows she has the hots for the Potions Master, and he is absolutely not interested. We need to keep him safe from her advances."

"Miss Potter, where do you get these strange ideas from?" Snape inquired, his expression passive, but his cheeks had a tinge of color to them.

"One only needs to be observant Professor, to know what goes on in this building. Besides, I heard her telling Professor Hooch how sexy she thinks you are," Harry laughed, mounting the moving stairs before he could reply, as the other professors looked on trying hard to conceal their amusement.

Harry hurriedly tended to her puppy, and played with her for about an hour before she had to go down to the Great Hall for dinner. True to her words, they all sat together, with Ginny Weasley on the other side of Sirius. Harry was relaxed since her ordeal at the cemetery and enjoyed listening to Ron and Ginny tell her all about the latest gadgets his brothers had invented for the magic shop. She noticed that Snape was also acutely interested and suspected that it was because he wanted to be prepared for whatever was going to crawl out of his cauldrons next. Ron had also purchased some more Furried Fingered Foulies for Professor Lupin, to use in class, and he was delighted. Following their meal, Harry adjourned with Ron and Ginny up to the Gryffindor Common Room.

She told him about her visit to the cemetery and allowed him to read the letter. He listened in fascination when she mentioned that it was the same cemetery where Voldemort had regained his body. He was also more than a little interested in the stag that had mysteriously appeared at the edge of the woods, and then vanished.

Ginny wanted to know all about Artemis, as she knew about Watcher Elves, as did Ron, but had never met anyone who had seen one. They questioned her at length all about her amulet, and were fascinated by the story Professor Lupin had told her about the Elf god Luna.

Harry also asked them about their day, and found out that Mrs. Weasley had finally given in on the twins going to work for the ministry when she saw how popular the magic shop was. Mr. Weasley was quite proud of the twins and said he knew they would do well. Ginny made sure Harry knew that George and Fred had asked about her, and told Harry that she thought they both had a crush on her. Harry dismissed the notion and told them she thought of all the Weasley's as her surrogate family.

They topped off the evening playing with the puppy and then Ron and Harry engaged in several games of chess, with Ron winning two out of three games. Harry then bid them both goodnight and retired to her room. She fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow, and her dreams were filled with visions of her parents smiling and hugging her, letting her know that she was never really alone.

## ***Friends Enemies and Allies***

True to its nature, March came in like a lion, blustery and chilly. Harry had been working hard in school and her special lessons continued. Snape had taken to dueling with her, and she enjoyed trying to best him, but could not quite match his skill. Professor Lupin generally acted as referee, but sometimes she would duel with him too. She often had fun with these matches, but found that she came away bruised and tired. It had finally gotten to where Madam Pomfrey complained to both Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore, so that dueling was now limited to brief encounters of no more than fifteen minutes.

Sirius was teaching her in Transfiguration Class and working with her on her ability to transform. She would often fly outside now, and had taken to meeting Dumbledore when he would apparate on his return from the Ministry. He would laugh, knowing it was Harry, and called her his little Phoenix. Dumbledore was pleased that Sirius and Harry had been able to work together in class and the anticipated problems had not materialized. Sirius did not show her any favoritism and was not any harder on her than the other students. In fact, he had found he really liked teaching and Harry was enjoying his classes more than when Professor McGonagall had been teaching.

Harry also continued to work on her Charms, and every Sunday evening Dumbledore would give her a new Charm to perfect by his return on Friday. She loved to play his little games, and would often try to add her own touches to the illusions he wanted. He had laughed with delight when she had done a scene of swans swimming and set them to music.

It pleased them all to see her so happy, but they all knew trouble was brewing. Voldemort had been doing more and more raids on Muggles and Wizarding families through out the country. Torture and killings were becoming more frequent, and he continued to try to recruit new members to his cause. Harry was never told much, but was able to follow the events in the Daily Prophet. She knew it was only a matter of time before her scar would begin to hurt again, and hoped that what ever was to come, would not be as painful as being sent back in time to the night of her parents death. All she knew was that the Prophecy had said she would be betrayed by someone close. She spent many an evening discussing this with Ron and Hermione, but neither of them had any more clues than she did who it might be. It was one such evening that they were rehashing the entire problem again, and decided to try to figure out who would actually try to betray her and why.

"I personally think it is Professor Snape," Ron remarked shaking his head vigorously.

"Ron, I told you Snape is a good guy now. You can't blame the man because he made a mistake. He has Dumbledore's trust and that's good enough for me," Harry insisted, hands on her hips, defying him to refute her trust in the Potions Master.

"Just the same, he would be the logical choice. He was a Death eater for Merlin's sake."

"Ron, Harry's right," Hermione interjected, "Professor Snape has been protecting her since she started at Hogwarts."

"I think it might be someone from Slytherin House who is in touch with the Malfoy's. You know half of the Slytherins didn't come back after the Christmas recess. It's obvious their families are loyal to You Know Who," Harry stated matter of factly.

"I might remind you that Professor Snape is the head of Slytherin House!"

"Ron, Professor Snape has been summoned any number of times by the Dark Lord, and has refused to go. He is in as much danger as I am since he is now considered a traitor. No, it has to be somebody that can be seduced into doing something or getting something they really want."

"What about Mr. Filch? He has access to the entire building and he really wants to be able to do magic. He's angry and probably bitter, seeing as how he's a Squib," Hermione suggested thoughtfully.

"No, I don't think so. Even the Dark Lord can't give him any magical ability. He might offer him the chance for revenge though, but I doubt he'd go against Dumbledore.

"If you don't think it's Snape or Filch, then who do you think it could be? Didn't the Prophecy say it was someone close to you? What about Remus, or even Sirius? It's supposed to be a friend," Ron suggested trying not to sound like he was pointing fingers.

"Ron, how could you!" Hermione protested angrily, "Sirius is Harry's Godfather, and spent all that time in Azkaban for a crime he didn't commit. Professor Lupin was her parents friend. He has never shown anything but affection for Harry. They both devoted their lives to keeping her safe and defeating You Know Who."

"Sorry, Harry, I just wanted to point out that everyone around you is suspect. I don't really think they would betray you anymore than me or Hermione," Ron apologized, his face red with embarrassment. "I know they really care about you."

"Apology accepted, Ron. I didn't think you really meant it. You're right though, it will be someone close to me. If I could only figure out who it is, maybe I could stop them from doing something stupid. You Know Who will offer anything to get to me, but that doesn't mean he will keep his promise."

"Maybe he will do something that the person can't fight against," Hermione suggested, "he's threatened people and their families before."

"You know," Ron looked thoughtful, "what about Neville? I heard a rumor that his parents are in St. Mungo's. That's why he lives with his grandmother. I overheard my dad and mom talking and they said his father used to be an Auror, and that You Know Who's people tortured them."

"Ron you shouldn't listen to gossip," Harry remarked with annoyance, deliberately looking away. She was aware that what Ron had just told her was the truth, but had promised Dumbledore long ago not to say anything. "For that matter it could be Seamus or even Colin." "I still think it will be one of the teachers," Hermione stated trying to smooth over the conversation. "Can't you just use your power as an empath to find the person?"

"No, Hermione, it doesn't work that way. I can feel their emotions, and sense their feelings. If it is someone who is my friend, they may still like me, but may be angry or afraid, or even jealous. I think that may have been in the Prophecy. All I know is that there is one person who it absolutely is not, and that is Dumbledore," Harry grinned. "Anyway, lets talk about something else. I'm tired of racking my brains on who it might be, I need to think of something fun for a change. How about organizing a game of quidditch?"

"Harry, are you feeling okay? You know Dumbledore cancelled the quidditch season since Slytherin doesn't have half of its team and the situation with You Know Who is getting worse," Ron looked at her with exasperation.

"Ah...but I have an idea, and if I can get Dumbledore to agree..." She shrugged with a wicked smile.

"Here we go again," Hermione laughed, "let's hear your plan."

"What do you think of a friendly game of students vs. teachers?"

"Harry, you may have hit on something!" Ron shouted with glee. "Most of the teachers are able to play quidditch. Didn't Sirius and your dad play together?"

"Yes, and I know Snape played for Slytherin. If we can get enough staff together we could even combine students and staff to make up the teams. It would be great fun."

"Do you think Dumbledore would agree?" Hermione asked doubtfully.

"I don't know, but I bet he will if we can convince Professor McGonagall. She is a big quidditch fan, and I'm sure she was disappointed that we wouldn't be able to play."

So when do we ask her?" Hermione wanted to know. "We'll have to make sure she's in a good mood."

"I think we should go right now. She has been a bit harried lately, and could use a bit of a diversion. A good game of quidditch may be just the thing to get her to relax."

"I'm with you all the way!" Ron grinned with pleasure, "So long as you do the talking. How about you, Hermione, do you think we can convince her?"

"It's worth a try. A good game of quidditch would lift all our spirits and help the morale. Everyone has been getting more and more worried about You Know Who."

"Then lets go. I think she's still in her office." Harry jumped up and headed for the door, Ron and Hermione close behind.

They made their way over to the Deputy Headmistress Office, and were just in time to run into Professor Snape, who was going up to see her on a matter of class business. It seems the third year Gryffindor students had once again been playing practical jokes in his classroom and had nearly caused an explosion. He had been furious and had taken fifty points from Gryffindor, but had also made an appointment with Professor McGonagall since she was head of Gryffindor House and he expected her to discipline the students involved.

"What are the three of you up to this evening?" he inquired eyeing them with suspicion.

"Professor Snape, you may be of some help to us," Harry said pleased to have run into him.

"We have an excellent idea to improve morale, and were on our way to see Professor McGonagall."

"Indeed?" Snape arched his left brow, "what is this idea you're all so excited about?"

"He'll never go for it, Harry," Ron remarked with disappointment.

"Oh, Ron, give Harry a chance to tell Professor Snape what she had in mind before you go and give up."

"Miss Granger is right, Mr. Weasley. I am more than a little interested in Miss Potter's ideas. If it will benefit the school I may be of some help."

"Good," Harry shook her head up and down with delight, "it will involve a game of quidditch."

"Miss Potter, did not the Headmaster cancel the rest of the season due to the situation with Lord Voldemort?" Snape queried, noting how Ron and Hermione flinched at the name.

"That, and the fact that your house team is left with only two players, but I have an idea as to alleviate part of the problem."

"This should be quite interesting," Snape arched his brow.

"I totally agree," Professor McGonagall's stiff Scottish accent came from her door. She had heard voices in the hall and had looked out to see what was going on, since she had been expecting Professor Snape.

"Professor, may we all come in?" Harry asked giving her a smile that would rival one of Sirius'. "We will only take up a few minutes of your time since we know how busy you are."

"Harry, if you're trying to butter me up, it won't work," McGonagall looked at her shrewdly, as she ushered them into the office, indicating where they should sit. Professor Snape remained standing, his hands behind his back. "Now what is this plan about playing quidditch?"

"It's a simple idea really, why not form teams involving the teachers and the students? I happen to know most of our teachers have played quidditch in the past. I think it would be good for morale."

"It would be beneficial, but what about the situation with The Dark Lord. That was part of the reason the season was cancelled too?"

"Listen, the grounds are pretty much protected, and if the students don't want to participate it's their right not to. Everyone will respect Dumbledore more for not allowing the student body to be intimidated and frightened by a madman's bid for power, and it will boost everybody's confidence that things will be okay."

"Hmm..." a familiar voice came from behind them, "what do you two think of her idea?" They all looked to see Dumbledore smiling in the doorway, looking from McGonagall to Snape.

"Headmaster, you have returned earlier than anticipated," Snape greeted him, his dark eyes questioning.

"Yes, Albus, is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything is fine. Ron, your father said to say hello, and to behave yourself,"

Dumbledore winked. "Now I am more than a little interested in Harry's plan for a quidditch team involving the teachers. How do you both feel about it?" He nodded to the two teachers.

"I think it would be worth considering, Headmaster."

"I agree with Professor Snape. I think her idea is worth exploring, especially if it helps the students to stop worrying," Professor McGonagall smiled at the three students.

"How would you make up the teams, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, his blue eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"I think we should use students from all the houses, and make up a team of students and then see which teachers wanted to play. Since there are more students than teachers, maybe we could do several games, like the best of five. That way everyone will get to play."

"I think that's a great idea, Harry," Hermione agreed.

"Me too, I think it would be neat to play against the teachers. Let's see if they can still live up to their reputations," Ron grinned, looking at Professor Snape, his eyes challenging the former Slytherin player.

"Very well, I will consider your request, and discuss it at the staff meeting on Friday,"

Dumbledore smiled at them looking over his glasses. "In the mean time I want the three of you to see how the other students in all the houses feel. Each of you can talk to the house Prefects and they can fill in the students in their houses. I will see you all in my office on Friday evening following dinner, and I will make my final decision."

"Yes, Sir," they all answered rising from their chairs, knowing Dumbledore was dismissing them.

"We'll go and start speaking to the Prefects tonight," Harry stated to them all as they left Professor McGonagall's office. "I think we should all split up, this way we can save time. We can meet back in our common room and then talk to the Gryffindors."

"I'll take the Ravenclaw's," Hermione informed her as she turned the corner towards the Ravenclaw tower.

"You can go on down to the dungeon, and see the Slytherin Prefect," Ron told her firmly, "I'll go and see the Hufflepuff Prefect."

"You want to go to the Hufflepuff Common Room to see that pretty little redhead, Celia Ravenwood. I know you have been looking at her with more than a little bit of interest."

"I do not!" Ron exclaimed, but his face was beet red.

Harry was laughing as she headed for the stairs leading down to the dungeon and the Slytherin Common room. Finding the door to the Prefect's room, she knocked, hoping he was there, but there was no answer. Turning to where the entrance was hidden for the Slytherin Common room, she knocked again, not knowing the password. A moment later Roland Grayson, a rather handsome member of Slytherin House, appeared at the door.

"Well if it isn't Miss Harry Potter," he sarcastically announced over his shoulder, "come to visit us in the dungeon."

"Knock it off Roland; I'm here on the request of the Headmaster and Professor Snape. I have a proposition they wanted me to see you about. Where is your Prefect?"

"What can I do for you, Harry?" the Slytherin Prefect asked coming to the door. His name was Stuart Byron and Harry had always gotten along with him. He was also the present captain of the Slytherin quidditch team.

"I am trying to get all the students together to start playing quidditch with the teachers. I know you have lost most of your team so we would integrate all the Houses into maybe three school teams and play against the staff."

"Interesting idea, Potter," Roland said looking at his Prefect.

"The Headmaster and Professor Snape have agreed to this idea?" Stuart asked, his eyes alight with excitement.

"They liked it, and it will be discussed at the staff meeting on Friday. I am to see the Headmaster after dinner on Friday and he will let me know about their final decision. I know he wants us all to work together right now. It will also help some of the other students to realize that not all of Slytherin House is loyal to a certain dark wizard."

"It seems to me that some of the other houses have lost some of their students too," Stuart remarked uncomfortably.

"They have, but we both know that yours was the hardest hit. It isn't right that people think all of you have gone bad," Harry told the two boys candidly, " the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws have each lost three students and Hufflepuff has lost two."

"But we have lost half of our house and five of our quidditch team was among them."

"So hold your heads up high, and let the world know that just because you're in Slytherin doesn't mean you practice the Dark Arts. Hell, my parents were betrayed by a fellow Gryffindor. Now do you want to play quidditch or not?"

"I'll discuss it with the rest of the house members and we'll let you know tomorrow at breakfast."

"Good enough, I'll see you then. Goodnight to you both," Harry waved to the two boys as she headed back towards the stairs from the dungeon. Rounding the bend, she ran head long into Professor Snape. She knew he had been listening to her conversation. "It's not polite to eavesdrop Professor."

"I did not wish to influence the members of my house, Miss Potter. I do respect you for your candor with them and I hope you gave them a boost. Most of the Slytherin students have been shunned by the rest of the houses."

"I know, it's particularly hard on the brothers and sisters. I know you have at least two students in Slytherin with a sibling in one of the other houses."

"In fact there are four at the present time, and yes it is very hard for them. I hope this little idea of yours will work."

"If nothing else I'll get to beat you at quidditch. I sure haven't bested you dueling just yet. I'm beginning to get frustrated."

"Indeed, Miss Potter, and what makes you think you will beat me in quidditch?"

"What makes you think I won't, Professor?" Harry countered with a mischievous grin, "After all, weren't you a seeker too?"

"I was, and I also still coach from time to time with the Slytherin team."

"Why do I think it was you who taught them all those nasty moves they love to use so much?" she asked, her green eyes bright, her smile growing wider.

Professor Snape laughed out loud, much to Harry's surprise, and nodding, turned on his heel and went down to his quarters.

Harry hurried back to the Gryffindor Common Room to find Ron and Hermione waiting for her. They had been so excited that they had told the Gryffindor Prefect, James Woodbine, about Harry's plan for the quidditch matches. He had liked the idea so much that he had put it to an immediate vote, which had been unanimous in favor of playing. The other two houses would discuss the idea and inform Harry and the others in the morning. There had been some grumbling about allowing the remaining Slytherin team members to play, but both Ron and Hermione had argued in their favor, much to Ron's credit, since he still did not trust any of them.

Harry went to bed happy and excited, and was curious as to how Sirius and Remus would react to the idea, but decided to wait until the morning to find out. She was drifting off to sleep when Snuffles let out a low growl, and she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her head. Her scar was hurting! She managed to get out of bed and stumble over to the fireplace, to summon help. Uttering the spell the way Sirius had taught her, she called on Dumbledore.

"Headmaster, my scar, please come," she sobbed trying hard to conceal her tears. She was nearly doubled over with the pain, and wondered if Snape's tattoo was also burning.

"I'm on my way, Child. Try to remain calm."

"Please hurry." Harry cried as she sat down on the floor with Snuffles, who was now quite gangly and awkward looking. The pup climbed half onto her lap, and licked her face, sensing her mistress distress. "It's all right, puppy," Harry told her rocking back and forth with the pain. "Dumbledore will come and make it better."

"I'm here, Child," the Headmaster said entering her room, kneeling in front of her. Snuffles whined and wagged her tail, but did not move from Harry's lap. "How soon after you went to bed did it start?"

"Not long, I was just drifting off to sleep," she explained as he touched his wand to her forehead. A moment later, there was a frenzied knocking on her door, and Dumbledore opened it for her while she got unsteadily to her feet. Professor Snape was there with Sirius and Remus.

"Miss Potter, are you all right? I came as soon as my mark began to burn and assumed that your scar may be hurting. I met Black and Lupin on the way; apparently they were with Dumbledore when you summoned him for help."

"I'll live," Harry smiled at Dumbledore.

"You're sure you're okay, Princess?" Professor Lupin asked with concern.

"Honestly, I'm fine."

"You really had us worried," Sirius stated brushing the hair away from her scar. It was an angry red and again had the appearance of being fresh. The last time it changed like that Harry had been attacked by Voldemort, and sent back in time.

"It's red again, isn't it?"

"Yes, Child, I'm afraid so," Dumbledore replied as he turned to Professor Snape. "Severus, give me your arm so that I may relieve the burning in your mark."

Snape pulled up his left sleeve. Harry noted that his tattoo was almost black.

"It really doesn't hurt so much, Albus. This really isn't necessary."

"Nonsense, Severus, you know it is burning and uncomfortable."

"You'd think being a former Death eater he would be able to lie a little better about it," Harry teased him impudently, as Snape rose his brow and the others grinned.

"Now, Child, Severus needs a little TLC from time to time too," Dumbledore stated, his expression daring Snape to contradict him.

"Headmaster, I always appreciate it when you assist me. I just don't feel you need to do so every time I have a little discomfort."

"It pleases me to make sure those I care about are safe and comfortable. I consider every one of you my family and don't like to see you in any distress," Dumbledore beamed, looking at them all with affection. "Now, it's time for Harry to be in bed and then we will all go to my office and discuss our next move. It's obvious that Voldemort is going to try something again, and I'd like to be prepared."

"Read the Prophecy, it says I'll be betrayed by someone close. Let me know if you can think of someone I haven't ruled out already," Harry remarked sarcastically as she climbed into bed.

"I see your memory is excellent. Let's hope it was just as good during the test I gave today," Snape eyed her sardonically.

"Of course, I knew all the answers," Harry quipped, knowing that he had probably already graded the papers. While she was sure she had passed, she knew she didn't get one hundred.

"Harry, do you want me to stay for awhile?" Sirius asked his brow furrowed with anxiety.

"I'm fine, Sirius. If anything else happens I promise I'll wake you up."

"You better, or I'll give you detention with Snape."

"Gee, maybe he'll take me shopping again."

"No, I'll tell him to be sure you have to clean all the cauldrons and gut the salamanders."

"Then for sure he'll take me shopping since he would never do something you would want him to," she laughed, and Snape actually gave her a brief smile of agreement. "I do want to

tell you both I am very happy to see how well you have been getting along. If you keep it up you may actually become friends."

"I believe she may still be suffering the after effects of the pain in her scar."

"Harry, I think Snape is right, are you sure you're not feeling a bit feverish?" Sirius joked putting a hand on her forehead.

"See, you both are actually agreeing with one another. We may be witnessing the beginnings of an epiphany!"

"Harry," Remus laughed, "you're not going to give up on the idea that they will become friends, are you?"

"No, I'm not. They're both so much alike it is driving me crazy that they do not get along."

"Well, Child, I wish you success in this endeavor. I have been trying since they were boys, and this is as close as anyone had ever gotten."

"And it's as close as she will ever get," Snape remarked with disdain, "Black and I are simply tolerating each other for both her sake and yours, Headmaster."

"Keep up the attitude Professor and you and Sirius will be in for a rude awakening. If you continue to have such a strong dislike for one another I have a little cure that will show the two of you how alike you actually are."

"Interesting, Child, may I ask what it is?"

"Come here, Headmaster and I'll whisper it in your ear. I had a teacher do this once to two students who acted just like them, and it worked like a charm."

Dumbledore moved over to where she was sitting up in bed and she whispered her plan into his ear. "Do you really think it will work?" he smiled mysteriously at the two men.

"It's worth a try. In any event they will have an excuse to be nasty to one another."

"Then I shall help you with it, if their behavior does not continue to improve. I think it is a very interesting experiment."

"Princess, what are you both up to? I may just want to be a part of it too."

"Remus, we'll tell you when the time comes, since you will be directly involved anyway. In the meantime I can't trust you not to tell Sirius," Harry looked at him with a wicked smile.

"Now, if you all don't mind, I am very tired and would like to go to sleep. I spent the better part of the evening trying to convince everyone we could still play quidditch despite Lord Voldemort."

"Princess, would you be very disappointed if the staff decided not to allow the games?"

"Put it this way, you think Voldemort can get cranky? Then you haven't seen me at my worst yet. I'll make him look like he's up for saint hood."

"Harry..."Dumbledore warned sternly looking at her over his spectacles. "I don't want you trying to bully the staff."

"I don't have to, Professor McGonagall will probably do that for me," she grinned defiantly as the other three men tried not to snicker. They all knew that McGonagall was a big quidditch fan and would do almost anything to get the school to resume even a modified season.

"Good night, Child," Dumbledore shook his head as he leaned over to give her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

"Good night, Professor," she replied knowing better than to try his patience any further.

"Good night, Harry," the other three men said as they followed Dumbledore from the room, and Sirius blew her a kiss from the doorway.

Harry just smiled, and rolling over, she snuggled into the blankets and fell asleep. She slept well for several hours, dreaming about playing quidditch, before she woke up with a jolt. She sensed something was wrong, but didn't know what.

Pulling on her robe and slippers, she grabbed her invisibility cloak, along with her wand, and went out into the dark hallway. Deciding not to wake up the Headmaster, she headed towards the dungeon. Her instincts told her to go to Snape. If there were something going on with Voldemort, he would be the one most likely to figure it out. As she neared his chambers, she

wincing as her scar began to hurt. Reaching his door, she sensed he was in danger, and her scar was throbbing. She decided to take a chance and enter his chambers.

"Deadly nightshade," she whispered, using the password he had given her for emergencies. Stealthily pushing open the door a crack, she peeked inside. Snape was there with Lucius Malfoy! Lucius had him down on the floor and kept hitting with a *Cruciatus* curse, while Voldemort's image was watching from within the flames of the fireplace.

"Severus, you should have known better than to betray me a second time. I would have made you my second, and given you anything you asked for," Voldemort spoke coldly, "now I will have to have Lucius kill you as a warning to that old fool Dumbledore." The evil wizard laughed cruelly, "But first, I want you to tell me how Harry is doing these days. I understand she is getting quite powerful. Just what skills does the little brat possess?"

"Why should I tell you anything?" Snape replied calmly. "Even if I knew, I would make sure you never found out."

"Lucius, please give Severus something to think about," Voldemort directed the other wizard with a leer.

"*Crucio!*" Lucius spat out with glee, "are you having fun yet Severus?" he taunted as Snape pulled his knees up in pain, but never uttered a sound.

"Lucius, I will be the one to speak to the traitor, not you," Voldemort warned Malfoy softly, his voice dripping icicles.

"Yes, Master, I just thought..."

"You are not to think! You are merely to follow my commands in this matter. I believe I made that blatantly clear from the beginning?" Voldemort's eyes blazed red and Harry noted that Snape's eyes glittered with laughter.

"How does it feel to lick the boots of your master?" Snape taunted Lucius, coolly. "Do you really believe all the nonsense Lord Voldemort tells you about doing away with the Muggles and keeping the blood lines pure?"

"*Crucio!*" Lucius yelled again, the wand shooting white-hot light into Snape's stomach. "Shut up and listen to Lord Voldemort, he will command our world and the Muggles will be nothing more than play things for our amusement."

"Lucius, I warned you not to speak! I will not be interrupted by an inferior wizard,"

Voldemort smiled as a tongue of flame shot from the fireplace, hitting Malfoy so that the hem of his robes caught fire. Snape lay on the floor laughing at Malfoy as he struggled to put them out. "Severus, you have courage and talent. I will miss you. No other wizard has ever been able to fight off the *Cruciatus* curse like you; such stubborn command of your emotions!

Lucius if you have finally finished playing with your robes I would dearly love to see Severus endure a few more blasts before he dies. Maybe if you break a few bones this time he will yell for mercy."

"Yes, Lord, I shall do as you command," Malfoy responded directing his wand at Severus knees, watching coldly as he bit his lip and curled into a semi fetal position from the pain, but refused to utter a sound.

Harry watched the whole scenario with fascination. She needed to create a diversion and get to Snape. He was unarmed and she did not see his wand anywhere. She assumed that Lucius had found a way to get into the castle but knew that the spells on the building kept Voldemort from doing so. She could also feel the darkness and anger that always surrounded him and Lucius hatred as well. Such strong emotions were extremely distressing, and she wished she had woken up Dumbledore. She could feel Voldemort's strength, even though he was not actually present in the room. Harry decided to try to lure Lucius out into the hallway in an effort to get to Professor Snape. She could feel Snape's pain and needed to heal him to get them to safety. Making sure she was totally invisible under her cloak, she pushed on the door so that it was partially open.

"Master someone is here," Malfoy looked up at the door as it swung inward.

"Go and see who it is you fool," Voldemort directed angrily.

Malfoy walked over to the door and stepped out into the hall. As he stepped out, Harry pressed her body around the door and eased herself by him into the room. Moving swiftly over to Professor Snape, she sat down next to him on the floor, letting her body brush up against him. She knew instinctively he would realize who it was and not display any indication of her presence.

"No one is here, Master." Malfoy said with confusion as he came back into the room. Perhaps a draft caught the door."

"Malfoy, you ass, the door was closed tightly and sealed with a password. No, we have a visitor, don't we Harry Potter?" Lord Voldemort laughed maliciously. "I am aware of your presence. The scar on your forehead sees to that, it has made us inexorably linked until one of us dies."

Harry's heart was beating so hard she thought it would burst. She was trapped as much as Snape, but at least she had her wand, if she could use it against Malfoy before Voldemort tried to stop her or harm Snape...

Sirius woke with a start, and for a moment, he was confused. Something had awakened him, but he wasn't sure what. He has been dreaming about Harry and Snuffles. They were playing outside, and he was laughing at their antics. Then the dream started to turn dark. The sky went gray and the wind had sprung up. He had gotten a sense of foreboding, and had started running towards them, calling Harry's name, when he awoke in a cold sweat, his heart beating wildly, sheets rumped around him.

"Sirius, something is wrong," Remus quiet voice came from the darkness. He was sitting up in the bed, looking over to where Sirius lay on his cot. The wolf within him had sensed Sirius anxiety, and knew that he was awake. Remus had also awoken with a feeling that something was not quite right and immediately thought about Harry.

"I feel it too, old friend. I think we had better go and wake Albus, if he isn't already up."

"Come on then, I think Harry is in danger."

"I do too. I don't know how, but I think it has something to do with Voldemort. I hope she hasn't left the building," Sirius said pulling on his pants and a shirt, as Remus hastily put on a set of robes.

"Harry would never leave the building if she thought that Voldemort was nearby. She may be daring and often reckless, but she is not stupid," Remus stated matter of factly as they each grabbed their wands and headed up towards the Headmaster's rooms.

They never made it however, as he met them half way there.

"You both feel it too?" Dumbledore questioned his blue eyes bright with worry.

"Albus I think Harry is in danger," Sirius informed him as they headed down towards her room.

"I agree, but we need to go down to the dungeon. I sense that is where the trouble is coming from."

"The dungeon!" Sirius snorted, "I knew that greasy git Snape couldn't be trusted."

"Sirius, you know Severus has changed. He's been helping Harry for six years," Remus chided him; "he is actually quite fond of her, although he would never admit it to you."

"He likes her?" Sirius questioned feeling jealous and protective at the same time. "I thought he was merely trying to satisfy his debt to James."

"Originally, yes, but he has come to recognize that she is not James," Dumbledore told him quietly. "She has humbled him like no one has ever been able to do."

"Albus, you were able to get through to him," Remus whispered as they descended the stairs to the dungeon.

"He has always had a good heart; it's his priorities which were mixed up. Harry is right when she says he and Sirius are very much alike."

"I could never be like him. He's a Slytherin!" Sirius tightened his jaw in denial.

"I might remind you that Peter Pettigrew was a Gryffindor," Dumbledore rebuked him sharply. "Severus is a Slytherin because of his mind, and his desire to succeed, so the sorting hat put him into Slytherin."

"Then how come Peter was put into Gryffindor?" Remus asked confused.

"Because of his extreme loyalty. As I recall the sorting hat took its time with him, as it did with Severus."

"But Peter was loyal to Voldemort," Sirius swallowed hard, the truth finally dawning on him after all these years.

One only had to be loyal to be in Gryffindor, but that did not mean you had to be a good person. Peter had been weak and had fallen prey to the Dark Lord's seductive power, never having a second thought about the irreparable harm he would be doing.

"And Severus is loyal to me," Dumbledore stated matter of factly. "He realized that Voldemort was the wrong route to his desires, and it cost him his family and many of his friends. He is like a son to me, as are the two of you. I know he would protect Harry with his life. Not just to fulfill his debt, but because he cares about her, just as the two of you do."

Both men looked at Dumbledore, but didn't reply, each was sure he realized that their feelings for Harry had to be kept to themselves until she came of age. They knew that what ever happened, her happiness had to come first, and now there was another competitor for her affections. As they reached the dungeon level, Professor Dumbledore indicated they should be quiet, and carefully leading the way, he moved towards Severus Snape's private quarters. As he did so, he muttered a charm so that they would be masked from view as they moved forward. Alert to possible danger they moved cautiously, staying together, wands drawn. Rounding the corner, they were just in time to see Lucius Malfoy disappearing into Snape's quarters.

"Malfoy," Remus hissed, "What is he doing here?"

"It can't be anything good; that much is certain," Sirius replied dryly.

"Hush..." Dumbledore warned them, "He is speaking with someone in the room. It sounds like Lord Voldemort."

"How did he get in? I thought the castle had been charmed to protect the students from his getting into the building?" Sirius asked with concern, as they moved slowly forward. Then his blood froze in his veins, as he heard Voldemort addressing Harry. She was in Snape's quarters. 'If that bastard has gone back to Voldemort and put her in mortal danger...'

As if reading his mind, Dumbledore shook his head and nodded towards the doorway. From where they were standing, they were able to see into the room. Malfoy was standing over Snape with his wand drawn, preparing to curse him, and Voldemort's head was visible in the fireplace.

"Lucius, it seems Harry Potter is not going to reveal herself too quickly. Why don't you curse Severus again, lets see how she enjoys watching him in pain."

"I shall be more than happy to do as you request, Lord," Lucius sneered. "*Crucio! Crucio!*" Lucius laughed as he cursed Severus twice in quick succession.

Snape rolled away from Harry, and looked towards the fire, addressing the evil wizard.

"You're a fool Voldemort, if you think Potter is in this room. She's safely tucked away in her bed, sleeping. I gave her a sleeping potion after she felt your presence earlier," Severus lied, hoping Harry would not reveal herself.

"Oh, Severus, do you really believe that I will fall for your little charade? I know Potter is in this room, but I should have guessed she would be too cowardly to show herself," Voldemort remarked in an attempt to anger Harry into revealing herself.

"Potter is not a coward; if she were here she would do her best to stop you."

"Would she, I wonder?" Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "How much does she dislike you, Severus? Enough to watch you die? I had planned on having Lucius torture you into unconsciousness and then bring you to me so I could make an example of your betrayal. Now

though I think I have another idea. Lucius I am going to count to three. If Potter doesn't reveal herself I want you to put the *Avada Kedavra* curse on Severus and kill him."

Harry knew she had to act quickly. She had to stop Malfoy and knew he would do what Voldemort ordered without so much as a second thought. She had hold of her wand, knowing her actions would reveal her position. Swallowing hard, she prepared to do her best to save Snape.

"One...Two..." Voldemort counted, his eyes gleaming.

"*Expellarmus!*" Harry yelled, disarming Malfoy and sending him falling backwards into the wall, revealing herself as she scrambled to her feet, the invisibility cloak falling onto the floor.

"Ah, Potter, at last! Malfoy you fool grab the girl and stun Severus. I want them both,"

Voldemort yelled, as Malfoy attempted to get up from the floor and get to his wand.

"*Stupefy!*" Sirius yelled, charging into the room and directing his wand at Malfoy, but he dodged the blast and rolled away from him.

"Sirius Black," Voldemort hissed, "you and your meddling godchild will die together."

"Sirius, look out, Malfoy has his wand," Harry warned him as she moved over to Snape.

"*Crucio!*" Two voices erupted at the same time. One was Malfoy, and Sirius fell to his knees, the other was Remus, who had directed the same curse at Malfoy, who screamed and was writhing in pain. Remus moved to pick up Malfoy's wand, where it had fallen beside him, but Malfoy grabbed his ankles and Remus fell to the floor.

"Remus Lupin, the werewolf. You have caused me a good deal of trouble. Now you shall all die together!" Voldemort laughed insanely.

Suddenly the fire grew more intense and a large burst of flames lashed out to engulf the room as Snape pulled Harry to the floor in a vain attempt to offer her some protection from the inferno.

"*Inverto Directio,*" a powerful voice bellowed from within the room, and a violent maelstrom engulfed the room sending the flames back into the hearth.

Lord Voldemort emitted an inhuman scream of pain, following a bright flash and the sound of thunder. A moment later there was total silence, as they all looked around stunned.

Dumbledore was standing in the middle of the room, wand still pointing towards the hearth, blue eyes the color of steel, his jaw set in anger.

"Is everyone all right?" he asked calmly without moving.

"I believe Malfoy has escaped, Headmaster," Snape remarked almost casually as if this sort of thing were a daily occurrence.

"He kicked me in the groin when Albus came into the room. He managed to dive for the hall just as Voldemort tried to incinerate all of us. I think he went into the Potions classroom,"

Remus informed them sitting up weakly.

"Then he's gone. I'm certain he had help getting into the building, but I'll have a search instituted immediately," Dumbledore said lowering his wand, the threat over.

"If I get my hands on the bastard he'll wish he had never been born," Sirius gingerly moved his aching limbs as he fought through the last of the curse. "Harry, are you all right?"

"I think so," she responded, staring at Dumbledore in awe. She had never felt such power, and sensed that what he had just done was only a portion of what he was capable of doing.

"Child, you were very brave to try and help Severus by yourself, but you should not have done so," he remarked gently looking down at her with concern. "Promise me that if you ever sense any hint of a spatial disturbance in this building again you will come for me at once."

"Yes, Headmaster," Harry replied relieved he was not angry with her. "What is a spatial disturbance?"

"It is very advanced magic. You felt something wrong, like a shift in the atmosphere before a storm?"

"Yes, and I followed it down here."

"What you felt was Lucius getting into the building. He had to have had someone help him from the inside to get past the security charms," Dumbledore explained, his features etched with worry. "Severus did you see how he get into the dungeon?"

"No, Headmaster. There was a good deal of banging on my door, and someone yelled help me, so I went to see what was wrong. When I opened the door, Malfoy hit me with a *Cruciatus* curse and forced me back into the room. He then summoned Lord Voldemort's presence through the flames, as you saw. I apologize for not using better judgment when I went to see what was wrong."

"There is nothing to apologize for Severus. You thought someone was in trouble and acted accordingly."

"Albus, do you want us to go and alert the others. I'm sure they're probably awake by now," Remus stated dusting himself off., and helping Sirius to his feet.

"Yes, get everyone and institute a thorough search of the building. I want to know about anything that is amiss or seems out of place. Also, let me know about any student who may have been out of bed. Get Mr. Filch to help you and send for Hagrid to search the grounds and the forest," Dumbledore instructed with authority. "I also think we need to start doing night watches again until this is resolved. The safety of the students has been jeopardized."

"Albus, if I may, I'd like to see that Harry is safely back in bed before I join the search," Sirius asked bending down to make certain Harry was truly unharmed, as Remus headed out the door for help.

"Sirius, I'm fine, but Professor Snape is injured. Malfoy broke his knee caps."

"Severus," Dumbledore gasped with concern, "please forgive me. I was so concerned with the actions of Voldemort I failed to notice you were severely injured. I shall summon Poppy immediately."

"Headmaster, Nurse Pomfrey will be needed for the search. Why not let Harry mend the bones. After all, she is a natural healer."

"Are you up to it honey?" Sirius asked, disturbed by the way she was still looking at the Headmaster. He was worried that after witnessing Dumbledore's display of power she may be afraid of him.

"Harry, do you want to try and mend the bones?" Dumbledore studied her features, his blue eyes scrutinizing her carefully. He was more than aware that his display of power had astounded her.

"Yes, I can do it," she turned to the Potions Master, "Professor lay still. Sirius if you'll adjust his night shirt so that it is above his knees I can get started."

"Okay," he smiled amused by her feelings of discomfort regarding adjusting Snape's clothing by herself. "Do you need me to hold him?"

"I don't think this will be too uncomfortable, just make sure he stays still so I can feel where the damage is."

"Miss Potter, do you really think that I would move? I pride myself on my tolerance to pain."

"You may be tolerant to pain, but I'm not. You seem to forget that I can feel whatever you do."

"Understood," he replied pursing his lips, "whenever you're ready then."

Harry closed her eyes for a moment, and held her hands over Professor Snape, feeling his aura and pain. She could feel his sinews and tendons, and the blood flowing through him. Gently she put her hands on his knees and a blue light emanated from them. She held them over each knee for about five minutes on each side. She was able to feel the cracks and broken vessels within his bones and began to heal them from the inside out. She restored marrow, bone, tendons and muscle so that the knee could once again flex and support his weight. When she had finished, she sat back on her heels, and smiled down at him.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have nice legs Professor?" she teased, as Snape readjusted his nightshirt.

"I believe she's pulling your leg, Severus," Sirius laughed at his pun.

"Child, it amazes me how you can still laugh after all you have been through," Dumbledore beamed as Severus stood up, flexing his knees, testing their strength, and Sirius gave Harry a hand up.

"Why, Headmaster, didn't anyone ever tell you that laughter is good for the soul?"

"Many times, Harry, many times," he replied putting his arm around her shoulders. "Sirius if you and Severus would go and help with the search, I will accompany Harry back to her room. I would like to speak with her privately."

"Of course, Albus." Sirius understood that Dumbledore wanted to discuss what Harry had witnessed, and his concern was reflected in his fatherly demeanor towards her.

"I believe we should start down here, Black. I'm sure the others are working on the upper wings." Professor Snape pulled on his bathrobe and slippers and followed Sirius out the door towards the Slytherin Common Room.

Harry followed Dumbledore back upstairs to her room, and they passed Remus on their way. Dumbledore informed him that the other two men were searching the lower wing, and that they should all meet in his office as soon as the search was completed. He would be with Harry, should they need him in the mean time.

"Phoenix feather," Harry uttered her password, and Snuffles greeted them both happily.

Kicking off her slippers, she hung up her robe on the hook over the bathroom door and climbed back into bed as Dumbledore took a seat in the chair by her bed.

"Harry, I know you're somewhat disturbed by what happened tonight."

"I...Professor..." she shook her head trying to find the right words.

"You knew I had a great deal of power," he spoke slowly trying to help her to understand. "I don't usually have to display such examples, but my children were in trouble. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"I'm more stunned than frightened. In any event it's not you I'm afraid of."

"Voldemort, then?" he quizzed seeing the worry in her eyes.

"No, Headmaster. I am afraid of myself. You always tell me that one day I'll be as powerful as you, and I've always had a sense of your powers but never actually saw them until tonight."

"Why does it disturb you so much?" he asked gently placing his hand on her head.

"What if I hurt someone, or get angry and do something to someone without really meaning to?"

"You won't," he smiled.

"You can't know that. What if I become like Voldemort?"

"Harry, the reason I know you won't misuse your power is because of your sense of right and wrong. You have a kind and gentle soul, and a brilliant aura surrounds you. It's why you can transform into a Phoenix. Fawkes sensed it a long time ago, when you displayed your loyalty to me in the Chamber of Secrets. It's what helped you to protect the Philosopher's stone, and to bring Cedric's body back to his parents."

"How do you know I have a brilliant aura?"

"I can see it," he told her, his blue eyes twinkling with delight. "It is one of my powers. Just as you are an empath and can feel it."

"That must be weird, seeing all these people surrounded by different light all day long."

"No, Child," he laughed merrily, "I am able to control it, just as you can control feeling the emotions of others."

"Oh. Headmaster, do you have any other powers I should be aware of?"

"I have other powers, but none that you need to know about at this time. If I need to use them, I will though. I just don't want you to feel frightened or uncomfortable."

"Hey, I care about you, remember? You're a member of my family, and I could never be afraid of you. I feel what you can see, and you're always so nice and warm, like a teddy bear,"

Harry's eyes looked into his, locked in understanding, and she tweaked his beard with a wide grin.

"Go to sleep now. It's late and you have classes tomorrow. I'll stay while you fall asleep."

"More likely you'll stay to put a sleeping charm on me," Harry yawned as he stroked her forehead.

"Now what makes you think I would do something like that?"

"Because I know..." Harry started to reply, but Dumbledore's silent charm had already taken affect.

He smiled tenderly as he tucked the blankets in around her. Kissing her forehead, he put the lights out, and patted Snuffles on the head as he left the room without a sound.

## **Quidditch Time!**

The entire school was excited. Today was going to be the first of five quidditch matches involving the teachers. Dumbledore and a majority of the staff had accepted Harry's plan, so a schedule had been made out. The Positions on the student team had been decided by lottery, and Harry had not made the team. The more people discussed the upcoming game the more withdrawn she became, and Sirius was growing more than a little concerned. He decided to go and see her, but her room was empty and Snuffles was not there either. He assumed she had taken the dog for a walk, and went outside to find her. Spotting Snuffles over by Hagrid's cottage, he walked over, and knocked. Hagrid came to the door with a frown.

"Sirius, 'ave ya seen Miss Harry? She asked me ta keep an eye on 'er pup over an hour ago an' she hasn't been back. I am kinda worried, 'er being so down an' all."

"She isn't here with you?" Sirius asked, a knot forming in his stomach. "I thought she may be feeling down about not being able to play in the matches, but now I'm more worried than ever."

"An' well ya should be. Harry not being able ta play. Why it's one o' the few things that give 'er any happiness these days. I think it stinks. She got the whole thing together an' didn't make the team."

"Hagrid the team was done by lottery to be fair to all the students. She had as much chance as all the others to be picked to be the team Seeker."

"It still ain't right. She's the best player in the school. She works hard 'an then gets snubbed. She done it to bolster everyone's spirits, and ya all let 'er down. I seen 'er face when she weren't picked, and it was like she were struck down. She does everythin' to make people happy, but she always seems ta get pushed aside. Some o' 'er closest friends made that team, an' not a one of 'em said they wouldn't play without 'er."

"Hagrid, Harry has to learn to accept the fact that there will be times she will be disappointed in life. This just happens to be one of them."

"Disappointed," Hagrid spat, "she's 'ad nothin' but disappointment 'er whole life. Not ta mention that she's worryin' herself sick over that damn prophecy."

"Hagrid, what has Harry been telling you?" Sirius asked alarmed over this new information.

"It's what she's not sayin' that 'as me scared. She won't talk 'bout what she'll be doin' when she finishes Hogwarts. She just looks away, and tries ta change the subject. Says she doesn't like ta think 'bout the future. Says there's no point in worryin' 'bout things that may not happen. She were real happy when the staff agreed ta the matches. Said she 'ad promised you would get ta see 'er play, and now she would be playin' against ya. Laughed like hell, she did, said she planned ta kick all yer asses. Claimed it would be good fer you an' Snape too, 'aving ta work together on the same team."

"I see," Sirius remarked thoughtfully, "did she give you any hint about where she might be going?"

"I thought she were goin' back up ta the school, but since you come lookin' fer her...I don't know."

"Let's not panic. I only checked her room and thought that she took Snuffles for a walk since they both weren't there. She's probably in the common room or with Ron, helping him to get ready for the match. I'll go back up to the castle and look for her. When I find her I'll send her down to fetch Snuffles. You are planning on coming to the match, aren't you?"

O' course, I wouldn't miss it fer the world," Hagrid answered, but a hollow feeling was starting in the pit of his stomach.

Sirius hurried back to the castle, and checked all the places Harry might have been. He even went down to see Snape, but she wasn't there either. Finally, he went up to Dumbledore's office, hoping she had gone to him for comfort, but again he was disappointed. The

Headmaster was alone, but his keen eyes didn't fail to note the anxiety on the young wizard's face.

"Sirius, is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure yet, Albus. It's just that I can't seem to find Harry anywhere, and no one has seen her since she left Snuffles with Hagrid."

"Snuffles is with Hagrid?"

"Yes, does that make a difference?"

"It may. How thoroughly did you check her room?"

"Albus, you're not saying she would leave the school over something as trivial as a game of quidditch?"

"Sirius, Harry was disappointed about not playing, that's true. If she even suspected what we did, well..." Dumbledore's brow furrowed with worry.

"How could she find out?"

"She's an empath. If she was able to pick up on any or all of us feeling guilty or secretive she would know we did something to prevent her from playing."

"She would be angry and hurt," Sirius ran his fingers through his thick black hair, "Albus, she would never be able to forgive us. Hagrid told me this game meant a lot to her. She wanted to play against us and wanted me to see her play. She was also hurt that none of her friends withdrew when she wasn't selected for the team."

"She may have picked up on their guilt as well. She had no way of knowing that the whole team asked for her to play, and the seeker wanted to withdraw in favor of her playing."

"What are we going to do? The game starts in fifteen minutes. We have to find her."

"Let's go and check her room. I know she wouldn't leave without the one thing that means the most to her."

"What is that?" Sirius queried.

"The photo album of her parents," Dumbledore replied moving swiftly towards the door.

The two men hurried down to Harry's room and knocked, hoping she had returned, but there was no answer. Using her password they entered, and began to search her belongings.

"Albus, it isn't here. She usually keeps it in the drawer by her bed. The pearls I gave her are missing too."

"Did she take any of her clothes?"

"I think she may have. Her drawers seem to be slightly disorganized, as if she packed in a hurry. Her robes are in the closet, so she must have taken muggle clothing. Her back pack is missing too, and I don't see her wand anywhere."

"All right, I'll go and get Hagrid. You go and start the match with the others. I don't want to arouse suspicion that she is not here. We have no idea who was helping Malfoy and if they know Harry has bolted..."

"I understand. Should we tell Remus and Snape?"

"Quietly, and make certain you aren't overheard. I will send Hagrid into Hogsmeade to see if she took the Knight bus. Do you have any idea where she may be headed?"

"None, the only home she has ever had was with the Dursley's and she hates it there," Sirius was growing more worried by the minute. Harry had bolted, and could find herself in real danger. "Albus we have to find her and explain that we took her name out of the lottery to protect her. If something happens to her..."

"She will be all right, Sirius. Harry is smart and resourceful. Now get to the game and meet me by the lake as soon as it's over," Dumbledore told him firmly, but inside the old man was more than a little worried.

They had acted on his orders when they had deliberately taken her name from the lottery. He hadn't realized how much it had truly meant to her, and knew she had pieced together what they had done. Harry was hurt and confused. They had considered everyone's morale except hers. How could he have been so blind? Hurrying out of the castle, he met Hagrid as he was

heading towards the quidditch field. Hagrid knew by the expression on Dumbledore's face that something was very wrong, and he knew it had to be about Harry.

"Professor Dumbledore, Sir, I ken tell by yer face somethin's wrong."

"Did Harry return for Snuffles?"

"No Sir, she's gone missin' hasn't she?"

"When she left the dog, did she have anything with her?" Dumbledore asked ignoring the question.

"Nothin' unusual, just 'er regular back pack. I figured she 'ad some o' 'er books in it. Thought it was odd this bein' Saturday, but the weather's been nice an' I know she likes ta study by the lake."

"I need you to go to Hogsmeade right away. From what we have discovered and what you have just told me I'm concerned that Harry has left the school."

"I figured somethin' was wrong when Sirius come down to see me. I'll do what ever I ken to help."

"I know, Hagrid," Dumbledore put his hand on the giant's arm, "go and find out if Harry took the Knight bus out of Hogsmeade. I believe she is upset with me about the lottery."

"Headmaster, why would she be upset? I know she was hurtin' 'cause she weren't picked, but why would that make 'er leave? Harry 'as better sense than that."

"Hagrid, we deliberately left Harry's name out of the lottery. We were concerned about the situation with Voldemort, and felt her safety would be jeopardized."

"Professor Dumbledore, Sir, it may not be my place ta say this, but ya done wrong. Harry's a good girl, and would do anythin' ya asked o' 'er. If ya 'ad just asked 'er not ta play 'an told 'er why she would've done if fer ya."

"Hagrid, you are probably right, but we didn't want her to feel like we were smothering her. We believed she would deal with the disappointment and go on, but as an empath we think she has realized what we did."

"I expect so, an' if I find 'er I'll bring 'er back, but I dunno if she's goin' ta want ta stay. I best get goin', seems like the match is over any way," Hagrid remarked hearing the din coming from the stadium. "Will there be anythin' else?"

"When you return from Hogsmeade, stay in your cottage in case she should come back for Snuffles. If she does, I want to see her immediately."

Hagrid nodded and turned towards the path into Hogsmeade. He was concerned about the situation with Dumbledore and Harry. He knew they both cared for one another, but the old man had made a mistake. He had lost Harry's trust, and that was not a good thing. She was now fair game for Lord Voldemort...

Harry had been shocked and hurt. The one person in all the world that she trusted and admired had deliberately kept her from playing in the quidditch match. He didn't confide in her but had hidden the fact that she was to be excluded from playing. Her friends had been avoiding her since the lottery too, and she didn't think they wanted her around. The whole school was talking about how Harry Potter, the best quidditch player in the school would not be in the matches. At first she thought it was just bad luck, and had cried herself to sleep, but as the days progressed she began to feel others guilt. Sirius and Remus were particularly upset and their emotional pain was very apparent.

Then she had gotten the note. It had been unsigned, and had said that she had not even been put in the lottery. It said Dumbledore didn't want her to play and that she was becoming a burden to him. She had wanted to confront him, but when she had gone to his office, he had been busy with Professor Binns, and was unable to see her. Harry didn't recognize the handwriting, and was sure the writer had tried to disguise his signature. The final straw was when Sirius had asked to borrow her Firebolt to play in the match. She had scanned him, felt his guilt, and could feel that he was relieved she was not playing. She knew then that it was all

true. They had conspired against her for whatever reasons, and she really was becoming a burden. It was time to leave.

She took only the things she really prized, trying hard not to cry as she threw them into her backpack to avoid suspicion. She would find a way to get Snuffles later; in the meantime, she would be safe and well cared for with Hagrid. Leaving her at his cottage, she walked back in the direction of the school to make sure he wasn't watching her and then backtracked onto the path leading away from Hogwarts. She had one more stop to make. Following the path, she walked for about half an hour before spotting the gate to the cemetery. She had to say goodbye to her parents. She had no one else to talk to anymore. It took her another fifteen minutes, but she finally made her way through the cemetery to the gravesite.

The tree now had buds on it and the grass was turning green with the spring. The grave blanket had been replaced with fresh flowers of tulips, daffodils, and lilies. The Easter recess was in two weeks, and by then she would be home. She knew where she was going, and had looked it up in the atlas she had secured from the library. She would go back to Godric's Hollow, the only place where she had ever known true happiness and security. Sitting down on the little stone bench, she wondered if Artemis were watching. She had liked the little watcher elf, but had not seen or heard from her since New Years Eve. Harry still had the talisman and wondered if she should return it. Taking it from her backpack, she laid it over her parent's headstone.

"Dad, Mum, I've come to say goodbye. I have to leave Hogwarts and don't know when I'll be able to visit you again. I don't want to go, but Dumbledore is having a hard time trying to protect me from Lord Voldemort. He feels I have become a burden to him, and he has lied to me. I thought he loved me, but now I don't know what to think. Sirius and Remus also lied and so did Snape. My friends are false friends, and have been avoiding me, even Ron and Hermione. All I wanted to do was to play quidditch and help people forget about Lord Voldemort for a while. It half worked, anyway. Please forgive me for running away, but I'm not the person you believed in."

Harry sat crying openly, for there was no one around to hear her. "I met mama's friend the watcher elf, Artemis, and she gave me the talisman that I'm leaving here with you. She watches over this place. She'll understand that I need to give it back. I'm a failure and don't deserve such an honor..."

Artemis stood watching Harry as she spoke to her parents. She was more convinced than ever that the child of her friend was going to have a great destiny, but the young one needed guidance. She was alone, and at a time in her life where she was making the cross from child to adult. She still needed the love and support of her elders, but also needed to know where she belonged. Right now, this little one was feeling like she had been let down and was not worthy. Moreover, why did she say that the wise one had lied to her and believed her to be a burden? This was not the Albus Dumbledore she knew...

Sirius, Remus, and Snape hurried down to the lake as soon as the game had ended. It had only lasted for fifteen minutes, with the students scoring ten points before Snape had caught the golden snitch. He had made it a point to catch it quickly, so that they could go and find Harry. 'Blast, the girl had been doing so well, and had been so happy!' He had warned Albus that it was not a good idea to keep her from playing, but he did not listen. Of course, Black had come up with the idea, and Lupin had gone along with him. 'When will they learn how smart and loving she really is?' As they reached the lake, Dumbledore was waiting, worry etched into his features.

"I have sent Hagrid into Hogsmeade, but I think we need to search elsewhere too. Sirius do you think you could scent for her?"

"I can, but maybe we should use Snuffles too. I can let her know we are looking for Harry, and see if she scents her first. Harry may also not try to run from us if she sees the dog."

"Sirius do you really believe Harry would try and run if we find her?" Remus questioned his friend.

"Remus she's angry and hurt. She will probably also believe we are mad at her for trying to run away, and be afraid to face us."

"I believe you are right," Dumbledore acquiesced, "Harry does have a tendency to bolt when upset. Unfortunately, I am the cause. If I had listened to Severus, we would not be in this situation."

"Headmaster, you did what you thought was best for her protection," the Potions Master told him quietly. He did not like to see his friend so worried and unhappy.

"Let's just hope she's safe and we'll deal with the quidditch situation later. I'll go down and get Snuffles and leave word for Hagrid that the dog is with us," Sirius remarked heading towards Hagrid's cottage.

"Headmaster, do you have any idea where she may have gone?" Remus asked frowning.

"No, but it has only been a little more than an hour since we know she left the dog with Hagrid. If she hasn't gone into Hogsmeade that means she may be somewhere close."

"Unless of course she transformed and flew away," Snape suggested, voicing the Headmaster's worst fear.

"I have already considered that possibility and sent Fawkes to search for her from the air," Dumbledore replied as Sirius returned with Snuffles.

"If we're ready, I'll transform and Snuffles and I can try and find her scent."

"Very well, go ahead; the rest of us will follow you."

Sirius transformed into his dog form and communicated his desires to Snuffles, who barked and wagged her tail happily. They both set off noses to the ground. The puppy caught her mistress's scent first and barked happily. They followed it back towards the castle, but then the pup became confused. Sirius immediately realized Harry had doubled back and they had lost the trail.

He transformed back to human form and faced the others, "She doubled back, and we've lost the scent. It will take a little while to find it again, but I think we will be able to."

Dumbledore began to nod in agreement when there was an odd sensation of movement from the bushes by the path.

"One moment, Sirius, I believe we have a visitor." Artemis stood uncertainly by the path and nodded to the old man, with an uncertain smile. "Welcome, Artemis. My friends are well known to you, I'm sure."

"You are the Potions Master, Severus Snape. You once worked with the Dark Lord," she eyed Snape with suspicion and worry.

"I did, but my loyalties now lie with Albus Dumbledore. I regret any wrong doing I may have caused to your people," Snape looked at her with pain in his dark eyes, allowing her to see that he spoke the truth. She bowed her head and moved on.

"You are the one who was as a brother to James Potter; the one who runs as a dog."

"I am. My name is Sirius Black and James was my best friend," he responded, as she moved on to Remus.

"You are the one they call Remus. You have been touched by the curse of the sun god and walk with the moon as a wolf. We of the wood have watched and guarded you when the change is upon you."

"I am Remus Lupin, and I am grateful for your concern," Remus smiled, awed that the elf even knew his name.

"I have come to see the wise one," she said, her bell like voice filled with concern. "The child of my friend is in pain and confused. She speaks with her parents as I speak to you."

"Harry is at the cemetery?" Dumbledore's voice queried hopefully, and the elf nodded.

"She speaks of you, and says that you believe her to be a burden. She thinks you have lied to her."

Dumbledore studied the elf thoughtfully before replying, "I have never considered Harry a burden. I love her dearly, but I did lie to her. I wanted to protect her from the Dark Lord, but made a grievous error in judgment."

"Is it not the way of the elders to do what they feel is best? Unfortunately, sometimes we do not realize that the young ones will see it our way, and we use other means to protect them. Go and seek her where her parents sleep. She is young but possesses a wisdom that is rare. Soon she will cross the bridge from child to adult, and needs to know she will be welcomed when she does. The little girl needs your love; the young woman needs to know you will respect her opinion. I shall go and watch over her until you get there." She then vanished back into the bushes.

"Albus, I am more than a little moved by the watcher elf. Now I understand why Lily spoke so fondly of her. Is she really older than you?" Sirius looked at the old man astonished by what had just occurred.

"Yes she is two hundred years old. Now we had better get to Harry. Sirius why don't you transform and bring Snuffles. The rest of us will apparate and meet you by the cemetery gates."

"Understood," Sirius answered and then turned into Padfoot. He and Snuffles then bounded towards the path to the cemetery.

"Are you all ready?"

"Yes, Headmaster," Severus and Remus chorused.

Holding their wands into the air, they all apparated at once. Padfoot and Snuffles were just coming up the path, Snuffles wagging her tail, nose to the ground, following her mistress scent, as they appeared by the cemetery gates. At the same time, Fawkes appeared in the sky above them, and flew down to land on Dumbledore's shoulder.

"Yes, Fawkes, Artemis has told us that Harry is in the cemetery," Dumbledore spoke lovingly to his phoenix, giving him a treat from his robe pocket. "Should she try to fly away I want you to follow and try to get her to land."

The bird blinked and trilled quietly. Remus and Snape both had the idea that the bird understood what he was saying.

"Albus," Sirius spoke quietly, having transformed back to human form, "I think we had better get moving. It looks like a thunder storm is coming." The wind had started to spring up and the day was turning gray.

"Send Snuffles on ahead, Harry may stay put if the dog is with her. We can follow and meet her there."

Sirius indicated to the pup to follow the scent of her mistress and the young dog bounded off, wagging her tail and barking with excitement...

Harry knew she would have to leave soon, and hoped they hadn't realized that she was gone yet. She thought that Sirius would be looking for her to discuss the match, and a part of her felt guilty about leaving him. He had been through a lot and wanted so badly to make her happy. Nevertheless, he had lied to her, and that hurt felt like a stab in the heart. She cared very deeply for Sirius, and didn't like to do this to him, but he had to realize that he could have talked to her about whether he felt she should play or not. Snape and Remus too, she thought they would have had the common sense to at least tell Sirius or Dumbledore that what they were doing was wrong. As she mulled these thoughts over in her mind, a familiar barking came from the path, and Snuffles bounded up to her, her whole body wiggling with excitement.

"Oh no, puppy, you need to stay with Hagrid," Harry admonished the dog, as she licked the tears from her mistress' face, "how did you get loose?"

"We brought her with us," Sirius quiet voice came from behind her.

Harry turned swiftly, her heart in her throat. Sirius was standing behind her with Dumbledore, Remus, and Snape.

"Go away! I don't want to see any of you. You all lied to me and Dumbledore thinks I'm in his way," Harry cried, her body shaking with anger and pain. Snuffles whined in confusion as she sensed Harry's anxiety. "My friends don't even care to be near me. All I wanted to do was to make people forget about Voldemort, and I got more than I bargained for. I found out that I'm nothing more than a burden to people," Harry said grabbing her backpack, backing away from them, hurt and confusion marking her features.

"Miss Potter, I suggest you don't try to run. Between the four of us you would never make it," Snape said looking at her down his nose, the familiar warning note unmistakable in his voice. "Don't be so sure, Professor, I might surprise you," Harry replied taking his measure. They had countered each other many times during her advanced tutoring sessions, and she was confident she could beat him.

"Snape, you'll hurt her," Sirius warned, holding him back, as Snape made to draw his wand. "No more than the lot of you has already," Harry told Sirius coldly. "I thought you all cared about me, but I was wrong. It seems to me you shouldn't lie to people you care for."

"Princess, at least hear what we have to say. Albus didn't mean to hurt you; he just wanted to protect you. He felt you would be an open target in the air."

"And he couldn't just talk with me about it? Not to mention the fact that half of the teachers would have been up there with me! Remus, I probably would have been safer in the air than on the ground."

"Child," Dumbledore's soft voice was sober, "it was simply an error of judgment."

"You had no business deliberately leaving me out of the lottery. Did you all really believe I wouldn't find out? If you thought I was becoming a burden to you why not just send me back to the Dursley's?" Harry sobbed angrily, as a rumble of thunder sounded in the distance.

"Harry, you have never been a burden to me, and I don't know why you think you would be. I was wrong in what I did. I want you to come back to Hogwarts, and we'll talk about it."

"I don't want to go back. There's nothing there for me anymore. I have no friends, or family. Just leave me alone."

"Young one," Artemis voice came from the tree, appearing as if she were a part of the scenery, "you are more loved and cared for than even the two who sleep in the earth beside you could have wished for."

"No, I'm not. My friends have shunned me, my godfather and the headmaster have lied, and the two people whose opinions I value most allowed them to do it."

"Then listen to what they are saying to you now. I have lived even longer than the wise one, you loves you as his own, and even I have made a few mistakes with my children. He wishes only to protect you, but forgets that you have both desires, and feelings. You are halfway from childhood and not yet, an adult, but you need to be heard. Go home to Hogwarts, and let them listen to you, but listen to them too. I know much of what is in your heart, for I have watched you grow."

Harry just stood crying, her green eyes locked with Artemis' violet ones. She had the strangest feeling that the elf knew what she was thinking, and she wanted to scan her emotions but felt it would be rude. Snuffles picked that moment to go up to the elf and bark, licking her tiny hand.

"Snuffles, no, bad dog, leave Artemis alone."

"She loves you very much, and knows I watch for you. She wishes for you to go with your family and is confused that you left her," Artemis explained. Seeing the look on Harry's face she continued, "We of the wood can communicate with the animals by telepathy. She is a good dog, and will be loyal to you," Artemis smiled as another clap of thunder sounded, accompanied by a flash of lightning.

"Harry, please come home. There's a bad storm coming, and I'm going to turn gray worrying about you out in it," Sirius smiled his brown eyes large and begging.

"Potter, if you insist on staying out in the rain, that's your business, but the Headmaster does not need to catch a chill with this storm."

"Professor, I don't think you should be telling me what's best for the Headmaster. He's well over a hundred years old and is capable of speaking for himself! Headmaster, if you'll allow me, I will walk back to Hogwarts with you."

"I will be delighted, and when we get back we can have some of my favorite hot chocolate and we'll talk," Dumbledore beamed, relieved that she was not going to try to run.

"Young one, you are forgetting something," Artemis smiled, as the talisman vanished from where Harry had put it on the grave marker and reappeared around her neck.

"I really don't deserve this. I haven't done anything to warrant it."

"Look back on your life, little one, and you will see that you are special. You also have a good friend, who will walk by your side as your brother for as long as you both live. He is the one who has hair the color of ochre. He will be there when you need him," she hinted mysteriously, and then vanished.

"Headmaster, how does she know that?"

"I don't know, Child, but if she says it she means it," he replied as they started walking back down the path.

"I believe she's talking about Mr. Weasley, Miss Potter."

"No kidding, Snape, do you really think so?" Harry said sarcastically, as the Potions Master raised his eyebrows at the way she spoke to him, and Sirius snickered.

"Miss Potter, I would suggest you watch how you address me unless you wish to lose some points."

"Professor, do you go to bed at night thinking up ways to drive the students crazy?"

"Actually I have a whole log book of ideas; in fact, you actually rate an entire chapter," Snape arched his brow, keeping his face deadpan.

"That's not good," Harry shook her head, "I think I should have more than one chapter after all this time."

"Careful, Princess, he may just devise something new for your next detention."

"Professor Lupin, he just likes to push my buttons, but he knows it isn't that easy. It was probably his idea to leave me out of the lottery."

"No, Harry," Sirius looked at her, his brown eyes troubled, "it was me and Dumbledore that decided to do it. Severus argued against it."

Harry stopped in her tracks, and looked at the two men with such a hurt expression that Sirius lowered his eyes and Dumbledore placed a hand on her shoulder to try to offer his apology.

"Professor Snape, I apologize for insinuating that it was your idea. Thank you for believing in me. It's a pity that our Headmaster and my Godfather don't. I suppose Professor Lupin just went along with the idea too?"

"I'm sorry, Princess, I thought it would help to keep you out of harms way," Lupin apologized as another rumble of thunder sounded coming closer.

"Miss Potter, I suggest that we hurry along, or we will all be soaked before we reach the castle. We can discuss this in the Headmaster's office."

"Professor, it's only a little rain," Harry shook her head at their worried expressions; "you're all acting like we're going to melt."

"Child, Severus is right, we need to get you inside," Dumbledore replied worriedly, as he took her arm to hurry her up the path. Hogwarts was in sight and they would reach there shortly.

"Headmaster, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just don't want you to catch a cold."

Harry studied his face warily, and spoke quietly, "I know something's wrong..."

She never finished the sentence. Just ahead of them, three figures disappeared, and Dumbledore pushed her behind him. Snuffles was growling and the hackles were raised on her back.

"We need to stay around her," Dumbledore ordered as two more figures appeared behind them. All wore the robes of the Death Eaters.

"Do you really believe you can keep us from her old man?" A familiar voice spoke from behind one of the masks, "our master will not allow her to go free. He has special plans for her."

"You will not have her today or any other day," Dumbledore answered, wand raised, his blue eyes like steel. "Your master is a coward or he would have come himself."

"Tell me, Lucius, why do you even bother with that ridiculous mask? Surely you're aware we all know each one of you," Snape remarked calmly, as if this was a commonplace occurrence. "Severus...you are the last person I expected to find here. Lord Voldemort will be pleased when he arrives."

"I don't think so. Pity I won't get to see him punish you Malfoy. I guess I'll just have to do it myself," Snape stared coldly at the masked man.

"Lucius, do you really believe you will be able to take Harry? I sincerely doubt you will get past all of us," Sirius addressed the hooded figure.

"You all forget, there are five of us to four of you, and you are all surrounded," Malfoy laughed harshly.

"Oh brother, what an asshole. Draco really is a chip off the old block," Harry called from inside the circle they had formed around her, as Remus gently nudged her to be quiet.

"I see the little brat still thinks she is better than my pure blood son. The half blood bitch."

"Hey, Lucius, if I were you, I'd be a little more careful about touting your so called pure blood. If I recall correctly Tom Riddle's father was a muggle too. How is that for a joke; the bigoted pure blood Malfoys are the lap dogs of a man whose father was a Muggle." Harry deliberately taunted Lucius to distract him.

"If I was you Potter, I would watch my mouth," Malfoy warned coldly, "you have a very nice puppy. I'm sure you wouldn't want anything to happen to her."

"You so much as try to harm my dog, Malfoy, and I will make certain that your son will pay the price," Harry told him her voice low and steely. "In fact, maybe you would like to see him suffer a little. I know he's here with you now," she said scanning the younger Malfoy.

She had recognized him by his hair, and could tell the Death Eater was just a youth by his size compared to the others, but she also sensed his fear and revulsion. Harry knew he didn't want to be there.

"You dare to threaten my son, you half blood bitch!"

"You know what, Malfoy," Harry looked at Snape and nodded with a smile, "you're right. Draco is just not up to my standards, but you on the other hand..." she directed her wand between Snape and Remus, "*Stupefy!*" Malfoy fell like a ton of bricks, Draco ran over to his father, and the other three Death Eaters were suddenly in the midst of an altercation with wands exchanging fire in rapid succession.

Sirius fired on the larger of the other two men, and hit him with a *Cruciatous* curse. He screamed in agony, and fell to his knees. Dumbledore never used his wand, and Harry was stunned to see him look at the other two men and send them flying backwards about ten feet.

"Apparate now!" the headmaster yelled, as Snape grabbed onto Harry.

"Get Snuffles," she called as she felt herself move through space and time. They reappeared in front of the school, and rushed Harry into the front door. "Where's my puppy?" she inquired frantically.

"Here, Child," Dumbledore smiled as Fawkes flew in carrying the pup by the scruff of the neck. The phoenix gently set the pup down on the floor and then landed on Harry's shoulder, trilling and blinking his eyes at her.

"You are such a wonderful bird, thank you for bringing my pup," Harry beamed as she gave Fawkes a treat. "Is everyone else all right?"

"Now she asks?" Sirius laughed looking at her rakishly, "Remus, what are we going to do with her?"

"If she were a few years younger we could put her to bed without supper."

"A good spanking would be more like it," Professor Snape commented shaking his head, lips pursed.

"You're just jealous because I hit Lucius Malfoy with that curse before you could," Harry tossed her head.

"My dear Miss Potter, if you had let me go after Malfoy we would no longer have to worry about him."

"Ahem," Dumbledore looked down his glasses at them all, "this is not something we should be discussing in the main hallway. I suggest we all retire to my office as planned and talk there." Fawkes looked up at Dumbledore's remarks and flew up the stairs, with Snuffles bounding after him.

They all proceeded to the Headmaster's Office and were surprised to find not just Fawkes and Snuffles, but a group of students waiting there. Among them were Ron, Ginny, the Slytherin Prefect, and the bulk of the quidditch team members from each of the houses.

"Excuse us Headmaster," the Slytherin Prefect and Captain of the Quidditch team stated stepping out from the group with Ron.

"Mr. Byron, is there something I can do for all of you?"

"Yes, Headmaster. We were all upset that Harry wasn't playing and everyone in the school got together to vote on who should actually play on the student team. We don't mean to be disrespectful, but we feel the students should be allowed to pick who plays for them in the Quidditch matches."

"Mr. Byron," Snape interrupted, "the Headmaster selected the players by lottery, that way everyone had a chance."

"I'm sorry Professor Snape, but we both know that isn't true. Harry, they left you out on purpose. The Headmaster said he didn't feel it was safe for you because of the Dark Lord. We don't believe that. You have stood up for everyone of us and risked your life any number of times. If anything were to happen, we would all be up there with you and so would the teachers. The students also voted to pick the rest of the team to make it fair."

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry is my best friend and the best Quidditch player in the school. If she can't play then I won't either," Ron asserted firmly as the group behind him agreed.

"Well, Harry, it seems that your friends and classmates have it all arranged. I shall be interested to see how the next match goes. May I have the list of team members?"

Dumbledore smiled holding out his hand for the names of the students.

"Then it's all right? She can play?" Ron asked hopefully as the Slytherin Quidditch captain handed Dumbledore the new list of names.

"Do you want to play, Harry?" Dumbledore smiled placing his arm around her shoulders. Her eyes had filled with tears, and she nodded mutely, unable to find the words she wanted to say.

"Very well, she can play and I'll post the new roster. However, the first game still stands."

"Fair enough, Headmaster," Byron said shaking the Headmaster's hand in agreement, while the group of students cheered, and Ron hugged Harry.

"Where have you been, anyway? I got worried when you weren't at the game?" Ron asked as the other students dispersed.

"I was feeling a little down and went to the cemetery to visit my parent's grave," Harry explained, not wanting to tell him she had actually been running away.

"Ron, would you like to join us for some hot chocolate?" Dumbledore smiled at the red headed youth.

"Sure! That is if it's all right with the others," he answered looking at the Professors.

"Of course, Ron," Sirius replied with a smile, "maybe you can talk some common sense into my stubborn goddaughter's head."

"Professor Black, I have been trying to do that for the past six years, she just smiles and goes about her business."

"As I recall," Snape looked at Ron sardonically as Dumbledore opened his door, "you were usually with her when she was going about her business."

"Well someone had to try and keep her out of trouble."

"It seems to me I have been doing just that, with the added bonus of a red headed youth, and girl with long bushy hair," Snape looked at Ron as if he were a thing to be dissected.

"Now, Severus, you really shouldn't tease young Mr. Weasley, you're making him nervous," Dumbledore admonished, ringing for the house elf.

"Am I?" Snape smiled wryly, as Dobby appeared.

"Headmaster, do you require something? Dobby will get it for you," the elf bounced up and down dizzily.

"Hot chocolate, and some sandwiches or cakes," Dumbledore directed him.

"Very good, hot chocolate, sandwiches and cakes," Dobby repeated snapping his fingers. As soon as Dobby vanished, the food appeared on the table and they all took seats by the fire. Harry curled up on the sofa between Sirius and Snape while Ron pulled up a chair next to Professor Lupin. Dumbledore sat in his large high back desk chair.

"Ron, I'm going to trust you not to repeat what you hear in this room today," Dumbledore said, his blue eyes looking him squarely in the eye.

"Headmaster, I won't say anything, but I don't understand why you are asking me to keep quiet."

"Because I was running away, Ron," Harry answered for the Headmaster.

"Harry, what is wrong with you!" Ron demanded upset by her admission, "what would make you feel that you had to leave Hogwarts?"

"That is what we're here to discuss. Fortunately we found Harry before she was attacked," Sirius said quietly.

"Attacked! Who attacked you?"

"Death eaters, Mr. Weasley, they surrounded us while we walked back from the cemetery," Snape looked at him, his dark eyes measuring the boy's reaction.

"Harry, how did they know where you were?"

"A few nights ago Lucius Malfoy got into the school and attacked Professor Snape. I felt something was wrong and went to see what it was and found them. Fortunately, I used my cloak, and Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus came to investigate too. It seems someone in the school helped him to gain access, and we were all nearly killed by Voldemort."

"You know who was in the school?"

"Not exactly, Ron," Dumbledore reassured him, "there are charms on the school that prevent him access, but he has other means of causing trouble."

"Headmaster, if someone in the school helped Malfoy to get in..." Ron began mulling an idea over in his mind, "could it have to do with the Prophecy, and someone betraying Harry?"

"It's entirely Possible, Ron," Professor Lupin responded as Dumbledore nodded.

"You all don't think I would betray her, do you?"

"Not a prayer, Ron Weasley. In fact, the watcher elf I met saw me again today. She says you and I will be best friends our whole life."

"You saw the watcher elf again? She knows who I am?"

"Yes, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore nodded amused by the boy's apparent amazement. "Artemis says you are Harry's true friend. She didn't call you by name, but referred to you by your red hair."

"All right!" Ron beamed sitting up straight. "But Harry, why did you try to run away in the first place. You've never run from anything in your life, except maybe the Dursley's, and no one would blame you for that!"

"I found out I was left out of the lottery on purpose. I was hurt that I was lied to by people I thought cared about me, and when my friends started avoiding me, well..." she shrugged.

"Harry, why didn't you come and talk to me, or even to Dumbledore? It's not like you not to confront a problem."

"I did come to see Dumbledore, but he couldn't see me. He was busy with Professor Binns."

"When was this, Child, and who told you I was too busy to speak with you?"

"I came to see you last Tuesday, and Professor Flitwick said you were unavailable to speak with students and sent me away. I tried again on Thursday, but you were at the Ministry again on business. Then I got this note that said you believed I was becoming a burden and that I was deliberately left out of the lottery."

"What note, honey? You didn't say anything before."

"Here, it's in my backpack," she explained taking the note out and handing it to Sirius.

"It's unsigned, Albus. Whoever sent this to her wanted Harry to leave the building, or at least not show up for the Quidditch match," Sirius remarked thoughtfully as he gave the note to Dumbledore.

"Princess, why didn't you come to any of the rest of us. You know we always have time to listen."

"Professor Lupin calls you Princess?" Ron interrupted looking at Harry sideways, trying not to snicker.

"You don't want to go there Ron Weasley, it just has to do with a story I told him."

"I'm not saying anything, besides you may try to levitate me again like you did when I found out you were a witch."

"Don't be ridiculous, I would do something entirely different."

"Oh, really, miss smarty pants, like you could get away with it a second time and in the Headmaster's office."

"Ron, you are about an inch away from getting me really annoyed," Harry warned tilting her head in vexation.

"You just hate it when I'm right."

"You may be right about me not getting away with it, but that doesn't mean I won't try," Harry smiled, her green eyes flashing as she whipped out her wand, "*Asellus Auris*." Ron's ears immediately transformed into those of a donkey. "You look absolutely charming."

"Harry Potter you turn my ears back right now!"

"Harry, this will not earn you extra points in class," Sirius laughed, "now turn Ron's ears back right now before the Headmaster gets angry."

"Before he gets angry? I might remind the lot of you that the reason we are all here is that you all lied to me. If anything, I'm the wronged party."

"Harry," Dumbledore looked over his glasses, his voice stern, "turn Ron's ears back right now, or I will get angry."

"Harry, please, before Dumbledore gets mad at you. I don't want to see you get into any trouble," Ron implored, worried about what the Headmaster would do to her.

"*Incantamentum Rescindo*," Harry said with a wave of her wand. Ron's ears immediately returned to normal.

"You did that quite well," Dumbledore smiled, relieved that she was not going to try to instigate him into doing magic. He knew she was still upset, but did not want to have to immobilize her to plead his case. "Now, I believe Professor Lupin and Ron both asked you why you didn't confide in any of them."

"How could I? I knew you were all feeling guilty and I didn't believe you would admit the truth to me. You all keep things from me and tell me it's to protect me, but I always find out anyway. I'm a human being. I don't like being lied to or kept in ignorance when it involves my life."

"Miss Potter, Harry...we only keep things from you so that you don't have to shoulder the burden of worrying about them. You need to think about your studies, and spend time with your friends. We're just trying to let you have some normalcy in an otherwise chaotic situation."

"Professor Snape, my life stopped being normal the night my parents were murdered," Harry sighed miserably. "I feel like you all let me down by lying to me. How can I confide in people who can't even tell me the truth, or ask me to listen to something that they feel would be beneficial?"

"Harry, you might have said something to me," Ron looked at her perplexed, "it's not like you to avoid telling me how you feel."

"Ron, I figured out that you knew about my not being in the lottery. As far as I knew, you agreed with them and felt I was in the way."

"Harry James Potter, you have never been in the way. You're good, kind, loving, and funny. You are also the bravest person I know. We may get mad at each other from time to time, but I would never deliberately cause your feelings to be hurt. If you realized I knew, why didn't you just...just... turn my ears into donkey ears! That would have gotten my attention and maybe you could have resolved the situation before you felt you had to leave."

"You know, Ron, sometimes you actually make sense."

"I'm glad you listened to him, Child. Now will you listen to me.?" Dumbledore asked, and seeing her nod, continued, "That note is a hoax. I have never considered you a burden. It was wrong not to talk to you about playing in the Quidditch matches, but we were concerned for your safety. I am even more concerned now. Whoever is working with Voldemort will try again. I want you to be extra careful and come to one of us immediately if you suspect anything. If you can't come yourself, send Ron with a message. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I dread to think about what would have happened today if we hadn't been with you," Sirius shuddered. "Honey, you could have been killed."

"Sirius, if you hadn't been with me I could have escaped quiet easily."

"Harry, you don't know that for certain," Ron looked apprehensive, "how many Deathaters were there?"

"There were five, Mr. Weasley," Snape responded matter of factly.

"Professor did you recognize the other three besides the Malfoy's?"

"The Malfoy's?" Ron gasped. "You mean Draco was there with his father?"

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, Draco was on the raid."

"I always knew he was bad news," Ron sneered, "Harry, I'm surprised you didn't try to put a spell on him."

"Ron, sometimes being an empath can pay off. This may surprise all of you but Draco did not want to be there. I sensed his fear and revulsion. I had the impression he felt he was trapped in the situation."

"Are you sure about that, Harry?" Remus asked quietly, mulling over this new information.

"Harry, that's crazy. Draco has hated you and been an arrogant nasty bastard towards any one with Muggle blood his whole life. If you aren't a wealthy Pure Blood you were dirt."

"Mr. Weasley that was Draco's father's teaching. It could be that Draco himself has seen that his way of thinking is unacceptable."

"That and he's scared to death of both his father and Voldemort," Harry stated thoughtfully, "he's always been somewhat of a coward. That's why he kept Crabbe and Goyle with him."

"The Senior Crabbe and Goyle were with them both today," Snape acknowledged. "I believe the other member of the team may have been Avery, but I'm not certain since I didn't hear his voice."

"Severus, you don't think it may have been a new follower of Lord Voldemort, do you?"

"No, Headmaster. The Dark Lord would not trust a new recruit to try to capture Harry."

"Then why was Draco there?" Ron demanded curiously.

"I believe Draco was allowed to go along since his father is among Voldemort's inner circle. Lucius probably wanted to make an example out of Harry and show his son that she was not the adversary he thought."

"I hope you kicked his ass, Harry!" Ron exclaimed, his eyes flashing.

"Actually, Ron, I put a *Cruciatus* curse on his father, and Draco panicked and ran straight over to daddy," she replied smugly, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"All right, nice job, Harry."

"That's when all the fighting began," Sirius looked at his goddaughter, pursing his lips.

"Just wanted to give you all a little fun. Besides, our Headmaster just makes things more and more interesting."

"Harry, I would rather you not talk about what you have seen to the other students,"

Dumbledore rebuked her gently.

"Not even Ron?" She pouted, curling her lip, and putting on her best-hurt face.

"Child," Dumbledore laughed, "you certainly know how to make an old man feel guilty."

"I thought I kept you young."

"Sometimes, and at others you age me another ten years. You most assuredly know how to make things interesting," he studied her thoughtfully. "You can tell Ron, and only Ron. You may not even tell Hermione. Do you understand me?"

"Absolutely, Headmaster," she looked at him affectionately, and he was pleased she had calmed down and was no longer angry or upset.

"Now why don't you two go and have some fun for the rest of the afternoon, while we try and figure out how best to protect you during the quidditch matches."

"Excuse me Headmaster, but I still have one question."

"What is it Ron?" Sirius asked, glad that Ron was Harry's friend. They had a kind of comradeship that he and James had both shared.

"Harry, how the heck did you think you could escape from five Deathaters all by yourself?"

Harry grinned and looked towards Dumbledore for confirmation before she answered. He slowly inclined his head, giving her permission to speak, his blue eyes laughing. Sirius and Remus were both smiling and Professor Snape just rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Why, Ron, I would have just flown away."

"Harry, you couldn't fly away because Sirius had your Thunderbolt."

"Who says I needed my broom?"

"Harry, don't be ridiculous of course you need..." He began, but was struck dumb as Harry transformed into her Phoenix, and flew around the room, landing on his shoulder, trilling happily, as she blinked at him. "Headmaster," Ron's voice cracked, and he took a minute to clear it flushing with embarrassment, "Harry just turned into a bloody Phoenix!" His eyes were wide with wonder and excitement.

"Harry is an animagus, Ron," Dumbledore smiled, gently patting him on the back.

"Harry, why didn't you tell me?"

"She was told not to tell anyone, Ron," Professor Lupin informed the stunned student.

"Why? This is so fantastic. I've heard about magical animagi, but they're very rare."

"She is not permitted to say anything to anyone, Ron, due to the situation with Lord Voldemort," Dumbledore explained slowly, as Harry flew back to the sofa and transformed.

"I'm also unregistered, but your father is aware that I can transform. Our Headmaster feels that it's something we should try to keep from Voldemort for as long as possible. It can be used as an asset in the fight against him. I'm just surprised he let me tell you today," Harry looked at Dumbledore quizzically.

"Ron, I allowed Harry to show you what she can do, since you are such a close friend and a true ally. You are both not to tell anyone else."

"Not even Hermione?" Ron asked looking at the four men.

"No, Ron, Hermione is not to be told. The watcher elf believes in you, and they are very perceptive, with a magic all their own. That is why I have allowed you to be a party to this information. I expect you to respect the confidences we have shared with you."

"I will, Professor Dumbledore," Ron replied seriously, knowing he had been given privileged information. "Harry, how long have you been an animagus?"

"Since just before Christmas, the only other person here in Hogwarts who knows is Professor McGonagall, so if something should happen while I'm transformed you can go to her too."

"Miss Potter, do you believe you may have a problem in your animagus form?"

"No, Professor Snape, but you never know what the Dark Lord is up to. This way Ron knows who he can call on for help."

"Good thought, Harry," Sirius said giving her an affectionate squeeze.

"Thanks. Now before you all throw us out of here," she joked, knowing they wanted to talk about how to best keep her safe, "I have a bit of a problem."

"What is it, honey," Sirius inquired concernedly.

"How am I supposed to play Quidditch when you are using my broom?" she asked him, hands on her hips, raising her brows.

"I think we should give Harry her little present now, instead of waiting," Professor Lupin looked at his friend knowingly.

"Professor Lupin is right," Snape agreed, "it would be the prudent thing to do."

"Headmaster?" Sirius looked at Dumbledore for approval.

"In view of the circumstances, it would be wise. Harry, we knew how badly you felt about not being able to play originally, so Sirius wanted to make it up to you and bought you this..."

Dumbledore went over to a large cabinet. Removing a long package, he handed it to her.

"Look Ron, a new broom!" she smiled broadly, as she unwrapped the broom.

"Harry, that's the new Firebolt Lightening Rod!" Ron exclaimed in awe, "It's supposed to be even better than your Firebolt."

"Cool," Harry hugged Sirius, delighted with her new broom, "I should make you feel guilty more often."

"No, I should be more alert to your feelings," he tweaked her nose playfully. "What will you do with the Firebolt after the matches?"

"Unless you have a use for it, I think we should give it to Ron."

"I think so too. Ron, once I'm done with the Firebolt it's yours," Sirius grinned as Ron's mouth dropped open.

"Thank you," he whooped, jumping up and shaking his hand, "come on, Harry, let's go plan our game strategy and leave them to worry about security before they change their minds."

"I'm right behind you," she replied giving a soft whistle for Snuffles to follow them. "I'll talk to you later."

"Walk, you two!" Dumbledore admonished shaking his head as they took the moving stairs two at a time, and the four men smiled.

They discussed the best ways to make certain Harry would be safe until dinner, and then headed to the Great Hall. It was difficult, but not impossible, and they all were glad that they had finally allowed her to play. Sirius was particularly relieved, and vowed that he would spend more time with Harry. He didn't want her ever to feel that she couldn't trust his word again.

## **Betrayal**

The lone figure moved furtively, keeping to the shadows, in an effort to avoid being seen by anyone who might be out on the grounds before dawn. The second Quidditch match was to be played at two o'clock and Lord Voldemort would be ready. Reaching the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the figure took one final look around to be certain no one was following, and then ran up the path to the designated meeting place.

"You're late," Lord Voldemort stated coldly as the figure knelt before him.

"I'm sorry, Lord, but I was worried someone would follow."

"Did you put the sleeping charm on the others in your dorm as I instructed?"

"Yes, but the Professors are on alert and have been taking turns watching the halls. All non essential doors and passages have been sealed by Dumbledore."

"If you hadn't failed when I gave you the unlocking charm to the tower we would not be standing here now."

"I didn't know Harry would go out onto the roof that day," the frightened figure whined in fear, "and I did send her that note before the last Quidditch game. When I saw her leave the building I did send you word."

"Yes...you are most useful. I expect you to remain so, if you want your family to stay safe," Voldemort's reptilian smile and burning red eyes affirming his quiet threat. "Do you understand what to do?"

"When Harry catches the golden snitch I am to utter the spell you gave me and turn it into a portkey, so she will be transported to you immediately."

"Should she fail to catch the snitch, and Snape does, you will lure her away in an effort to console her loss, and stun her. You will then use the floo powder I gave you to transport both of you to my location. You know where I will be, don't you?"

"I am to bring her to the Riddle Mansion."

"Either way, you are to come to me too. Should you fail to respond, your parents will be killed," Voldemort pronounced softly, "I am sure Lucius will enjoy killing them."

"I will do as you ask, Lord Voldemort," the figure prostrated on the ground in total submission.

"Then you will be given the reward you were promised, and I shall spare your family. Now go, and I will be watching to make sure you do not betray me."

"I am and will remain your faithful servant," the figure rose and started back in the direction of Hogwarts, unable to find a way out of the situation with Lord Voldemort...

Harry awoke with a start, her scar burning. She knew that Voldemort was up to something, and suspected it would happen during the Quidditch match. It was still dark out, and the sky had only begun to quicken as dawn approached. Getting out of bed Harry went over to the window. She was just in time to see a hooded figure skirt the building and move over to the kitchen entrance. It was still a little too early to hope the house elves would be up, but Harry grabbed her bathrobe and ran from the room to try to catch the invader. Her heart was racing, and as she neared Gryffindor Tower, on her way towards the stairs, she was just in time to see the portrait of the Fat Lady closing, and realized that the intruder had entered.

"Turtle doves!" Harry exclaimed, using the new password, hoping to catch the intruder.

"Incorrect password," the Fat Lady yawned.

"This is the new password."

"No, the password has been changed again this morning."

"By whom? Only the house Prefect can change the passwords."

"It was the Prefect," the portrait replied, annoyed that she was not being allowed to go back to sleep.

"Then I'll get him. It's imperative I get into the tower," Harry called over her shoulder as she moved down the hall to the Prefect's room. Knocking rapidly she waited until she heard a tired voice.

"Who's there? "

"James, it's me, Harry Potter. I have to get into Gryffindor Tower. It's an emergency."

"I gave you the password last night," James replied opening his door.

"The Fat Lady said you changed it again early this morning."

"I most certainly did not! I don't know what she's talking about."

"Come and ask her yourself."

"I intend to. What is so important that you have to get into the tower at this hour? Is someone sick or something?"

"I'm not sure. I woke up and had the feeling something was wrong, so I went to the tower. That's when I found out I couldn't get in," Harry told the Prefect, James Woodbine, as she followed him back to the portrait of the Fat Lady. She didn't believe he needed to know what was actually happening.

"What is the meaning of this? Harry tells me the password has been changed from turtle doves."

"Humph, you should know, you were the one who woke me up to change it," the Fat Lady snorted angrily.

"I assure you I did not. Now open the tower door."

"I will not. The only person who can override any password is Professor Dumbledore."

"What is going on here," Professor McGonagall's thick Scottish accent sounded from up the hall, as she moved swiftly towards them, tying the belt to her bathrobe. "What are the two of you doing out of bed?"

"Professor McGonagall, Harry felt like something was wrong in the tower and came to investigate, but found the password has been changed from the one I gave her last night. The Fat Lady refuses to let us in. She has been insisting that I woke her up early this morning and changed it again, when I didn't."

"Is this true?" McGonagall asked the portrait.

"Of course it's true. He changed the password about two o'clock this morning," the portrait answered testily."

"Open the tower door," McGonagall directed the woman in the painting, "the password was changed by an unauthorized person."

"I cannot. I can only override for the Headmaster."

"I am the Deputy Headmistress, and have the authority to override any password,"

McGonagall's accent was thick with anger.

"Only when the Headmaster is not in residence. I know he is still here in the building," the Fat Lady rebuffed her.

"Mr. Woodbine, you wait here and make sure no one comes out. Miss Potter you come with me. We are going to wake up the Headmaster."

"Yes, Ma'am," The two students responded in unison.

Harry followed Professor McGonagall up the hall and they met Professor Snape on early morning rounds.

"Severus," Professor McGonagall addressed him urgently, "someone has changed the Gryffindor password without authorization. They were posing at the house Prefect."

"I will wake the Headmaster immediately," he said eyeing Harry suspiciously before turning to go up the moving stairs.

"Wait here, Miss Potter," McGonagall instructed as she followed Professor Snape up to Dumbledore's quarters without waiting for her reply.

Harry was worried. She knew that whoever had changed that password was someone close to her. The prophecy was right. Someone she cared about was in league with Lord Voldemort.

But who? Who would do such a thing, and why? She had absolutely no clue. She was angry with herself too, for not moving faster when she saw the portrait door closing. If she had, maybe she could have stopped whoever it was. Her mind was reeling, and she was pacing back and forth furiously, when the Headmaster appeared with Snape and McGonagall.

"Harry, what is going on? Why were you trying to get into the tower at this hour?"

Dumbledore asked with concern as they started back down the hall.

"Headmaster, I woke up and my scar was burning, so I got out of bed. I just happened to look out the window and saw a hooded figure entering the building by the kitchen wing. I left my room hoping to see who it could be, but before I got to the stairs to the lower level, I saw the door to the tower closing. I knew it had to be the person who had been outside so I went to follow them. That's when I found the password was changed."

"Harry, you should have sent for me or one of the other teachers immediately. What you did was extremely dangerous. You could have been attacked," Dumbledore admonished her sternly.

"I ..."

"We'll discuss it later, right now we need to get into the tower. The others may be in danger."

Dumbledore stopped in front of the portrait, "Mr. Woodbine, did anyone try to leave the tower?" he questioned the Gryffindor Prefect.

"No, Headmaster. It has been very quiet."

"Override the password, Madam," Dumbledore said calmly to the Fat Lady.

"Password overridden as per the Headmaster," the Fat Lady intoned, and the door swung open.

"You two wait here," Snape ordered as Dumbledore and McGonagall entered. He then took out his wand, and entered the Gryffindor Common Room.

Harry and James Woodbine waited nervously for about fifteen minutes, when Professor McGonagall re-emerged through the door.

"All your classmates are safe, but they were put under a sleeping charm. Mr. Woodbine reaffirm your original password, and go back to bed. Miss Potter, the Headmaster has requested that you wake Professor Lupin and your Godfather and meet him and Professor Snape in his office in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, Professor," Harry replied as she headed in the direction of Remus and Sirius quarters. She wasn't sure if she was in trouble or not, but she did know that Dumbledore was concerned about what had happened. Reaching their room, she knocked sharply and waited. When there was no response, she knocked again, and Sirius' sleepy voice finally answered.

"Who is it?"

"Sirius answer the door. It's important," Harry called.

"Harry?" Sirius questioned opening the door, "what's wrong honey?"

"Trouble, wake up Remus, we have to be in Dumbledore's office in fifteen minutes."

"What's wrong, Princess?" Remus asked sleepily from the direction of the bedroom.

"Someone put all the Gryffindors under a sleeping charm."

"What!" they exclaimed at once.

"My scar was hurting and I saw someone come into the castle. I tried to head them off but I was too late," Harry told them breathlessly.

"Whoa, slow down and tell us everything from the beginning," Sirius directed her as he pulled her inside from the hallway.

Harry then proceeded to explain what had happened starting with waking up from the pain in her head. They listened attentively and then grabbed their robes to go upstairs to Dumbledore's office. Sirius was not pleased with Harry's actions, but he knew she was already worried and upset, so he refrained from reprimanding her. 'Damn, I love her more than I should, but this is one of the times I also need to be a parent. James, I wish you were here.' he thought, as they headed towards Dumbledore's tower.

"Chocolate Snaps," Remus uttered the password and they all entered the moving stairs to the Headmaster's Office. Dumbledore had not yet arrived, and Remus rang for the house elf to order some tea. Beryl appeared, and rubbed her eyes sleepily.

"Mister Remus, may I help you?"

"Send up a pot of tea, Beryl, and something to eat. The Headmaster will be here shortly."

"Tea and some food. Do you wish a full breakfast?"

"No, some muffins or scones will do fine."

"I will see to it immediately," Beryl replied and disappeared.

The teapot and some breakfast rolls, muffins, and bagels appeared along with jelly, butter, and cream cheese. There was also a pot of hot cocoa. Apparently, Beryl had noticed Harry was also there and sent it up along with the tea. Dumbledore and Snape entered the office five minutes later.

"Ah...I could do with a spot of tea," Dumbledore remarked as Sirius handed him a steaming cup, and poured another for Snape. Dumbledore settled himself at his desk and sat quietly studying Harry. She was more than a little uncomfortable under the unwavering scrutiny of his blue eyes. "Harry," he began slowly, "I can't stress enough the seriousness of this situation. Your scar was hurting and you were out of bed in the hallway when you should not have been. You may have been seriously injured or worse. Why didn't you wake us for help?"

"Professor Dumbledore, I just acted out of instinct. I wasn't worried about myself. I saw someone and went to head him off. I just knew something wasn't quite right, but...well..." she shrugged, "I was only trying to help."

"Child, you meant well, but you need to think before you act, especially now. Voldemort is growing more powerful each day, and I need not remind you that you are his primary target.

"I'd like to know how they got back out of the tower," Remus looked thoughtful.

"I know how," Harry looked at them all somberly, "the person never left. It was one of the students. Whoever it was, put the sleeping charm on them before they left to do their shady business. Then, when they got back, they returned to the tower and charmed themselves to avoid suspicion."

"Miss Potter, perhaps you should refrain from playing today."

"Snape's right honey, it may be best if you stay away from the Quidditch field altogether."

"Sirius," Harry began, going over to look out the window at the sunrise, "whether I play or not, something is going to happen. I would prefer to play or a lot of people will feel I've let them down. Besides, if I don't everyone may think I'm a coward."

"Harry, you're not a coward," Sirius said moving over to stand beside her at the window, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Child, you seem distracted. What is troubling you?"

"Headmaster, do you believe that history will repeat itself?"

"That's and odd question, Princess. Why would you ask such a thing?"

"Because, Miss Potter is about to be betrayed by someone close to her, just as her parents were fifteen years ago," Snape remarked quietly, from where he stood leaning against the fireplace.

"The question is who..." Harry muttered under her breath.

"Harry," Sirius gently turned her to face him, "please try not to worry. I can't believe that any of your friends would go over to Voldemort."

"You didn't believe Peter Pettigrew could either," she replied unable to hide the pain in her eyes. He just hugged her close to him, unable to find words to comfort her.

"Miss Potter, perhaps you should go back to bed for awhile. Since you insist on playing in today's match, you will need all your wits about you, and a good sleep will help to refresh you."

"You are absolutely correct, Severus, Harry needs to get some rest. We all do. Each of us will need all our wits about us today," Dumbledore spoke with authority. "Harry, would you like Severus to give you a sleeping potion?"

"No thank you Headmaster. You may just have him drug me into unconsciousness so that I will sleep through the Quidditch match."

"Child, do you really believe I would do such a thing?" Dumbledore asked trying hard not to smile.

"Let's just say I don't believe you wouldn't if you thought it would keep me safe," Harry smiled slyly with a toss of her head, "now, it you will all excuse me, I'm going back to bed." Harry headed for the moving stairs before they could reply and Dumbledore just nodded to her with a wink.

She really was tired, as she climbed back into bed, and needed to get some rest. She had been looking forward to today's game, and hoped that she would help the team to win. The first game had been a disaster, with Snape catching the snitch very quickly. They needed to go over their strategy and plan how to get around Hagrid. He would be playing the position of keeper, instead of Professor Sprout, and guarding the rings to prevent scoring. Dumbledore had made the switch as a safety measure after it was decided Harry would play. Snape of course was the seeker, with Sirius and Remus acting as beaters. The three chasers would be Professors Hootch, McGonagall, and Sinestra. Professor Flitwick had agreed to act as referee. If it were not for the threat of Voldemort, Harry knew it would be the most fun she had ever had playing Quidditch...

The students were waiting anxiously in the stands overlooking the Quidditch field and hoping the game would at least be better than the last time. They really wanted Harry to win, and even the Slytherin students, who were loyal to Snape, took their Quidditch seriously enough to want to beat the teachers. Snape would be Harry's adversary, but she knew that Sirius was good on a broom too, and that while he had played as a chaser with her father, she knew he was probably a good beater too. He also had the advantage of her Thunderbolt, which she was used to using. The new broom he had given her was good, but she still had to get used to its fast motion and it required a gentler touch to maneuver than her old one.

The student team was waiting quietly beneath the stadium going over some last minute briefings. In addition to Harry, the team consisted of Ron, who was the keeper, Stuart Byron, the Slytherin Prefect and Quidditch captain, playing as a beater, along with another Slytherin, Ray Serpentine. The three chasers were Jessica Southgate from Hufflepuff and twins Robert and David Mandrake from Ravenclaw. They were all nervous, as the only ones who had played in the last game were Ron and Stuart. The others had all been voted in by the students, and all seven were considered the best players in the school. Stuart was acting as captain, since he was a seventh year and captain of his house team.

Hermione sat anxiously in the stands with Ginny, and Fred and George had come in from Hogsmead to watch the game. Harry's other friends, Seamus, Neville, and Colin, camera in hand, sat behind them. Dean Thomas would act as announcer, calling the action for the crowd. Professor Dumbledore sat in the top box with the rest of the staff, and he had a clear view of the stadium. In his pocket was a set of Omnioculars. He would use them not just to watch the game, but also to watch for any signs of trouble within the stands.

Finally, Professor Flitwick appeared with his broom, blowing his whistle, as the gates opened. The student team was wearing their regular quidditch robes to represent their houses. It would also make the game easier to call. The teachers had all acquired black robes and each had a monogram of the sorting hat with a capital H on the upper right side.

"I don't need to tell all of you how pleased the school is to be doing these games," Professor Flitwick told them all. "If they are successful, I hope the Headmaster has at least one game every year once the situation with You Know Who has been resolved. Now play fair, and try not to injure each other too much," the little wizard smiled looking from Professor Snape to

Harry. She couldn't help but notice he too had a Thunderbolt Lightning Rod broom, and he arched his brow with the hint of a smile.

"Mount your brooms, please," Flitwick said blowing his whistle. All of them mounted their brooms and rose into the air. Sirius made sure to flash Harry one of his best smiles, but she just inclined her head, grinning. Professor Flitwick then blew a long blast on his whistle and released the Quaffle, as Dean began the commentary.

"The Quaffle is released and immediately taken by Madam Hooch for the teachers, and she passes it to Professor Sinestra and they head towards the Hoops. Stuart Byron, of Slytherin knocks the Bludger towards Professor Sinestra and she loses control of the Quaffle to David Mandrake of Ravenclaw. Look at him move up the field towards the students goal posts." The students were screaming and cheering and it looked like Mandrake might score the first goal, but Sirius had other plans. "Oh, no, Mandrake has been knocked half off his broom by Professor Black who hit him with a bludger."

Harry had been hanging towards the middle of the field, watching out for the Golden Snitch, and keeping a wary eye on Professor Snape, when he suddenly dove. "Oh, no, Professor Snape has spotted the Snitch," Dean Thomas intoned, "but why isn't Harry Potter going after him?" Harry just smiled, as she suspected that Snape would use the Wronski Feint and knew that by staying put she was taking a major gamble.

She had not seen the Snitch, but that didn't mean Snape hadn't. Dodging a Bludger cast at her by both Sirius and Remus she suddenly saw the snitch over near Hagrid, and took off at breakneck speed towards the teacher's goal posts.

"Potter has spotted the Golden Snitch and is flying across the field, but Professor Snape has recovered from his Feint and is in hot pursuit. Look at the two of them go!" Dean's enthusiasm spurred the crowd, the students were screaming for Harry, as the teachers were yelling to Snape to move faster.

In the meantime, the Quaffle was still in play, and had been taken over from the student team and was now in possession of Professor McGonagall.

"Professor McGonagall has the Quaffle and is moving towards the goal post. Nice block by Ron Weasley with the Starfish and Stick move! The students have again gained control of the Quaffle. Jessica Southgate of Hufflepuff is fantastic and moving towards the goal posts. Oh, no! Professor Lupin has used the Bludger Backbeat and Jessica had to swerve. Madame Hooch has control of the Quaffle. Madame Hooch scores the first goal. Ten points to the teachers!"

Harry heard this in the back of her mind, the Golden Snitch had disappeared in the sunlight, and she and Snape were watching each other very carefully. Both of them were flying around the field and dodging the Bludgers. Snape was staying right on Harry's back as a Bludger came at Harry, and she had to do a rapid Sloth Grip Roll to avoid a collision. Professor Snape dove to avoid the bludger, and Harry looked back just long enough to make certain he wasn't hurt.

"The Mandrake twins, Robert and David have control of the Quaffle and Jessica Southgate is flying in front to use the Hawkshead Attack Formation. Professors Black and Lupin have hit the Bludger with the Doppelbeater Defense breaking their formation, but David has retained the Quaffle. Professors Hooch and Sinestra are in hot pursuit. Nice move... David has used the Porskoff Ploy and thrown the Quaffle to his brother, who is diving downward to distract Hagrid, and the students score ten points!" Dean Thomas whooped as the students went wild in the stands.

Harry was watching Snape and listening to the score, when she spotted the Golden Snitch in front of where the faculty was sitting. Dumbledore also saw it and smiled, watching Harry through his Omnioculars. She took a major gamble and dove towards the ground instead, Snape following. Pulling up fast, she zigzagged over towards the Headmaster, where the Snitch was still fluttering. Going at a breakneck speed, she made a mad dash for the Snitch.

Professor Snape realized she had duped him and cursed under his breath, taking off straight up and nearly colliding with her as Sirius hit a bludger in their direction. The both dove to avoid it, and Harry saw that the Snitch was on the move. Diving under Snape's broom, she flew in a circle to distract him and then took off again. The Snitch was over by Hagrid and buzzed his head before flying off towards the students in the stands. Harry was flying so fast she thought she might lose sight of it, but she kept on going. Professor Snape was almost neck and neck with her and she had to stay ahead of him. The Snitch then made a swift dive and Harry followed, flipping her broom upside down using the Keeper's, Starfish move, she was able to nudge Snape out of the way with one foot and reaching out grabbed the Snitch. The crowd went wild.

"Harry Potter has caught the Golden Snitch," Dean Thomas yelled enthusiastically. "The students win one hundred and sixty points to ten."

Harry was jubilant and looked over at Snape, who arched his left brow and nodded as she held the Snitch in the air for all to see. Her team members were gathering around, along with the teachers as she pointed her broom towards the ground.

Dumbledore seemed to be watching something else, and Harry was wondering what it was when she suddenly felt a familiar tug behind her belly button, and letting go of her broom, she felt herself being pulled through space. The Snitch had been turned into a Portkey!

Dumbledore was on his feet and was moving quickly through the throng of students and teachers. Harry had disappeared, and there was turmoil on the quidditch field. Dumbledore had to stop the student responsible for turning the snitch into a portkey. He had known one of Harry's good friends would betray her. Indeed, he had believed he knew who it was, and was more than a little aggrieved that his suspicions were confirmed. He had made it a point to watch the students during the match, and had spotted the wand just as Harry had caught the snitch. Using his powers, he became invisible and apparated to the bottom of the stands to catch the culprit.

Sirius grabbed Harry's broom as she let it go, and was stunned when she vanished. He immediately flew to the ground with the other teachers and quidditch players.

"I want all students to go to their common rooms at once," he yelled, but only those closest to him heard.

Snape immediately flew over to Dean Thomas, and had him announce to the students to return to their common rooms, and then he flew back to Sirius.

"Black, I believe the snitch was used as a portkey. We must get to Albus immediately." He motioned the others to follow and flew off towards where the students were heading back to the building. He saw the headmaster waiting by the main entrance of Hogwarts. "Albus, they used the snitch as a portkey."

"I am more than aware of that, Severus, and I know who the guilty party is."

"Albus, we need to get Harry back!" Sirius exclaimed anxiously.

"And we shall, just as soon as we find where she has been taken to."

"Headmaster, Harry is in grave danger. We need to organize a search immediately," Remus gasped as he came over to stand with the others.

"I want all of you to calm down. We will get Harry back, but we need to keep our heads clear and our emotions in check," Dumbledore admonished sternly.

"Professor Dumbledore, what happened? One minute Harry had the snitch and the next she just vanished, just like after the Tri-Wizard Tournament," Ron Weasley questioned, his eyes moist, worry etched into his features, "please tell me it wasn't another portkey."

"I am afraid so, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore gently placed his hands on Ron's shoulders. "I need you to be strong now for Harry, and for the person responsible. I want all of you to go to my office and wait there. I will be there shortly with the only person who can help us now."

"It's the person who betrayed her, isn't it?" Ron asked angrily.

"Easy, Ron," Sirius spoke quietly, but his eyes were smoldering, with anger, "we need to question the person responsible if we are to get Harry back safely."

"But what if..." Ron began.

"Mr. Weasley, the Dark Lord will not kill Harry immediately. He wishes to demonstrate his superiority over her to his followers. We have time, if we keep calm and plan quickly. Now let's do as the Headmaster requests, and go to his office," Professor Snape said guiding Ron back into the building.

Sirius and Remus followed as Dumbledore continued to wait for the one person who could help him to save Harry. He didn't have long to wait....

Harry landed with a thud, stunned for a moment, but the burning in her scar quickly reminded her of what had happened, and she looked around. She was in a large room, with a fire burning in the fireplace. The furniture had once been lavish but was now worn and the smell of mildew filled her nostrils. She was sitting on a threadbare oriental rug, and a large boa constrictor was curled up by the wing chair, its black eyes staring at her.

"Welcome Harry Potter," the snake said lifting its head.

"Nagini, where is your master?" Harry questioned the reptile.

"He will be here shortly. I am to keep you company until he returns."

"Oh, really," she muttered getting to her feet, "I don't suppose you would consider a better life than being the pet of a low life sociopath murderer? Slytherin House could always use a mascot."

"My master treats me fairly," the snake intoned, its forked tongue licking the air.

"Where are we anyway?"

"You are in my father's house," Voldemort's oily voice spoke from the doorway, "I bid you welcome."

"I sincerely doubt it, Tom Malvolo Riddle," Harry replied deliberately using his true name to irritate him.

"Do not ever call me by that name, I am Lord Voldemort," Voldemort's eyes burned into hers, but Harry had enough sense not to look at him too long.

"I have no intention of calling you that ridiculous name ever again. It just shows what an egotistical manic you really are," she remarked bravely, knowing it would get him even angrier.

"*Crucio*," Voldemort yelled hitting her with the *Cruciatus* curse, his wand showering red sparks. "It's good to see you on your knees; you need to learn to obey me."

"If you think I would ever obey you then you should be committed to St. Mungo's."

"Oh, you will obey, if you wish to stay alive for more than a few hours. I have a wonderful use for you."

"Gee, you mean you don't want to recruit me any more? I am so disappointed," she smiled sarcastically, attempting to get up from her knees.

"*Crucio*!" Voldemort laughed again, enjoying her pain. "I see Severus has taught you well. You don't even scream with the pain, but that will change. McNair will see to that,"

Voldemort laughed as Harry looked up sharply. "Yes, my dear, I have every intention of torturing you. You see, you are very close to that fool Dumbledore, and I need to see how much he knows."

"Dumbledore tells me nothing," Harry responded fighting the curse through clenched teeth.

"That is not what your friend has told me," he smiled evilly, his voice light with amusement.

"You see, this time I made the Prophecy happen. It was so easy, and your friend so gullible. Of course, I did foresee a minor problem, so I took out a bit of insurance."

"What friend, and what do you mean, insurance?"

"Ah...I see I have gotten your full attention, so I will tell you, but first I need a bit of entertainment. *Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!*" Voldemort rapidly cursed her in succession, chuckling with enjoyment as she curled into a fetal position from the pain, "I do believe your

tenacity will make torturing you a real pleasure, Harry. You may prove even more entertaining than Severus was."

"You bastard. How dare you try to use my friends against me?"

"It was quite simple actually. Jealousy is such a marvelous emotion to play with; add a small insurance policy, and you have been betrayed," Voldemort sneered sitting down in the chair and kicking Nagini out of the way. "Go and find McNair, Nagini, and send him to me," he told the snake as it slithered out of the room.

"My friends would never even talk with you. There is no way you could have influenced them," she argued lamely, knowing her friends were no match for his powers.

"Oh, come now, Harry, a simple suggestion, and then an *Imperious* curse. All I needed was a few minutes. By the time your friend knew what had happened, I had my insurance. I'm sure you would have betrayed a friend to save the lives of your parents too."

"Who is it? Whose parents are in danger?" Harry questioned him, her voice sounding shrill in her ears. 'Don't panic, he wants you to be scared and upset so he can use you for his own ends,' Harry reasoned with herself.

"I was going to tell you, but your friend will be here shortly. It is a part of our agreement. Of course, I do not intend to keep my end of it, but I will enjoy watching your face while they all die together..."

Dumbledore looked down at the student coming towards him, and his blue eyes were unreadable, "I think you should come with me. I am aware of what you have done," he said taking the student by the arm, and heading into the building.

"Headmaster, I have to go to him or he will kill my family."

"There is time to save both your family and Harry, if you co-operate Child."

"Where are we going?"

"To my office. Professors Black, Lupin, and Snape are there waiting for us, along with Ron."

"Headmaster...please...I have betrayed my friend. I can't face them knowing what I have done."

"You have no choice. I will not allow you to leave. The floo powder you have secreted in your pocket will not work. I have charmed all of our hearths so that only the faculty can use them," Dumbledore explained to the frightened child as they reached the gargoyle that protected the moving stairs to his office. "Candy Kisses," he opened the passage for them to enter, and they rose up into his office. "Gentleman, this is the person on whose actions Harry's fate now rests," the old man spoke gravely, as the others stood up in shock...

"Ah...McNair, I have a job for you. I know how much you like to keep busy and perfect your skills. I thought that she would provide a little enjoyment for you while we wait for our other guest. Of course, they will both be killed later on tonight, but first we will wait for Lucius to bring his prizes," Voldemort gloated, looking at Harry malevolently.

"Lord Voldemort, I will be pleased to provide you with some entertainment this afternoon. A *Cruciatus* curse perhaps?"

"No, I have already hit her several times. She is as tenacious as our old friend, Severus. I think something purely physical would be rather interesting. Do you still keep that whip?"

"Yes, Lord. I have it down in the basement, where I keep all my equipment."

"Then we shall bring your tools up here, and enjoy ...*Crucio!*" Voldemort yelled pointing his wand at Harry as she attempted to get up again. "Potter, you really shouldn't try to get up without my permission. McNair, get your tools. I believe Potter is being a very disobedient child."

"Immediately, Lord Voldemort," McNair smiled at Harry with all the warmth of a dead fish. Waving his wand, a large satchel appeared, with a whip and a cat-o' nine- tails.

"Excellent! Now we can begin," Voldemort waved his wand, and using the *Imperious* curse made Harry stand and face the wall. He magically bound her hands, so she could not move.

"Before we start, I think we need to make sure she doesn't have her wand," Voldemort walked

over to Harry, and rubbed his hands down her body, lingering a little too long as he brushed her breasts and thighs.

"Take your fucking hands off of me!" Harry spit over her shoulder into his face, her eyes blazing with anger and her stomach knotted in fear.

"I think not, but I can be patient my dear. I don't like to rush these things. You need to learn to submit to my will," he laughed coldly. "But I am getting a bit concerned. It seems your friend is late. I guess it's time to send in my Death Eaters."

Voldemort closed his eyes, and Harry's scar began to burn. A moment later Lucius Malfoy appeared along with the senior Crabbe and Goyle.

"Lord Voldemort, we have felt your summons, and will obey," Lucius nodded, his cold blue eyes looking over towards Harry, a smile twisting his lips.

"Potter is not for you just now, Lucius. It is time for you to complete your assignment. Her friend has failed to show up."

"It will be my pleasure. It's a pity though, that I can only kill the parents. I know Draco would like a shot at..."

"Enough Lucius! You talk too much. Now go and enjoy yourself. You are to bring their bodies back here when you are done as an example to those who disobey me!"

"I will do so Lord," Lucius answered and then swept from the room with Crabbe and Goyle. Harry had listened to their conversation and her heart sank. She knew now who had betrayed her. There could only be one person that Lucius and Draco would want to see harmed so badly other than herself. The same person who had reminded her that Voldemort could make people do things they didn't want to do, and would use threats and intimidation to attain his desires. Harry's heart was in turmoil...

"Hermione, no!" Ron choked, scowling in disbelief. "Headmaster, there must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake, Mr. Weasley. Miss Granger has committed a terrible wrong against both you and Harry, she must now rectify it."

Sirius moved over to face Hermione, his brown eyes glaring with rage. He had all he could do to contain himself from slapping her in the face.

"Hermione Granger, if Harry dies I will find you wherever you are at and you will be made to suffer the same way as she did. Do you understand me?" he asked softly, his cruel smile belying the calmness in his voice.

"Miss Granger, what did the Dark Lord offer you in exchange for Harry?" Snape questioned looking down his nose at the frightened teen.

"Professors, Ron, please believe me. I had no choice. I ran into him in Hogsmeade. He was disguised and stopped me on the street to ask about the magic shop," Hermione began to cry softly; "he used the *Imperious* curse with a memory charm on me to make me jealous of Harry. He had me believing that she felt she was better than me because I'm Muggle Born. I tried to fight, but I couldn't. He said he would kill my parents. He knew everything about them, and even conjured a picture of them at work. He told me that if I told anyone he would kill them along with me and Harry. Professor, he had my mum's wedding ring."

"How did he contact you?" Professor Lupin asked with concern.

"He would prearrange the meetings for early in the morning. He showed me how to put everyone under the sleeping charm. I timed the night watches to get past the teachers and Mr. Filch. I was also the one who left the door open to the roof. Harry wasn't supposed to get out; I was supposed to let Mr. Malfoy in later in the evening."

"Did you let Malfoy in the night he attacked Professor Snape?" Dumbledore questioned his blue eyes intense and angry.

"Yes, I opened the door from the kitchen after the house elves were done for the night. I put a masking spell on it so no one would notice," Hermione sobbed. "Headmaster, please, my parents...he'll...kill them if...I don't...go to him."

"Your parents are safe, Hermione. The Aurors have been guarding them since you helped us to question Pettigrew. Moody alerted me that the Death eaters were watching them. Unfortunately, I did not receive his owl until just before today's Quidditch match. If Voldemort's men try to get to your parents, they will be walking into a trap. Unfortunately, I did not anticipate that Voldemort would have you use the snitch as a portkey."

"Oh, Professor Dumbledore, if Harry dies it will be my fault," Hermione wept, shaking with fear and grief. "I tried to tell her just before Christmas. I made sure to... remind her that... Voldemort... can make people do things... they don't want to. Please...you...have to...do something."

"Headmaster, Hermione is telling the truth. I was there. It was the same day that Professor Black's story was in the Daily Prophet; just before Hermione caught the train home for the Holiday," Ron affirmed glumly. Voldemort was holding his best friend and his other friend had betrayed her out of fear for her family.

"Hermione, I want you to stop crying, and calm down," Dumbledore said guiding her over to the sofa. "It is imperative that you tell us where you sent Harry. We need to get to her before Voldemort finds out his men have walked into a trap."

"I...I sent her...to...the...Riddle...mansion."

"Damn!" Sirius swore brushing the hair back from his forehead, "how are we going to get in? I'm sure that bastard has traps and charms everywhere."

"I can get in," Snape looked at Black, his dark eyes unwavering. "I will go and try to get her out."

"I'm sorry, Severus, but that is out of the question," Dumbledore said shaking his head negatively. "It is far too dangerous for you to go alone."

"I'll go with him. He can say he has deliberately not been answering the summons in order to convince you of his loyalty so he could get the kind of information Voldemort wants. He can offer me up as his prisoner," Sirius spoke resolutely.

"What if Voldemort questions him about the night Lucius attacked?" Remus asked logically.

"I'll tell him I did not trust Lucius, and did not believe he would have him kill me within the building. I can say that I was going to tell him everything after he took me back to his current hiding place when Lucius was no longer present. Harry just happened to come along and spoil my plan."

"I don't like it, but it is the only plan we have at the moment," Dumbledore mulled it over in his mind. "Perhaps I should go with you..."

"So my dear, Miss Potter, I see by the look in your eyes you know now who has betrayed you. Your little Mud Blood friend, Hermione Granger. She was so easy to manipulate. She didn't have the skill to fight the *Imperious* curse; she actually believed at first that you thought you were better than her. Of course, once I had her under control I let her know it was a lie," Voldemort gloated licking his lips with pleasure.

"Hermione didn't betray me. She did what any kid would do. She chose her parents lives over that of her friend. My guess is she didn't come because she's afraid, but because she is with Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore, what has that old fool got to do with this?"

"Albus Dumbledore is not a fool. He has powers you'll never have. I'll bet you he knew you had Hermione under a charm."

"Then why are you here, Harry? You're oh so perfect Headmaster is allowing you to suffer for the fun of it. I think not."

"I'm here, because he expected something like this to happen. He is probably planning his next move right now," Harry laughed, hoping she sounded convincing. "For all you know we planned it this way in order to trap you."

"Did you now," Voldemort jerked Harry around to face him, "let's just find out how much you really do know. McNair, use the whip on her back!" Voldemort threw her face down onto the

floor, tearing her Quidditch robes to expose her back. A moment later, she felt the sting of the whip and winced with pain, but she refused to cry out. "Hit her again!" Voldemort screamed in anger.

"Yes, Lord, with pleasure," McNair chuckled reveling in her pain as he came down harder on her back a second and third time.

"*Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!*" Lord Voldemort glowered over her, hitting her with the curses at the same time as the whip came down on her back. "I am going to kill you, Harry, but very slowly. If you think you are in pain now, wait until tonight. All my followers will see you die, and they will know you are nothing more than a stupid little meddling witch, no better than your parents were."

"My parents were brave and honorable. They died to stop you and I will too. I plan on sending you straight to Hell for all the pain and suffering you have caused in the world," Harry spat at him, her lips bleeding from where she bit them to keep from screaming.

"Hit her again, McNair! The little bitch is stubborn, but she will beg me to kill her later; *Crucio!*" Voldemort continued to curse her, with every crack of McNair's whip, and finally Harry could no longer refrain from crying out. "So you do have a breaking point. Severus would be proud you lasted this long. Pity I have to kill you. It would be fun to keep this up for months on end. Now," Voldemort said as he prodded her with his boot, "what can you tell me about Dumbledore's plans?"

"His vacation plans?" Harry looked up at him with a rictus smile.

"*Crucio!* You bitch. You will answer me!" Voldemort exploded and McNair didn't wait to be told to use the whip again.

Harry's back was being laid raw, and she knew she couldn't stand much more without passing out soon. Even if she had known Dumbledore's plans, she would never tell Voldemort. She would die first. As these thoughts were passing through her head, Harry caught sight of a slight movement in the hallway. She knew that whoever it was, they had been listening for a few minutes and did not want to be discovered.

"Lord Voldemort," Draco Malfoy entered, kneeling in submission, "my father has returned. It was a trap!"

"I told you never to interrupt me, Draco," Voldemort's red eyes burned like fire.

"I am sorry; Lord Voldemort, but my father and the others were attacked by Mad Eye Moody. They lost Avery."

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort cursed Harry one more time, and then conjured up some salt, putting it onto her raw back. Tears streamed from her eyes, but she refused to yell out again. "Draco, I am leaving you to guard our guest. See to it that she is made comfortable," Voldemort instructed as he released the bonds on Harry's wrists, which were now bloody and swollen from where she had struggled against them as he had cursed her. "You may play with her if you like, and practice your *Cruciatus* and *Imperious* Curses. If you can get her to scream, I will give you a promotion, and let you help to recruit our younger members."

"Yes, Lord. I will do my best," Draco smiled worshipfully.

"McNair, come with me. If I find out that someone screwed up there will be hell to pay," Lord Voldemort swept from the room, his robes billowing out behind him, with McNair following in his wake.

"*Crucio!*" Draco yelled with a smile as Voldemort exited. "*Crucio...* Potter," he whispered after the Dark Lord had gone, "I don't want to stay here. Voldemort is a lunatic and my father is a sadistic bastard. I can't leave though, since I think that they are planning something big, and my father is always watching me. Listen, Nagini is coming, *Crucio!*" Draco cursed her again to avoid his being overheard by the snake. He was amazed at her ability to fight through the curses and not cry out, despite the obvious pain on her features.

Harry saw the snake pass by them in the hallway and was aware that the snake was muttering about how her master had kicked her earlier. She ignored Harry and Draco and kept going.

Once Harry could no longer hear her talking to herself, she scanned Draco's emotions. He was frightened, and worried.

"Draco," she whispered, "I told you that you would have to make a choice the last time we met. Are you prepared to fight with Dumbledore to stop this tyrant?"

"Can you keep me from going to Azkaban? They keep taking me on raids, but so far I have only watched."

"Will you testify against them?"

"If I have to, yes."

"What about your father?"

"I hate him. He practices cursing people on me and my mother."

"I can't promise you anything. If you keep me informed I will talk to Dumbledore, but you will have to prove to me you are not working with them and trying to trick me. As you learn things, send an owl to Dobby with an envelope addressed to Jamie Evans. Dobby will see that it gets to me. Once I'm satisfied you're on the level, I will talk to Dumbledore."

"What if I'm caught before then?"

"Don't be," Harry warned studying him. She could feel his fear, but he was also excited that she might believe him. She knew he hated his father and was worried about his mother.

"Someone's coming, quickly, curse me again!"

"*Crucio!*" he yelled, as the younger Crabbe and Goyle peeked in. "What do you two want? Lord Voldemort put me in charge of Potter."

"We just wanted to see how you were doing," Goyle responded and Crabbe nodded in agreement.

"Well, as you can see I'm doing fine, now go away and let me have some fun," Draco waved his wand at them threateningly, and they left the room hastily. "Potter, you have to get out of here. Voldemort is going to kill you tonight and have a feast over your corpse."

"Draco, knock over some furniture to make it look like we had a struggle, then give me your wand. I'll knock you out and get the hell out of here."

"How? The building is under heavy guard. You can't just walk out of here."

"Draco, there's no time to explain. Just trust me," Harry hissed, deliberately knocking over a chair, as she rose from the floor unsteadily. Draco moved the coffee table onto its side while Harry then turned over a lamp, spilling a bottle of ink on the desk. "Now, give me your wand. I'll see that it's left on the floor for when you wake up."

"Here, but I still don't see..."

"*Stupefy!*" Harry stunned him before he could finish the sentence. She then went over and opened the window, throwing the wand back over by Draco, and transformed. She was tired and would need to rest before returning back to human form, but should be able to make it back home to Hogwarts. None of Voldemort's Deathaters paid attention to the great bird as it flew overhead and the village of Little Hangleton disappeared behind her into the late afternoon shadows...

"Professor Dumbledore, is there anything I can do to help?" Ron asked worriedly.

"You can take Miss Granger back to Gryffindor Tower and tell the Prefect she is not to be allowed to leave. I will determine her punishment depending on what happens to Harry," Dumbledore informed them gravely. "Miss Granger, if I may have your wand please?"

"My...wand...Headmaster?" Hermione asked with trepidation.

"Yes, Hermione. I do not believe you should be entitled to the privilege of having a wand at this time. I will not break it however until I decide if you should be expelled." Dumbledore spoke with the austerity of his position, as he took Hermione's wand and put it into his desk drawer. "Ron, after you escort Hermione back to the tower, I want you to bring Snuffles over to Hagrid and ask him to look after her while we try to rescue Harry."

"Yes, Headmaster," Ron replied. "Come on, Hermione, you had best do as Professor Dumbledore orders; you're in enough trouble already."

"I'm coming," she said following him to the moving stairs. "You all hate me now, don't you?"  
"No, Child, but we expected you of all people to be able to distinguish when to speak up. Instead you made matters worse, by not coming forward."

"I'm sorry, really I am. Harry would die to protect any one of us, but I was too afraid to do the same for her," Hermione began to sob hysterically, as Ron took her by the shoulders, guiding her back towards Gryffindor Tower.

"Severus, I don't need to tell you how much of a risk this will be. Voldemort wants you dead as much as Harry and he has already forgiven you on more than one occasion."

"That is why Black's plan may work. Our hatred for each other is well known, and he is Miss Potter's godfather. Voldemort will want to make her suffer by watching him in pain."

"The question is can you keep him from killing Sirius?" Remus demanded apprehensively.

"He will not kill him if I can convince him that he is privy to Albus plans. He will however plan on torturing him, with Miss Potter present."

"But how will you alert Albus to cause a diversion long enough for you to grab Harry and Sirius and get out with the portkey he made from your boot?"

"I am sure that Voldemort will hit me with at least one *Cruciatus* Curse. I will, quite simply scream."

"But you never..." Remus voice trailed off as he realized the simplicity of it. Severus never screamed until he was practically half-dead from the pain.

"Remus I will need you to stay here. Should we fail, you and Minerva must evacuate the school. Any student who is not considered a Pure Blood will be in danger. You will also alert both the Order and the Ministry. It is already almost five, and the sun will be setting soon. If we have not returned by midnight, then you will consider us lost and do as I have instructed."

"Headmaster...Albus...I"

"Don't argue with me, Remus. Time is of the essence. I am trusting you with the safety of our students," Dumbledore put his hand on Remus arm, and looked at him over his half moon spectacles.

"Very well, but I will be expecting you all to get back here safely," Remus answered, looking at them all and trying to sound convincing. Nevertheless, was unable to hide the worry in his tone.

"Then let's get going," Sirius smiled at his old friend, "the sooner we leave, the sooner we'll be back."

"We will apparate down by the path to Hogsmeade," Dumbledore informed them quietly.

"Remus, why don't you accompany us to the apparition point and then go and see to Mr. Weasley. He may wish to wait with you. I know he is worried and angry."

"Thank you, Albus. I will do that," Remus Lupin responded as the four men left the Headmaster's office, prepared for the ordeal they believed they would each be facing...

Ron escorted Hermione back to Gryffindor Tower in silence, unable to find the forgiveness in his heart to comfort her. 'What would I have done in her place? Could I have risked the lives of my family to help my friend?' he questioned himself silently. 'Why didn't she use her smarts and just write a letter to Dumbledore or Harry to tell them what had happened?' he sighed inwardly, confused and hurt. 'Hermione never really was people smart. She's more book smart. It probably never occurred to her that Harry and Dumbledore would have protected them all. Hell, her family was being protected and she never even knew it. If only she had trusted her friends, a little bit more. Now she'll probably be expelled, and Voldemort may have gained the edge he has been waiting for. Please, Merlin let the Prophecy be right; let Harry be okay.' he thought as he walked her into the Common Room and the other students eyed them suspiciously, as Ron had a private word with the House Prefect.

Ginny had been sitting with Hermione when Harry had disappeared and had seen the wand flash. The students all knew Hermione had been responsible for what ever had happened to Harry.

"I know how hard he is to resist, Hermione, but you could have come to any one of us," Ginny told her quietly, while Hermione shifted uncomfortably.

"He threatened my family. They're Muggles, and wouldn't have had a chance," Hermione cried, running upstairs into the girls' dorm. She flung herself onto her bed, and lay there crying, wondering if her friends would ever forgive her, and if she could ever forgive herself for being so stupid. 'If Harry comes out of this alive, I promise that I will spend the rest of my life making it up to her.'

Ron had been glad to escape the scene in Gryffindor Tower and had not seen fit to come to Hermione's aid. It would be up to Harry how to deal with her friend, but for now, she was ostracized. The other students considered her a traitor, since unlike Ginny, she had not been kidnapped and used to try to restore Voldemort. As he reached Harry's room, he heard Snuffles at the door and called out to her.

"Hey, Snuffles, it's Ron. Would you like to go outside for awhile?"

"Woof. Woof!" Snuffles barked and whined at the door.

"Okay, puppy," Ron spoke to the dog, "I'll take you." He used Harry's new password, 'Padfoot' to enter, and Snuffles leaped up on him as he opened the door. "Hey, girl, don't worry. Harry will be home soon. In the meantime Uncle Ron will take care of you, okay?" he questioned her as he pet her affectionately. He found talking to her was extremely comforting, and realized how badly he had wanted to cry. 'I need to be strong for Harry. She will need me when she gets back.'

"Woof," Snuffles barked again going over to her bowl, and Ron noticed it was empty. Harry had always fed Snuffles herself, feeling it was her responsibility and not that of the house elves.

"Hungry, huh?" he asked the dog and she wagged her tail. "Then we'll eat first and I'll see you have a good run." Ron picked up the bag of dog food that Harry had learned to keep out of Snuffles reach, and poured some into her bowl. As she ate, he took her water dish and filled it up in the bathroom. He waited until Snuffles had finished, then attached her leash, since he didn't know if she would run away from him, and headed down stairs. Reaching the main entrance, he was just in time to meet the Professors on their way to rescue Harry.

"Mr. Weasley, would you like to walk with us to the apparition site?" Dumbledore asked as Snuffles greeted them all happily. She was sniffing, and Sirius knew she was confused and looking for Harry.

"Yes, Sir. Snuffles will enjoy the walk too. Are you all going?"

"No, Professor Lupin will wait with you. I want you both to see that the school is safe," Dumbledore said in an effort to include Ron and make him feel as if he was contributing.

"I'll do my best, Sir."

"We know you will, Ron," Sirius looked at the teen confidently. "Harry will need your support when she gets back."

"I just wish..."

"No, Mr. Weasley, Harry could not bear it if anything happened to you. As it is she will have to deal with the situation with Miss Granger," Professor Snape stated knowing that Ron wanted to go with them.

"I know," Ron replied somewhat crestfallen.

"Ron, I'd like to go too, but someone has to mind the house," Professor Lupin patted the youth on his back. "Just be glad that she has three of the best wizards that ever came out of Hogwarts on her side. I'm sure they'll all give Voldemort a good kick in the ass."

Ron smiled at Professor Lupin, glad that he was treating him as an equal, and talking to him as if they were old friends. "With both Dumbledore and Harry, he'll have more than he ever bargained for," the youth replied.

"Then this is where we all part company for the time being," Dumbledore announced as they reached the path to Hogsmeade. "I will be..."

"Woof, Woof, Woof..." Snuffles picked that moment to start barking frantically and pulling hard on her leash, almost knocking Ron off his feet.

"Professors, I'm sorry. I don't know what's the matter with her."

"Let her go, Ron," Sirius told him, "I think she senses something."

"Probably just a rabbit. If I let her go..."

"Woooffff..." Snuffles howled cutting Ron off in mid sentence as she wrapped the leash around his legs, and stared up at the darkening sky....

Harry had been flying for what seemed like hours. Her back hurt, and it was an effort to fly. The muscles she needed to use her wings were directly linked to those in her back and it was an agony to keep on going. Her insides felt like they were on fire too, as the *Cruciatus* curses had not yet fully worn off and wouldn't for several more hours. She wasn't even sure if she was going in the right direction, but her instincts told her to go that way, so she did. She wanted to stop and rest, but was afraid she would not be able to get aloft again.

She was also worried about Sirius. She knew he would be frantic about her disappearance and hoped he wouldn't do something impulsive. 'What if he found out that it was Hermione that had betrayed her? What would he do then?' All these thoughts gave her the impetus to keep on going, and finally, as the sun was getting low in the sky, she could make out the towers of Hogwarts in the distance.

'Just a few more miles...just a few...more...miles,' she chanted to herself, not realizing she was actually making a cooing sound in her throat. Finally the village of Hogsmeade was beneath her and she could see the castle torches just coming on in the twilight. 'I'm home...I made...it...' she said with relief and could feel the tears welling up in her eyes. Blinking she thought she saw a group of people standing on the path leading from the school into town. In her pain and exhaustion she had to look hard to see who they were, and then she heard Snuffles. 'My family, they're here looking for me...Snuffles...' she called, not knowing that from the ground five figures had looked up when the dog had howled. They had heard her screech, and could see a large scarlet bird coming towards them, struggling to land...

"By Merlin's beard, it's Harry!" Dumbledore exclaimed as the dog continued to cry and Ron detached the leash.

Snuffles bounded forward and Ron took off behind her. Sirius transformed and passed them both as the Phoenix crashed to the ground. He could see she was breathing heavily, and was utterly exhausted. Sniffing her gently he scented blood, and noticed how the feathers on her back were wet and sticky. He quickly transformed as she watched him, her sides heaving.

"Sirius, why isn't she transforming back?" Ron panted racing up to him behind Snuffles, who sat down and began to whine.

"She can't Ron, she's badly hurt and exhausted. We need to get her into the castle," he explained as the others came over to where Harry lay injured.

"How bad is it Sirius? I can scent the blood."

"I'm not sure, Remus. She's too exhausted to try and communicate with me."

"She's in shock," Dumbledore said quietly, removing his outer robe. He gently wrapped it around her, and sent her a warm surge of energy.

"Headmaster, if I may be so bold, I don't think we should take her to Madam Pomfrey. Not in her animagus form, anyway."

"I agree, Severus. We will take her to her room. Ron, you take Snuffles, and go and get Professor McGonagall. She and Sirius will have to help her transform back into her human form. Meet us up in Harry's room," Dumbledore instructed the youth with authority.

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore," Ron replied taking off at a run towards the castle.

"Don't worry, Child. You're home and safe. We'll all take care of you," Dumbledore gently spoke to Harry as he carefully picked her up and began walking towards the castle.

"Albus do you realize that if Harry had been a few minutes later and Snuffles hadn't been here to alert us, the three of you would have been at the Riddle Mansion?"

"Yes, our little rescue mission would have been a failure, Remus."

Harry trilled up at Dumbledore and blinked when she heard what Remus had said. They had been coming to help her! Thank god they had spotted her. She made up her mind that as soon as she was well enough, she would give Snuffles a big steak for saving them by alerting them to her presence. For now though, she just wanted to cuddle up to the warmth and comfort that Dumbledore emitted as he carried her the rest of the way into Hogwarts, and safety. Everything else could wait until tomorrow...

## Recovery

Harry woke slowly, stretching her muscles. Her joints were stiff, and her back was sore, but the bed was warm and cozy. She knew that it would be awhile before she was fully recovered from her ordeal with Lord Voldemort. Professor McGonagall and Sirius had helped her to transform back from her animagus form. It had been a slow and tedious process, since Harry was so tired and the transformation was painful due to her injuries, but she had finally managed it.

Harry's injuries had been severe, and Madam Pomfrey had asked Dumbledore to send for the local healer. They had both worked over her for more than an hour, with the healer searching for any internal injuries from the repeated *Cruciatius* curses. There had been several, and he was able to discern that Harry had a miraculous ability for healing herself. When he had finished he told Dumbledore that her own ability to heal was what had kept her going. Of course, he did suggest that she might just want to go into medicine. She just smiled and told him she would consider it as Madam Pomfrey put a healing salve on her back.

While none of them had openly said anything, it had been apparent by their expressions that they were both shocked and angry at the condition of her back, and the bruises on her body. She had haltingly told them what had happened after being transported to the Riddle Mansion. Sirius had been furious that Voldemort had actually dared to hint that he had planned to violate her sexually, and sat cradling her compassionately knowing how difficult it had been for her to tell him.

Professor Snape wore his usual scowl, but was more than a little interested in Voldemort's remarks about him. He did venture to mention that Harry had been right, and that her ability to keep from crying out had bought her the time she had needed to escape. Dumbledore and Remus agreed. Sirius had looked at him with gratitude, actually shaking his hand. Snape took the whole thing with his usual stoic manner. Harry could feel the torrent of emotions inside of them both. Sirius, who had hated Snape ever since their days as students together, was actually beginning to think he had been wrong. Severus was slowly beginning to believe that maybe he could fit in with them after all. Dumbledore and Remus merely exchanged glances and smiled.

The only thing Harry did not tell them was that Draco had helped her to escape. She merely said that he had been left to guard her and she was able to overpower him and get hold of his wand, stunning him. Dumbledore had listened to this with interest, and his blue eyes studied her intently. She wondered if he suspected the truth, but had refrained from saying anything. Stretching again, she finally opened her eyes to find Sirius sitting beside her and smiling.

"What are you smiling about? You look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

"I'm smiling because you look so pretty in your sleep."

"I'm sure that right now I probably look pretty bad."

"I think you look beautiful," Sirius said as he brushed the hair from her forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Hungry," she grinned up at him, "is there anything to eat?"

"I'll have the house elves send you up something. The healer says you need to eat light for the next day or two."

"That doesn't sound too thrilling," Harry pouted. "I would have really enjoyed some pancakes and eggs."

"Well, my dear, it's going to be more like some cereal and fresh fruit," he laughed ringing for the house elf, and Dobby appeared.

"Miss Harry is awake! Miss Harry is awake!" Dobby bounced gleefully. "What would Miss Harry like for breakfast?"

"Miss Harry needs to eat something light for the next few days, Dobby. I believe Nurse Pomfrey sent the list to the kitchen."

"Don't listen to him, Dobby. I want pancakes and eggs."

"Dobby must obey the nurse's orders," the elf said flattening his ears in confusion. "Perhaps Dobby can talk to the Headmaster and get you pancakes?"

"I'm afraid I will agree with Madam Pomfrey. Harry needs time to recuperate," Dumbledore's voice came from the door.

"I'm sorry, Miss Harry, but Dobby must listen to Dumbledore. He pays Dobby's salary. Can Dobby do something else to make you feel better?"

"Yes, Dobby, come here. I have something to tell you."

"You have something to tell Dobby?"

"Only if you can keep a secret?" she asked mischievously

"Dobby can keep a secret," he responded slyly bending over to let her whisper in his ear. This was just what Harry was hoping for. She quickly told him that if an owl should come to him with a letter for Jamie Evans, he was to bring it to her immediately. He was not to tell anyone.

"Dobby can't bring Miss Harry any food later without permission," he winked conspiratorially so the others would believe she had asked him to sneak her some snacks.

"Dobby!" Harry groaned, going along with the deception, "I can't live on what they want to give me."

"I'm sorry, Miss Harry, but Dumbledore says no!" Dobby then snapped his fingers and disappeared while Sirius and Dumbledore laughed and her breakfast appeared on a bed tray.

"How are you feeling this morning, Child?" Dumbledore inquired as he sat down on the bed beside her.

"I'm okay, just a little stiff and sore."

"That is to be expected. You were very lucky. Do you feel up to talking with me while you eat your breakfast?"

"What do you want to talk about? I'm sure it isn't the upcoming Easter recess," Harry remarked trying to sound casual as she studied Dumbledore's expression and glanced over at Sirius.

"Well first I would like to congratulate you on a wonderful game of Quidditch. That was one of the cleverest catches I have ever seen, using a keeper move to retrieve the snitch."

"Snape will never live it down, either," Sirius snickered, as he checked out what was on her breakfast tray.

"Sirius, if you're hungry, go ahead and eat it. I'm certainly not," Harry grimaced looking at the grapefruit wedges, farina, and apple juice.

"Child, you need to eat. You said you were hungry."

"I am, just not for that," she pouted pushing the tray out of her way. "I don't like farina, anyway."

"Very well," Dumbledore sighed, waving his wand, causing the tray to vanish. What would you like besides pancakes?"

"A croissant and some strawberries would be nice."

"Dobby, did you hear that?" Dumbledore asked to the air, and the food magically appeared, along with a cup of tea and a vase containing some daffodils.

"Headmaster, you know you have her very spoiled," Sirius shook his head affectionately at the old wizard.

"Do I?" Dumbledore winked and Harry giggled, taking a bite of her croissant.

"So do we get to have any more Quidditch matches?" she demanded looking from one to the other.

"I haven't decided yet."

"Pleeeeeeaaasssee..." Harry begged. I had such a great time, even if it did end in disaster. Besides, the person responsible has been caught..." Harry couldn't finish the sentence. It was too painful to think about Hermione, and she averted her gaze to avoid Dumbledore's intense eyes. "Where's Snuffles?" She asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"Hagrid is keeping an eye on her while you recuperate," Sirius informed her quietly. "Ron brought her over to him last night after we got you back into the building. Ron asked to see you last night and first thing this morning. Hagrid also asked how you are, but Albus wanted to give you time to rest before allowing too many people up."

"Can you get Snuffles for me?" Harry implored Sirius. "I want to get her a nice big steak. If she hadn't let you all know I was here...well...I shudder to think what may have happened."

"Of course I will. I'm sure we can all help with her for a few days. In fact I'll go and get her now if you like?"

"I would. I have gotten used to her being here."

"Albus, do you mind staying with Harry for a few minutes, while I go and retrieve Snuffles?"

"Not at all, it will give us some time to talk." Dumbledore waited until Sirius left, studying Harry as she concentrated on her breakfast. He knew she did not yet want to face the subject of Hermione. "You're going to have to talk about it sometime."

"Talk about what?" Harry questioned feigning ignorance.

"Harry...you know I'm referring to Hermione," Dumbledore responded patiently.

"There's nothing to talk about. She had her reasons for doing what she did. It just hurts to know that she didn't feel she could trust us to stop the situation before it got worse."

"You said last night that Voldemort told you what he had done. Do you believe it?"

"Yes, Hermione was no match for Voldemort's *Imperious* curse. He laughed about how easy it was to control her. Does she know that he had no intention of keeping his word about sparing them?"

"Not yet, Child. I thought you might like to tell her yourself. I need to make a decision about Hermione's punishment today, but wanted to talk with you first."

"What do you mean her punishment?" Harry looked up startled.

"Harry, what Hermione did would normally warrant her being expelled. I have taken her wand for the time being."

"Headmaster, no! Please don't expel Hermione. She was only trying to protect her parents. I know if my parents were alive and Voldemort threatened them I probably would have done the same thing."

"Her actions resulted in your being kidnapped, and could have caused the deaths of you, Hermione, and Mr. and Mrs. Granger. She was consorting with a dark wizard and jeopardizing the safety of this school. Hermione was the one who helped let Lucius in, and left the door to the tower open."

"Professor Dumbledore, Hermione had no control over the situation. She was afraid and used bad judgment. Please give her another chance. She isn't the first person to be used by Voldemort," Harry pleaded, as there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Harry called.

"Excuse me, Miss Potter," Professor Snape said opening the door, "but I need to speak with the Headmaster for a moment."

"Professor your timing couldn't have come at a better moment. Please come in and sit down."

"Is something the matter, Severus?" Dumbledore asked as the Potions Master came in and seated himself in the empty chair where Sirius had been.

Professor Snape studied Harry intently for a moment, his dark eyes serious, before shaking his head and turning towards Dumbledore. "I thought you should know that there are rumors running all over the school that Miss Potter is dead, and that Miss Granger is responsible. I am concerned for her safety."

"Miss Granger is still confined to her room in Gryffindor Tower. I shall have Minerva reassure her fellow Gryffindors that Miss Potter is indeed alive, and that if she feels well enough, she will be down for dinner in the Great Hall."

"I'll be there if one of you has to carry me," Harry tossed her head vehemently. "This brings me back to what we were talking about, Professor Dumbledore. Professor Snape is a very

good example of giving someone a second chance. He's done far worse things than Hermione, yet you still can find it in you to trust him. He was a member of Voldemort's inner circle. All Hermione did was fall victim to an *Imperious* curse and her own fear," Harry said looking from one to the other in agitation, grimacing in pain as she tried to reach over to Dumbledore. "Calm down, Child," Dumbledore soothed leaning her back down onto the pillows. "You have a good and honest heart, and Hermione is lucky to have you as her friend. Now I want you to rest, and let me worry about how to discipline Hermione. I promise I will consider everything you have just said," he told her noncommittally, his eyes moist with affection. "For now, you need to recuperate. Poppy will be down in a little while to put some more salve on your back. Then if you feel up to it I will let you have some visitors this afternoon."

"Can Hermione come down?"

"If you are ready to see her, yes, I will allow a brief visit. Afterwards I will decide if you can eat downstairs," he winked, tweaking her nose, as the door opened and Snuffles bounded in with Ron and Sirius.

"Snuffles, Ron!" Harry exclaimed her face brightening as the clumsy puppy came over. Placing her front paws on the bed to have her ears scratched, tail wagging furiously, she sniffed her mistress and gave her a big slurpy kiss on the face. "Yech, dog breath," she laughed, pushing the overlarge pup back onto the floor.

Professor Dumbledore rose, indicating Ron should take his place. "Mr. Weasley, I see you weren't going to be put off any longer about visiting Harry."

"I'm sorry, Albus, I told Ron he could come up for a few minutes. He's been haunting Remus all morning for information about Harry's condition."

"Headmaster, people are asking me if Harry is dead. I keep telling them no, but they don't always believe me."

"Maybe I'm a zombie..." Harry intoned in a deep voice trying to sound spooky. "Be careful lest I try and attack you...", she continued, throwing her pillow at him with a grin. They all laughed, and Ron handed her back the pillow, red faced.

"Wait till you're better, Harry Potter. I'll get you for that."

"Wanna bet?"

"All right you two, Harry needs to rest. Poppy told me to expect her by ten, and it's five of now," Sirius said looking at his watch.

"Mr. Weasley, you can have a good visit with her after lunch," Dumbledore smiled, and I would appreciate it if you would bring Miss Granger with you. I will have Professor McGonagall inform the Prefect she is to accompany you."

"You want to see Hermione?" Ron asked Harry wide eyed.

"Don't tell me you want her expelled too?"

"Expelled?" Ron jumped up looking at Dumbledore worriedly.

"I have made no decisions as of yet, Mr. Weasley. Harry has pled Miss Granger's case to me for consideration. Do you have anything to say?"

"Uh...yes, Sir, I do. Hermione only did what any one of us probably would have done. She was being used and she was scared. Professor Dumbledore, Hermione is very smart when it comes to books and stuff like that, but her people skills...well...she's still learning."

"I was just giving Professor Dumbledore examples of people who have made mistakes and been forgiven," Harry said quietly. "I have just thought of another one, too."

"What might that be, Child?"

"Sirius. He should have been expelled for the time he almost got Professor Snape killed by Remus, but you were able to forgive him. This is just a similar situation," she said reminding Dumbledore of the infamous prank Sirius had pulled as a student, sending Severus Snape down the secret passage from the Whomping Willow to face Remus Lupin in his werewolf form. Snape would have been killed if Harry's father hadn't gone and rescued him just in time.

"I'm sure Professor Snape will agree," she looked at the Potions Master, who shifted uncomfortably at the memory.

"Sorry, Professor Black, but Harry's right Sir," Ron pleaded with Dumbledore before Snape could reply. "Can't you punish Hermione some other way?"

"Ron, I will tell you the same thing that I told Harry. I will take what you have said under consideration, and that she is lucky to have two such forgiving and loyal friends. Now it is time for me to attend to some of the business of running this school, while you, Mr. Weasley are to do as I have instructed and allow Harry to rest. I believe Nurse Pomfrey is here anyway," Dumbledore said as there was another knock on the door and Ron stood up to leave. "I'll see you after lunch then, Harry. I'll bring my chess set and we can have a couple of good games together."

"Sounds good," she smiled as he left with Dumbledore and Professor Snape as the nurse entered.

"Miss Potter, you certainly know how to keep me on my toes. You should be up in the infirmary, but the Headmaster refused to put you there. Heaven knows why. You certainly won't get any rest down here, and that dog will spread germs everywhere. You're liable to get an infection on top of everything else," Madam Pomfrey complained good naturedly as she laid out her salves and sterile gauze to treat the wounds on Harry's back.

"I'll just go and grade some papers while Poppy works on your wounds, Harry," Sirius said going over to sit at Harry's desk and pulling out a sheaf of papers. His back was towards her, and she knew this was actually an attempt to provide her some privacy while the nurse helped her to remove her pajama top.

"You're healing well, Miss Potter. This salve works quite well and there will be no scars. The wounds should all be healed by tomorrow evening. It would have been sooner, but due to the number and the amount of abrasion around them, it is taking a bit longer than usual."

"Ouch," Harry winced as Poppy applied the salve. Her skin was still very sensitive to touch and the wounds were painful, but the salve had a pleasant numbing effect as it was absorbed and Harry began to relax.

Madam Pomfrey did a quick scan and checked her vital signs, before nodding with a satisfied smile. "You mend quickly, Harry, but I'm going to insist that you stay in bed until tomorrow. You are still recovering from the injuries created by the *Cruciatus* curses."

"Madam Pomfrey, Professor Dumbledore said I might be able to go downstairs for dinner tonight."

"Absolutely not, it's out of the question. Professor Black, I expect you to see that she follows orders," Poppy remarked as Harry buttoned her pajama top and Sirius turned to face them.

"I'll inform the Headmaster, Poppy," he agreed as Harry mouthed 'traitor' behind the nurse's back to Sirius.

"Then I'll be back late this evening since this salve needs to be applied every twelve hours," she informed them both as she gathered her supplies and left the room.

"Sirius, you're not mad at me for reminding Professor Dumbledore that he could have expelled you for that prank, are you?"

"If I were mad, you would know about it. I will say this though; you put up one hell of an argument in Hermione's behalf. I know I wouldn't have."

"I'll bet my dad put up the same kind of argument for you after what happened with Snape."

"He never told me what happened that night after he spoke with Dumbledore," Sirius frowned thoughtfully. "I just knew that Snape had poked his nose into my business one time too many. He would have told the whole school about Remus being a werewolf if Dumbledore hadn't stopped him."

"Speaking of our resident werewolf where is he? He hasn't been up to visit me yet."

"He's resting and will be up this afternoon. He is leaving Severus a lesson plan for tomorrow since tonight he will be out howling at the moon."

"I forgot tonight is the first night of the full moon. Professor Snape will be in his glory tomorrow, but I sure won't. I have Remus class tomorrow," Harry groaned.

"I don't think Snape will be too hard on you. He was more than a little upset when he saw what McNair and Voldemort had done to you. We all were," Sirius replied hugging her gently to avoid causing her any pain. "I'm just grateful you're alive."

"Well I'm grateful that I made it back before you all came to rescue me," Harry looked at him, resting her head on his shoulder, her green eyes wide with wonder. "What actually happened when I disappeared after I caught the snitch?"

"It was almost mass bedlam, but Severus had Dean announce that all students were to return to their common rooms."

"Who found out it was Hermione that turned the snitch into a portkey?"

"Dumbledore. He had Severus, Remus, Ron and me go up to his office. He met us up there with Hermione. He had been watching the game and the students with his Omnioculars and saw the wand flash. Ron told us Ginny did too. They were sitting together."

"I still can't believe it was her. We are all so close. I think that's what hurts the most. It will be a long time before I can trust her again."

"I know. I was furious with her when I found out. I told her that if you died, I would find her and make her suffer the same way you did."

"Oh Sirius, you didn't. You probably scared her half to death. You are so impulsive. That is the same kind of behavior that landed you in Azkaban."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but that is how I felt. I'm still angry with her, but I understand why she did it. It just bothers me that such an intelligent young woman could not find a way out of her situation with Lord Voldemort."

"Sirius, she was scared to death. Hell, Voldemort scares the crap out of me, and I've had to face off with him," Harry shuddered remembering some of her encounters with the Dark Lord. "Hermione never even saw him before this happened to her, and you have to remember she's Muggle born. Her parents would have been playthings in Voldemort's hands." Harry snuggled closer to Sirius as she thought about how Voldemort would have toyed with his Muggle victims, the thought sickening her.

"Sh...try not to think about Voldemort any more for a while," Sirius comforted her. "There are much more interesting topics of conversation we could be discussing."

"Like what?"

"Like my goddaughter is one hell of a Quidditch player."

"I think Dumbledore said something to that effect before."

"Well, I'm saying it again. I wouldn't mind finishing the games myself. There are only three more."

"Actually," Harry smiled wickedly, her green eyes laughing, "there are only two more since the teachers aren't going to win again."

"My dear, we were just toying with you kids. Now is where we'll separate the men from the boys."

"Uh...Sirius...just in case you haven't noticed half the players on both teams are female."

"So we'll separate the women from the girls," he smirked.

"Yeah, well I think the three female teachers would much prefer to be thought of as girls, especially given their ages," Harry countered playfully, "although I have to say that McGonagall and Sinestra surprised me; Madam Hooch's performance was expected. I knew she would play well, being the usual referee and the flying teacher."

"What about me and Remus, did you think we played well?"

"You're both rusty, and you tried to hit me with a bludger. That wasn't very nice of you. Picking on your goddaughter...you should be ashamed."

"My dear," he laughed, "that is the nature of the game. All's fair in love, war, and Quidditch!"

"Yeah, like Professor Snape having the same broom as me!"

"He plays to win, and he always has."

"Yeah, well you try and stay ahead of him. He has long arms and can catch the snitch from further back. I haven't enjoyed the competition in a long time like I did yesterday."

"You should tell him then. I'm sure he will be glad to know it, even if we did lose. I will say this though; he will be tougher to beat a second time, honey. If Albus lets us finish the matches, be prepared for Snape to get down and dirty."

"What about you? Are you going to play sneaky too?"

"Ah...I'll never tell, but I promise not to hurt you too much," Sirius replied looking down at her affectionately, arching his brow. "Now I do have to finish grading these papers. Would you like something to read for a little while?"

"Actually, I'm feeling a little tired and sore. I think I'll try to go back to sleep. It was a long night last night, and transforming took a lot out of me."

"I know. Ordinarily you could have just rested before turning back, but you were so badly injured we had to get you back into human form to determine the extent of the injuries."

"I know, and I was happy you and Professor McGonagall knew what to do, but it still seemed like forever," Harry yawned as she snuggled back down into the bed and Sirius tucked her in.

"I'll wake you in time for lunch."

"Okay, and can you take Snuffles out for a quick run later? I'm sure she'll enjoy it."

"Sure thing, honey, now try and rest. I'll be here if you need me," Sirius kissed her forehead and she closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the bed and his comforting presence.

Harry slept soundly for over two hours, and Sirius hesitated to disturb her, but Remus came up to join them for lunch. He was sitting with Sirius having a cup of tea, when she opened her eyes and looked at the two of them. They were relaxing in two chairs by her fire, since the day was chilly, and talking about old times.

"I wish James and Lily could see her now," Sirius remarked unaware that Harry was listening, "she inherited the best of both of them. I know James would have loved to see her play Quidditch. She looks like him so much, but then you see Lily's eyes and they have her spark."

"I know what you mean. Lily always was playful and stubborn, just like Harry," Remus smiled at the memory. "She could see the good in everyone, even Snape."

"I don't know about Snape, but he does seem to have changed somewhat. At least we haven't tried to kill one another yet."

"I really think Harry's right; the two of you have more in common than you care to admit."

"Don't be ridiculous. Severus Snape and I have absolutely nothing in common," Sirius argued with his friend.

"Oh no, well you're both stubborn for one thing, plus you both hold grudges for a long time."

"I'm not holding a grudge against him; he's holding one against me."

"Sirius did you ever think that maybe all he wants is to hear you admit that what you did all those years ago was wrong. Sometimes saying I'm sorry can go a long way."

"Apologize...now...after all this time? Are you mad? He would think I was totally daft."

"I always thought you were exceptionally sane for someone who had been in Azkaban Prison for twelve years," Harry said casually from the bed, and grinned when both men jumped.

"Harry! It isn't polite to eavesdrop," Sirius glared red faced.

"It is when you're talking about me."

"For your information we were not talking about you. We were discussing Snape."

"Remus will you please refresh Sirius memory. I seem to have heard something about my father and Quidditch and my mother's eyes," Harry said sitting up in bed, her lips twitching into a smile.

"She's got you now. I want to see how you're going to get out of this."

"I'm going to tell my sneaky little goddaughter that if she doesn't behave I will just have to tickle her."

"You can't. My back is still all torn up," she smirked.

"You're right, it is," Sirius grinned wickedly coming over to sit on the bed beside her, "but your feet aren't!"

Harry tried to squirm away as Sirius grabbed her feet from under the cover and began to tickle them. "Remus, help me. I can't get away. Make him stop...please."

"I'm staying out of this one, Princess. You're on your own," Remus grinned as Harry laughed so hard tears were streaming down her face.

"If you want me to stop, you will have to say you're sorry you listened to our conversation."

"Not a prayer," Harry cried, attempting to pull away, falling back onto the bed. She immediately stiffened as her raw flesh rubbed against the sheets, and the tears of laughter turned into a grimace of pain "Sirius..." she sobbed her lip quivering.

"Harry, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to get hurt," He eased her back up into his arms, embracing her tenderly.

"Harry, are you okay?" Remus asked with concern as he came over to where Sirius sat holding her.

She shook her head affirmatively, and scrutinized him carefully. "You need to sit back down. I can feel the pain in your body. Between you and me, we could open a hospital ward."

"I wish it were that simple," Remus smiled easing himself back into his chair by the fire. "I wish my transformation were as easy as yours."

"If your transformation is anything like what I went through to change back last night...well..."she shrugged unable to find a way to tell him she understood.

"Some months are worse than others. This is just one of them."

"Sirius move over," Harry nudged him out of the way. "Remus come and sit with me. Maybe I can help you feel a little better."

"No Harry, you are not yet healed yourself. I don't want you to waste your energy on me."

"Sirius, yell at him. Make him get over here or he'll get to see the temper I inherited from my mother in full force," she tossed her head stubbornly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Remus is right, honey, you need to heal. He will be all right; after all, he has been a werewolf for over thirty years. Next month you can try to help him so it isn't so painful."

"Oh, you're both being ridiculous," Harry said throwing aside the covers and attempting to get out of bed. She was immediately overcome by a wave of weakness and her knees buckled. Sirius leaped up to support her to prevent her falling onto the floor.

"Now do you understand why we said you needed to heal? It isn't just your back. You had some pretty serious internal injuries from the *Cruciatius* curses. You're too weak to help Remus."

"It's not fair," Harry pouted as Remus came over again to make sure she was okay.

"Princess, how about if I come and sit with you and Sirius tonight? That is, if you don't mind a little howling?"

"Just don't get Snuffles started howling. You'll have half of Hogwarts awake all night."

"Well, I could take her and Padfoot out for a run in the forest. I'm sure they would both enjoy it."

"Absolutely not! You will get my sweet puppy into trouble. You will just have to visit here with me to chaperone."

"How come you're not worried about me getting into trouble?" Sirius pursed his lips pretending to pout.

"Don't be silly, you were corrupted years ago. I heard all those old Hogwarts stories about you. You were the Casanova of Hogwarts. It's a wonder you didn't leave a trail of baby Blacks behind you," Harry blushed, her cheeks bright red.

Remus chortled with laughter as Sirius looked down at Harry arching his brows.

"I seem to remember that on Halloween you mentioned something about having my animagus self neutered?" Sirius quipped, reminding her about what she had said prior to the costume party last October.

"Why Sirius, I would never even think of such a thing!" Harry exclaimed pretending to be shocked.

"You better not. Someday I just might like a few little baby Blacks running around."

"Oh..." Remus moaned jokingly, "we're all doomed."

"Only if they're boys. On the other hand, if he has daughters..." Harry grinned laughing, as Remus nodded in agreement.

"I already have a goddaughter who is causing me to turn gray with worry."

"There isn't a gray hair on your head, Sirius Black, and that's after being in Azkaban for twelve years!" she retorted, giving him a hug.

"Speaking of Azkaban, the food was terrible. I could go for a nice Hogwarts meal."

"I'll ring for the house elf," Remus offered getting up and pulling on the bell pull. Dobby appeared almost instantly.

"Professor Lupin, Professor Black, what can Dobby get for you?"

"Hey, Dobby, what about me?"

"Dobby already has your lunch ready. Nurse Pomfrey left Dobby a list of food for you until tomorrow. She said you need time to finish healing on the inside. The healer only wants you to have things that are easy to digest."

"Dobby, what if I want something else?"

"Dobby can only give you things the nurse ordered. Professor Dumbledore told Dobby you can't have anything else," The elf informed her stubbornly as Sirius and Remus grinned.

"Dobby I'll have the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans," Sirius told him. "I'd also like a butter beer."

"What would Professor Lupin like to eat?"

"I'll just have a chicken salad sandwich and a glass of milk."

"And what am I getting?" Harry demanded glaring at the house elf.

"Cottage cheese and fruit with jello, for Miss Harry with a glass of apple juice," Dobby replied as he snapped his fingers and disappeared, the food appearing on the table.

Harry looked at her lunch in dismay, pouting with disappointment. She was hungry and cottage cheese and fruit was just not going to satisfy her.

"Harry don't look so miserable," Sirius consoled her, "it's only until tomorrow."

"Princess, I know you happen to like fruit plates, so what's the problem?"

"Remus, I had hardly any lunch before the Quidditch match yesterday, and no dinner. All I got this morning for breakfast was a croissant and some strawberries. I'm hungry. I want some real food!"

"I'll tell you what," Sirius looked at her thoughtfully, "if you eat your prescribed diet I'll take us all out for dinner Friday evening in Hogsmeade. My treat."

"Who's all?" Harry queried with interest.

"Me, you, Remus, and Dumbledore."

"That's all?"

"Okay, I'll include Snape; not that I want to spend an evening out with the greasy git."

"Sirius, be nice," Harry rebuked him.

"He better be. It was Severus who was going to get him into the Riddle Mansion to rescue you."

"Tell me about it," she asked eagerly.

"We will tell you about it while you eat your lunch," Remus reasoned with her.

"Not good enough, he forgot to include Ron and Hermione for Friday evening."

"All right, Ron can come too, but Hermione may no longer be here," Sirius immediately realized that he said the wrong thing, as a look of horror spread over Harry's face.

"What aren't the two of you telling me," she cried shrilly, unable to hide her anxiety.

"Honey, calm down. It's nothing really."

"What's nothing? Remus, what is going on?" Harry asked looking from one to the other.

"Sirius we have to tell her. She will only find out later on anyway."

Harry immediately let her guard down and began to scan their emotions. The two men were definitely keeping something from her, and she concluded it had to do with Hermione.

"You're right, of course," Sirius sighed looking at his friend before turning back to Harry.

"Honey, we had a staff meeting late last night about what happened with Hermione. While it isn't binding we voted six to three in favor of expulsion, but Albus abstained and will make the final decision based on his inquiries, he's already told you that."

"Who voted against expelling her?"

"Remus, Minerva McGonagall, and Hagrid," he replied.

"I see," she replied flatly, her green eyes alight with worry. 'Sirius voted to expel her,' she thought, 'didn't he realize I would forgive her knowing the circumstances?' Harry could not voice her thoughts to him. She merely turned her back, curling up into a fetal position, sobbing into her pillow.

"Harry, it's not a binding vote. Dumbledore will make the final decision," Sirius placed a gentle hand on her shoulder in an attempt to placate her, but she merely pulled away from him. "Remus..." he began, a lump in his throat, I didn't mean..."

"Go and get Albus." Remus rose from his chair and came over to sit with Harry. "Tell him what happened. I'll try and calm her until you get back."

Sirius nodded numbly, unable to disguise the stricken look in his eyes. He had hurt Harry and did not know how to fix it.

"Princess," Remus said as the door closed behind his friend, "Sirius voted with the majority because he wants so badly to protect you. He doesn't know Hermione the way you do. Snape voted to expel her too."

"Snape would, he has to keep up the pretense of hating me," she cried miserably. Snuffles sensed her mistress distress and came over to the bed. She nudged Harry gently with her nose, whining softly. "Go away, puppy, leave me alone."

"She's worried about you. She knows something is wrong."

"How would you know?"

"I'm part canine remember? I can sense her feelings. I bet as an empath you might be able to also," Remus told her in an effort to distract her.

"Dogs don't have feelings like people."

"I beg to differ," Remus argued, as Snuffles whimpered again. "Why don't you try and scan her to see what happens?"

"Why should I?" she sniffed impatiently.

"Wouldn't you like to know how an animal really feels? You can get some sense of it as an animagus, but you may get a deeper sense if you use your power."

Harry stared at Remus for a few minutes, and then looked down at the gangly pup. Reaching out to pet the dog, she allowed herself to try to scan the animal. "Remus," she looked at him with shock, "Snuffles is worried. I'm getting a sense of fear and confusion."

"Didn't I tell you animals have feelings? I consider myself an expert in that area."

"At least she really cares how I feel. Snuffles doesn't look after me simply out of a feeling of responsibility."

"If you are suggesting that Sirius watches out for you simply out of his obligation as your godfather, you are mistaken," Dumbledore's solemn voice came from the door. "If that were the case he never would have escaped from Azkaban. You know that he loves you, and his biggest fear is that he will let you down. He still blames himself for the death of your parents," Dumbledore explained sadly, as he sat down beside her.

"Where is he now?"

"I asked him to wait out in the hall for a moment. He told me what happened."

"He wants to get rid of my friend."

"No, Child, he considered her a threat to your safety. Remember, it was a trusted friend who betrayed your parents. He merely saw the parallel, and wanted to protect you. In any case, Hermione's fate rests with me. I thought I made that clear to you this morning. I will make my decision this afternoon."

Harry just looked at Dumbledore sadly, and curled up again. 'Why doesn't any one ever listen to me? Hermione was only trying to protect her family. Just like Sirius wants to protect me.' She wanted to scan the Headmaster, but felt it would be rude to invade his privacy. She adored the old man, and wanted him to understand that to expel Hermione would be wrong. She just stared at him, letting him see how she was hurting inside.

"Professor, if you and Remus don't mind, I think I'd prefer to be alone for a while."

"What about your lunch. I thought you were starving?" Remus asked.

"I've lost my appetite. I just want to go back to sleep."

"Child, you need to eat something."

"Why bother. I can't have what I want anyway. Just take Sirius and Remus and go down to the Great Hall. I don't need a baby sitter."

"Very well," Dumbledore replied studying her closely, "if that is what you want." He got up and motioned to Remus to follow. They left the room and found Sirius in the hall waiting for them. "She's as stubborn as Lily was, and she's hurting right now. Sirius, she feels like you have let her down."

"Albus, I was angry and upset. I already went through this once with Peter," he said, remembering how he asked Peter to be James and Lily's secret keeper, only to find out he had betrayed them to Voldemort.

"I reminded her of that, but she doesn't understand what you went through. Hermione is her friend, and she still cares about her. She doesn't believe she did it for personal gain, only to protect her family."

"What do you believe? Is Hermione leading us all on a wild goose chase? Or is she telling us the truth?"

"I will reserve that judgment for later. I will be speaking with her again after lunch. In the meantime, I think we should just let Harry alone as she requests. She needs to work out her feelings about what happened. She is not being objective."

"All right, Albus, if you say so, but I don't like letting her sulk. I feel like I should be trying to make her understand that I did it because I care about her. I need to make her understand that I have a responsibility to keep her safe and a responsibility to the school."

"I think she knows that, Sirius," Remus looked at him, his hazel eyes filled with compassion.

"She's just feels that you should be supportive and trust Hermione too. She knows what happened with James and Lily, but can't conceive that it really could happen a second time."

"I distinctly heard her say that if the Prophecy held true, history would be repeating itself."

"But don't you see, it has repeated itself. She was betrayed by her friend, but the circumstances were different. Hermione did it to try to prevent her parents from being killed, and not for personal gain, like Peter. Fortunately this time nobody was killed."

"Remus you always were able to make me see the practical side of things," Sirius smiled at his friend.

"Perhaps you would both like to be present this afternoon when I speak with Hermione, Harry, and Ron together? I plan to bring my Sneakoscope, this way I can be sure of Hermione's true loyalty," Dumbledore informed them seriously, as they reached the Great Hall.

"I do. If it turns out that Hermione is telling the absolute truth I will apologize to Harry. I also think we should have some kind of lesson in Defense class to teach the students how to get help in a similar situation."

"That is a wonderful idea, Sirius!" Dumbledore beamed with interest. "Remus do you think you could schedule it for sometime next week. I think we should do it regardless of whether Hermione is guilty or innocent."

"I will see to it as soon as I am feeling better, Headmaster."

"Ah...Remus...I apologize. I forgot this is the full moon. Well let's eat," Dumbledore smiled as he took his place in the center of the table. "Would either of you object if I ask Severus to join us this afternoon?"

Sirius scowled, but put on a polite front for Dumbledore, "I think Snape would be very helpful."

"Severus may just be able to find out some additional information," Remus added thoughtfully, as he took a bite of his sandwich.

They all settled down to a leisurely lunch, and talk turned to whether they should continue with the Quidditch matches.

In the end, it was decided they would do them, but the students would not be permitted to carry their wands into the stands. Snape was delighted with the decision, and talked animatedly about how to plan their strategy for the next game. He had not been disappointed in Harry's performance during the game; indeed, he would have congratulated her immediately, if she hadn't disappeared. On the other hand, he was now prepared to win the next match, and would not make the same mistakes twice. She was a worthy adversary, and the Quidditch games could be used as a teaching tool for her to avoid being taken unawares during altercations with Voldemort.

Harry lay on her bed during lunch, hoping Sirius would come back. She wanted Sirius to come and say he was sorry, but when he didn't appear, she just stared at the ceiling, tears running silently down her cheeks. Snuffles sat beside her, trying to comfort her mistress, but was unable to do so.

She also needed to get to the bathroom, and was not sure if she could walk by herself. When she had tried to stand earlier, her knees had buckled. The *Cruciatus* curses had left her weak and she felt vulnerable. Finally, in desperation she sat up and held onto Snuffles collar. Moving slowly she made it to the bathroom. After relieving herself, she stood up, and holding onto the sink, surveying herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her face was pale. She would have liked to take a hot bath to relax, but decided to wait until later when the nurse was there.

Turning back into her room, she was holding onto Snuffles collar, when the door opened, startling her. She immediately let go and collapsed onto her knees.

"Harry, honey, I'm sorry! I didn't expect to find you up," Sirius cried in dismay, rushing over to pick her up. "What were you doing out of bed?"

"I had to use the bathroom," she whimpered, happy to have him back.

Dumbledore, Snape, and Remus were with him, and they all gathered around protectively as Sirius carried her back to bed, before seating themselves in the various chairs through out her room. Remus and Snape were sitting by the fire, while Dumbledore and Sirius were sitting beside her on either side of the bed.

"Did you eat anything?" Sirius asked anxiously, looking over to where her lunch tray still sat untouched.

"I wasn't hungry."

"Miss Potter, if you expect to recover from all those *Cruciatus* curses and be back in class tomorrow you need to eat something," Snape eyed her down his long nose.

"I don't want cottage cheese and fruit."

"Child, Severus is right. You need to regain your strength. Especially if you want to beat these three at Quidditch again."

"Did he say Quidditch?"

"Yes, Princess, the Headmaster has decided to let us finish the Quidditch matches."

"Oh, I knew there was a reason I loved this old man," Harry grinned tweaking his beard affectionately and they all laughed.

"Now how about having something to eat?" Sirius coaxed giving her the full effect of his brown eyes and boyish smile.

"Can I have a sandwich at least?"

"No!" The four men said in unison.

"Miss Potter, Harry... You were seriously injured. I know from experience it can take time to come back from repeated curses such as you just went through. If you try to eat too much too soon, you will be hanging over the toilet."

"Child, how about if I get you some soup. Would that be better?"

"Can I have some hot chocolate too?" Harry begged turning her green eyes on the Headmaster.

"You are as stubborn as your mother was, but yes, I'll get you some hot chocolate," Dumbledore sighed, his blue eyes twinkling, as he rang for the house elf.

"Miss Harry, can Dobby get you something? Wasn't the food to your liking?" He asked spying the untouched tray. "Dobby has failed to please Miss Harry, bad Dobby!" Dobby cried slapping himself in the head.

"Dobby stop!" Harry yelled sharply. "I was simply resting, and the fruit plate is now quite limp. I'm chilly and would like some soup."

"Miss Harry, yes, I'll bring your favorite soup, and some crackers."

"Bring her some hot chocolate too, Dobby. You may use my private store," Dumbledore instructed.

"Hot chocolate from the Headmaster's private stores. Can Dobby bring anything else?"

"A piece of cake would be nice," Harry winked at Dobby playfully, hoping he might concede just a little.

"Dobby cannot bring Miss Harry a piece of cake. Dumbledore will be mad at Dobby and Dobby won't get paid." The elf's ears flattened unable to do as Harry asked.

"Dobby, I believe Nurse Pomfrey put custard on the list of foods Harry may have. If so, she can give her that for dessert," Dumbledore told the elf looking at Harry shrewdly.

"Yes, yes, soup and custard," Dobby laughed, and snapping his fingers, disappeared.

A moment later, the uneaten lunch tray disappeared. This was replaced with a fresh one containing a steaming bowl of chicken soup, crackers, a banana, and a small bowl of vanilla custard and a cup of hot chocolate. There was also a glass of pumpkin juice.

"Now will you eat, Child?"

"Do we still get to go out on Friday night?" Harry asked Sirius ignoring Dumbledore's question.

"Yes," he grinned shaking his head, "and if everything goes well with Hermione, she can come too, along with Ron and the five of us."

"Then I'll eat," she replied looking at them all suspiciously.

"Sirius, you are planning a night out? I will be delighted to attend," Dumbledore beamed with pleasure.

"Unfortunately, I have other plans," Snape quietly expressed his regrets.

"Knock it off, Professor. We both know your Friday plans are merely to enslave some poor student into doing detention and cleaning the dungeon," Harry smiled gleefully, meeting the Potion Master's dark gaze with her green eyes. "I think it will be good for you and Sirius to spend the evening out together. Besides, if I recall you will have to do just that depending on who wins the bet about my mixing the Wolfsbane Potion for Professor Lupin. You can both consider it a lesson in endurance."

"Bravo, my dear. You have just maneuvered them both into a corner. I shall of course expect us all to be there. By the way, where are we going?"

"Nothing fancy, Headmaster. We are only going to have dinner in Hogsmeade at The Three Broomsticks. It'll be my treat, of course."

"It will do us all good to have a night out."

"I know I could use one," Harry relaxed as she allowed Sirius to spoon some of the soup into her mouth, "it will be nice to go into Hogsmeade. I haven't been there in a while."

"We're only going out for dinner, Miss Wings, so don't go getting any ideas."

"Sirius, you act like you think I'm up to something," she replied batting her eyelashes at him.

"Let's just say I'm not going to take any chances."

"Professor Lupin, did you get your potion yet?" Harry queried, changing the subject. She could feel his pain despite her ability to block it, and was worried about him.

"Severus gave it to me right after lunch. Why do you ask?"

"I told you before I could feel your pain. I'm blocking it as much as possible, but since I'm not in the best of shape myself..."

"Princess, would you like me to go? I won't transform with you present anyway since I don't want you to see what I go through."

"No, I don't want you to go. I was just concerned for you, and as for transforming...well...I have on occasion seen you change," she reminded him calmly. "I'm sure Professor Snape may find it rather interesting though."

"Miss Potter, that is not funny."

"Forgive me, Professor; I am merely practicing getting you annoyed. This way by Friday you will be so pissed off, I'll be the one on detention, and you won't have any excuse to try to back out of dinner. How am I doing so far?" she asked grinning wickedly at Snape.

"Exceedingly well, Miss Potter," he replied arching his brows, while Dumbledore laughed aloud.

Harry finished her meal, and then leaned back comfortably, resting quietly, while the men talked among themselves. She was dozing contentedly holding onto Sirius' hand, when Dumbledore gently nudged her.

"Child, I need to speak with you. Ron and Hermione will be here in a little while, and Remus and Severus have agreed to stay with us while I talk with the three of you. I want you to be aware of what I am going to do."

"Professor?" Harry questioned, her green eyes worried.

"Do you know what this is?" Dumbledore reached into his pocket and pulled out a small sphere.

"Yes, it's a Sneakoscope. It is supposed to tell when someone can't be trusted."

"That is correct. I am going to use this when I speak with Hermione again. This way there will be no doubt that she is telling us the truth. It will help to determine the kind of disciplinary action I will give her."

"You don't believe her story?"

"We need to be absolutely certain, Child. It is entirely possible that Voldemort lied to you to make us believe she was an innocent victim. He is unscrupulous."

"What happens if she has been telling the truth?"

"Then I will not expel her, but she will be severely disciplined. I can't let such behavior go unpunished. Too many people were jeopardized."

"And if she has been lying the whole time?"

"Expulsion and the Aurors will wipe her memory of Hogwarts. She will have to live as a Muggle for the remainder of her life. Alastor Moody is aware of what has happened and has agreed to this. We both felt that in view of her age we would not have her sent to Azkaban."

"I see," Harry replied, meeting his somber expression, as a knock sounded on her door, and Sirius got up to answer it. Harry knew it was Ron and Hermione.

"Professor Black, may we come in?" Ron queried from the hall.

"Come on, Harry has been waiting for the two of you."

"I brought the Wizard's chess, Harry, like I promised," Ron said entering the room, looking around at the other Professors curiously. He knew Dumbledore wanted to talk with them all again, but did not expect to see Snape and Lupin.

Hermione looked frightened, but walked in and went directly over to Harry's bed, and then burst into tears. "They kept saying...you...were dead," she sobbed sitting down and taking Harry's hand. "I really...made a...mess...of things."

Harry was quietly scanning Hermione, and knew that her fear and remorse were genuine.

"You sure did. How could you get yourself into such a situation?"

"He used an *Imperious* Curse with a mind charm to make me believe you didn't really want me around because I was Muggle born. He made me tell him what was happening here in Hogwarts. I tried to fight him, but at first I couldn't," Hermione explained, tears running down her cheeks. "Then when I continued to try and resist he laughed and threatened my parents. He had my mother's wedding ring and told me all about our house. He even knew their daily routines. Harry...I'm sorry...he told me...", she choked on her tears, "that he...would...kill them if...I didn't...cooperate."

"Why didn't you tell someone?"

"He said if I said anything he would know...Harry...he finds things out...I don't know how...but I think...he has...spies watching."

"What makes you say that, Hermione?" Dumbledore asked gently, trying not to unnerve the frightened teen any further.

"Professor Dumbledore, he knew about the first Quidditch match, and that Harry would not be allowed to play. I didn't tell him...he just ...knew. He made me send the note to Harry telling her you thought she was a burden."

"Hermione, why didn't you just send an owl to Dumbledore? You could have used Hedwig or Pigwidgeon and explained everything in a confidential letter."

"Voldemort anticipated I might do that. He told me that if I tried my parents would be dead before Dumbledore ever finished reading it. I didn't know Dumbledore was having my parents protected ever since we got Pettigrew to confess. Harry, I was such a fool. He would have killed you. I kept trying to find a way out. I was supposed to go to him at the Riddle Mansion after you caught the snitch. I was going to try and find a way to help you escape once I knew my folks were safe."

Harry looked over at Dumbledore, who nodded knowing what she was going to tell Hermione.

"Hermione, Voldemort had no intention of keeping his word and sparing your parents. He planned on killing all of you and making me watch. Then he was going to have me tortured to death just for the fun of it."

Hermione gasped in shock, "Oh, Harry, how could I have been so stupid?"

"Miss Granger, stronger persons than you have been taken in by the Dark Lord. He can be extremely persuasive," Professor Snape remarked quietly.

"Professor Snape is right, Hermione," Ron put his arm around her; "you were being manipulated by an extremely powerful wizard."

"Please, Professor Black, I never meant for anybody to be hurt, especially Harry. I wanted to tell, I just didn't know how. You have every right to be angry with me." Hermione glanced over at Sirius unable to meet his gaze.

"It's all right, Hermione. I know you aren't lying," Harry reassured her calmly. "After all I am an empath. I can sense your emotions, and you aren't hiding anything."

"Harry is right, Hermione. I have been monitoring our conversation with a Sneakoscope. You can still be trusted and have told us all the truth," Dumbledore informed her with authority. "I am relieved and want to tell you that both Harry and Ron spoke up for you today. Neither of them ever had any doubts."

"What is going to happen to me, Professor?"

"I have given this much thought, and Harry will tell you that depending on what happened here this afternoon helped to determine whether you would be expelled. Fortunately, that is not going to be the case. First, you were going to be named a Prefect next year but that will no longer be the case. Second, I can't let your actions go entirely unpunished. What you did resulted in Harry's kidnapping, jeopardized the security of this school, and very nearly got four people killed. So I have decided you will be suspended following the Easter Recess, which starts in ten days," Dumbledore said sternly. "The suspension will be for the rest of the term, and you will be required to keep up with your studies. You are a bright girl, and I'm sure you will have no trouble catching up next year. I will retain your wand until you return in the fall."

"Yes Sir," Hermione answered solemnly.

"In the mean time you may attend your regular classes. You are not to go into Hogsmeade with the exception of next Friday evening," Dumbledore winked at Harry, "when Professor Black will be taking us all out for dinner. I will inform the other teachers of my decision and will let them know to give you the required reading for the rest of the year to take home with you. Your parents will be notified of my decision. They are already aware of what has occurred. See that your trunk is packed and ready as you will be leaving on the train with the rest of the students who will be going home for the holiday."

"I understand, Professor. I promise if anything ever happens again I won't be afraid to tell you," Hermione said visibly relieved that she was not going to be expelled.

"Now, I have one more thing to say to the three of you, and that is to enjoy each other's company. You are all good and loyal friends, and I'm glad to say that you will all be here together next year."

Dumbledore rose, and motioned the others to go with him as he knew the three friends wanted to talk about his decision and spend some time alone together.

"Harry, I'll be in with Remus. We'll be back later in time for dinner," Sirius said kissing her forehead before following the other professors from the room.

The three friends spent the afternoon talking about what had happened. Hermione was relieved that Harry was still her friend but knew it would be quite a while before she would confide in and trust her again. All of them were glad she was not expelled and felt bad that she would not be made a Prefect. Harry hoped she would not be asked, as she had too many worries with Voldemort. She did not tell them but she was hoping to be named Quidditch captain.

Harry and Ron both promised Hermione that they would send her news of the events going on at school. Dumbledore had wanted to have an end of year dance, but due to the situation with Voldemort and his being needed at the Ministry of Magic so frequently, it had been cancelled. However, they would make sure she knew who won the rest of the Quidditch matches and anything else of interest.

Hermione and Ron left to go to the Great Hall for dinner and Sirius returned a few minutes later with Remus, who had transformed into his werewolf form. Snuffles was a bit confused by this new canine and they touched noses and sniffed each other gingerly. Harry used her newfound sense of animal empathy to determine how they felt about each other; and discovered that Snuffles knew this wolf was also Remus. She also found that Remus recognized Snuffles. Sirius was intrigued by this new discovery, and transformed to see if it worked with his animagus form too. After he returned to human form he was pleased to discover that Harry could read his feelings as well.

They then settled down to have dinner. The two canines each got a nice piece of steak. Snuffles was the promised reward from Harry, and Remus always had a piece of meat when he was in his wolf form. This was usually sent up to him ahead of time, or Sirius and Dumbledore would bring it to him. Sirius had roast chicken while Harry pouted miserably

over another bowl of soup and some Italian bread without butter. The bright spot was that she was allowed some lemon meringue pie for dessert.

Following dinner, she and Sirius played a few games of Wizard's Chess before Nurse Pomfrey arrived to treat Harry's wounds and help her to bathe. Sirius took Snuffles and Remus out for a run so that Poppy would not feel uncomfortable around the werewolf. Harry had a sneaking suspicion that Sirius transformed while they were out, but she didn't question him. She just smiled and curled up in bed, exhausted from the stress of the day, and fell asleep while Sirius sat by the fire reading a book. He slept in the chair most of the night, leaving just before the moon set, when Remus woke him to bring him to their room for his transformation.

## **Exams and Farewells**

Harry recovered quickly following her ordeal with Voldemort, and was back in class studying hard for her exams. The other students soon forgot the situation with Hermione when they saw that Harry and Ron had rallied around her. Even Ginny realized Voldemort had been controlling her and forgave the young witch. After all, she had endured a similar situation and after considering some of the things Voldemort had made her do, she realized she had been wrong to criticize Hermione. There were mixed feelings about her punishment. While most agreed the suspension was fair, they all felt it was wrong not to make her a Prefect in the fall. Dumbledore was more than aware of this. He decided secretly to have the staff reconsider in view of the fact that the Dark Lord had harmed so many people's lives, and to reconsider her otherwise exemplary scholastic record.

True to his word, Sirius took them all out to dinner, the Friday following Harry's ordeal, at The Three Broomsticks, and everyone enjoyed themselves immensely. Even Hermione relaxed when Sirius apologized for behaving so angrily towards her. She had been gracious and told him she understood perfectly and he did not really have anything to be sorry for. Snape had been a bit fidgety, as Neville Longbottom had been the student given this week's Friday detention, and had to clean the dungeon without him, since Dumbledore had insisted Snape come with them. Harry assured him that Neville would probably do a better job without him there. She also reminded him that Filch was supervising the cleanup and he would be sure Neville did the job correctly. This had done the trick and he seemed to enjoy himself.

Dumbledore was delighted when Harry had Miss Rosmerta bring him out a special treat. She had found out it was his birthday the day before and the group of them sang Happy Birthday over a huge cake with a sparkler on it in lieu of candles. He beamed with happiness at them all, unable to hide the tears in his eyes. After they had all eaten their fill, Ron and Remus got into an animated discussion about who would ultimately win the Quidditch matches between the teachers and students. Dumbledore smiled when Harry said in the end they would all be winners, since the games had gone a long way to boost everyone's school spirit.

Harry and Ron had done their best to stay in touch with Hermione following her departure at Easter. They sent her letters every week by owl post and told her all the Hogwarts gossip. She made Harry promise to write her as soon as she took her Potions Exams, and did her additional final. She told Harry that she just knew she was going to mix Professor Lupin's Wolfbane Potion correctly and win the bet. Neville especially had his fingers crossed for her, since he would be spared Snape's wrath in his final year.

They had also both sent her letters following the Quidditch matches. The games had gone to a full five. The students had won the third match, but the teachers had come back and won the fourth. Snape had tricked Harry and caught the Snitch while flying upside down! Harry was astounded and congratulated him enthusiastically, even though she was disappointed. He was so happy that he had been nice to her in class for the rest of the week. The fifth match had been brutal, and Harry had suffered a broken leg after Remus had hit her with a bludger. She and Snape had dived for the snitch at the same time, and the bludger just came out of nowhere. Still, Harry was stubborn, and Snape's having taught her to fight through painful curses had come in handy. It had allowed her to continue without falling, enabling her to do a three hundred and sixty degree turn, confusing the Potions Master enough so that she was able to grab the snitch right out from in front of him. While Snape had wanted to win, he was more than a little pleased that Harry had done as he had taught her, and ignored the pain in her broken leg. This had taken enough of the sting out of his loss that he had actually carried her up to the infirmary.

Remus had felt awful that she had been injured, even though he knew it was in the nature of the game. He kept telling her he hadn't meant to hit her so hard, but Harry had just smiled and

said it wasn't the first time she had suffered a broken bone during a Quidditch match. She then told him about what had happened in her second year when Professor Lockhart had made her bones disappear and Nurse Pomfrey had given her the Skele-Gro to grow them back. Sirius, of course, had run pell mell up to the infirmary. He always got nervous when she was hurt, and Harry knew it was still due to the guilt he felt about her parents' death. He constantly worried that she would be hurt, and would blame himself for not being more vigilant. Harry would just smile and tell him that he couldn't protect her from life, and that he had no reason to feel guilty.

Her feelings for all of them continued to confuse her, and she wished she would hurry up and come of age. She knew each of them harbored feelings towards her too, and were waiting until she completed her education before approaching her with any romantic notions. In the meantime, she had continued to see George Weasley. He would come to see her at school, or she would get someone to take her into Hogsmeade. This was usually Dumbledore, since she was uncomfortable when one of the others was around. She was careful not to lead George on, but she did like him. However, she had made it perfectly clear that she did not want to get serious. Dumbledore had sensed her feelings, and one day, as they walked back from Hogsmeade, munching on the toffee she had bought for him, he decided to question her about them.

"You like young Weasley a lot don't you?" he asked looking down at her affectionately.

"I suppose so. He is fun to be with. I was worried Ron might be jealous, but when he found out, he was actually very happy. He has visions of me and George getting married some day."

"Do you?"

"No, I'm not in love with him. That's why I try not to let it go any further than some casual afternoons together."

"How do you know that won't change?"

"He's not what I'm looking for in a man."

"What are you looking for?"

"Someone like you," Harry grinned up at him, her green eyes twinkling.

"I've had my share of marriages, thank you."

"Marriages, as in more than one?"

"Actually, there were three. They have all passed on now though."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"You haven't, Child. My first marriage didn't work out although we remained good friends. The other two passed away after many happy years together."

"Do you have any children?"

"No, I had no children with my first wife, and my second died with our only son in childbirth. My third was past the age when she could bear children," he told her quietly, "so I consider all of my students my children. You can't ask for better than that."

"Even with someone like Tom Riddle?" Harry asked using Voldemort's real name.

"Even with Tom. A person's children do not always turn out how they would like them to."

"And how am I doing?"

"Quite nicely, but you are a bit adventurous, and often disobedient, otherwise I am very happy with you," he laughed, his blue eyes brimming with amusement. "Now tell me what qualities you think I have that you would want in a young man?"

"Who says he has to be young. I don't believe age should make a difference. I know that it doesn't seem to in the Wizarding World; at least not as much as it does for Muggles."

"That's because we live longer and have ways to delay the aging process. We also are able to heal injuries which would be lethal to Muggles."

"How come we don't share our knowledge with them?"

"Fear and ignorance. Many still believe we worship the devil. They fear what they don't understand. Others feel we would take advantage of them and enslave them. So we take care to keep our worlds separate as much as possible."

"But people intermarry all the time," Harry said in confusion.

"Many of us work in the Muggle businesses. Our lives often will intermix in other areas too, such as primary school. We also live side by side in the cities. Remember, Hogsmeade is the only town that is strictly Wizard."

"Is that why some of us are actually Muggle born? Did they have witches or wizards in their family line previously that no one can remember and the genes come out again?"

"Very possibly," Dumbledore looked at her thoughtfully, pleased by her reasoning. "Now you are getting off the subject. What qualities do you think you would like in a future husband?"

"I told you, I want someone like you."

"If I was a few years younger, your suitors just might have had some competition," he winked, making her laugh.

"Okay, I want someone I can talk to. He has to be brave, kind, and able to put up with my temper and moodiness. He also has to love Quidditch."

"Does he have to be handsome?"

"Not ugly, but not handsome either. I'm not too concerned with his looks. I'll know what is on the inside."

"Is there anything else?"

"He has to like animals, but not as much as Hagrid!" Harry rolled her eyes. "I would like him to possess gentleness, but still be masculine, and he should like adventure and be able to embrace life. Accept it as it happens or change it to meet his desires. I want someone who isn't afraid to stand up for what he believes in."

"That could fit any number of young men. It might even be Sirius, Remus, or even Severus; not to mention some of the Weasley boys."

Harry stopped dead in her tracks, staring at the old man. She knew he was aware of her feelings towards the three men whose names he had mentioned. She stood studying him for a moment and then started to walk again, avoiding his blue eyes.

"You're right, it could be any one of them," she answered quietly; "time will tell if any of them are the right man. Meanwhile, I will just have to wait."

"What attracts you to each one? Is it anything specific?"

"George is funny, he makes me laugh. He also has a wonderful family; they make me feel like I belong. The only problem is there are no fireworks with him. I feel like he's more like an old friend, not a lover."

"I wasn't asking about George, and you know it."

Harry looked at the old man sideways, before smiling. Her face felt hot and she knew she was blushing. "You're really determined to know what I think about Sirius and the other two aren't you."

"Only if you want to talk about it. I see how you all look at one another when you think no one else is looking. I know as an empath you have to be aware they have feelings for you. I'm not sure if they realize you feel the same way."

"I hope they don't. It would make them uncomfortable right now. I'm still underage, which is probably why they have kept their distance. You can't ever say they behaved improperly. I can wait. If all goes well, and I survive my final encounter with Voldemort...well...I have time."

"So are you willing to tell me what you see in each of them?"

"Only if you promise never to say anything to them. My biggest fear is that one day two of them will be hurt, and I don't want that to happen."

"Child, if they love you they will want you to be happy above everything else. I firmly believe that if you do end up with one of them the others will still be there for you. However, I won't say anything to them."

"Okay. Sirius is very handsome, and could have any woman he wants. He is brave, and very loyal. His strength of character is amazing. I do not think too many people could have survived in Azkaban as long as he did and then escape. In some ways, he is still like a little boy. If I could do anything for him it would be to help him lose the haunted look in his eyes."

"Child, your love and devotion have helped him enormously. He cares for you very much. James knew what he was doing when he made him your Godfather."

"Sometimes I like to think he did it so that he would fall in love with me because they were so close. He wanted him to be as happy as he was with my mother."

"Interesting theory, except we actually expected a boy, remember?"

"Good point. I care about Remus, and have this overwhelming desire to protect him. He suffers so much. His endurance is unbelievable. He hurts and never complains. He is kind and gentle, and when he smiles it lights up the room."

"Remus has had many difficult times in the past. His lycanthrope has caused him both physical and emotional pain. Yet he never complains. I know he loves to see you laugh, and he too worries about you," Dumbledore told her quietly. "How do you feel about Severus?"

"Intrigued. He is a man of mystery. For years, I swore we hated each other, but then I started to find things out about him. He's a good man, but followed the wrong path. I know he is really smart, and I love it when he teaches me one on one. He's moody, but I think it's more because he's such a private person. There's sadness about him too. He's so different when he lets his guard down, and laughs. He's as courageous as Sirius is strong and Remus is tolerant. It must have taken a lot for him to walk away from Voldemort. He never says so, but I know Voldemort had something to do with the death of his wife and child. Sometimes I think we're opposite sides of the same coin."

Dumbledore looked thoughtful, and then stopped to look at her. "I will not go into Severus private life, but you have been good for him too. It pleases him to see you learn and he wants you to succeed; not just in your battle with Voldemort, but with everything you do. He tries to hide his feelings. He loved his wife very much, and has been avoiding personal relationships for a long time. You have stirred feelings he has thought long dead and sparked them back to life.

"You see, I told you I wanted someone like you, and the three of them are as close as I will ever get," she looked up into his blue eyes, and scanned him. She was aware he knew what she was doing. His feelings for her were parental, and he understood her confusion. She could feel his affection for her, and accepted his guidance.

"You know, maybe I should just take an aging potion, and then I'll elope with you instead," Harry teased him.

"At least they won't say I'm robbing the cradle," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he squeezed her gently. They walked on in silence for a few minutes before Dumbledore spoke slowly,

"Harry, I have been putting off telling you something, but the year is almost ended. You have had so much happen this year and over the past few months that I feel guilty about what I have to do," he told her, his mood turning serious.

"Professor, have I done something wrong?"

"No, Child, you are not in any kind of trouble; not today anyway."

"Then what's wrong. Nothing has happened to someone we know, has it? Voldemort..."

"No, no, Child, Voldemort has not harmed anyone you know. It's about Sirius."

"What about Sirius? He isn't ill is he? Something hasn't happened that they want to send him back to Azkaban?"

"Sirius is not ill, and he has been completely exonerated, so you can lay your fears to rest," Dumbledore reassured her.

"Headmaster what could be so terrible that you are finding it so hard to tell me?"

"Child, you know that Sirius has been having work done on an old house to make it suitable for the two of you."

"I knew he had been putting all his affairs in order over the past few months so that he could make a new life for the two of us."

"He has done a splendid job of it too. The problem is that I need him to do some work for the Order over the summer, which will require him to work undercover and take him away much of the time."

"Please don't tell me what I think you are going to say," Harry begged with a catch in her voice.

"Child, I'm sorry, but you will have to go back to the Dursley's for at least part of the summer."

"Can't I go and stay with Ron's family? I know they would take me."

"No, Child, I have your aunt and uncle's house protected with various charms. I also don't think you would want to endanger the Weasleys. They are currently under guard by the Aurors. Voldemort knows he can get to you through your affection for them."

"He hasn't threatened them has he?"

"He wouldn't, Child. That is not how he works, not with Wizarding families anyway. The Death Eaters strike without warning and they don't leave survivors. Ron and his sister will be spending most of the summer in Romania with their brother. The twins of course live in Hogsmeade, and Voldemort knows better than to attack a total wizarding community so close to Hogwarts. Percy and his parents will be spending the summer in a safe house run by the Order."

"At least my friends will have an interesting and safe summer. Hermione's family is going to America, Ron and Ginny will be dragon watching in Romania, and I'll be locked in my room on Privet Drive," Harry remarked gloomily, trying not to cry. "Why didn't Sirius tell me he wasn't taking me home with him?"

"He wanted to tell you. I asked him not to. I felt it would be better if you heard it from me, since it was my decision."

"He could have said no to working over the summer, especially since I may never see another one. I was actually looking forward to going home this year," Harry said as they reached the lake. She sat down on the bench to watch the giant squid, and Dumbledore could see her lower lip quivering. She was trying desperately not to cry.

"Harry, you will have many happy summers. Sirius is really needed to help with the situation with Voldemort. He could help to save many lives."

"Headmaster, please, just leave me alone. Maybe I'm being selfish, but I have given, and given, and given, when it has come to the Dark Lord. I have never asked for anything in return until now, and it seems even that will be denied to me. As for Sirius being able to save lives...well where was he when my parents were being killed and I was left alone because of his thirst for revenge?"

Harry jumped up angrily, and ran back into the castle, nearly knocking over some first years as she dashed down the stairs to the dungeon. She wanted to be alone in the dark, where no one could find her, for her world was collapsing. She found an unused classroom and burst into mournful sobs, unable to control herself, curling up into a corner. 'Why do I have to go and live with people who hate me? I'm treated worse than a house elf. Sirius promised to take me home, but now I'm not wanted. Mum. Dad, why did you have to go and die? I'm all alone with no real home. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon hate me. Dudley picked on me when he thought I was a boy, what will he do now? I know he didn't know about me. I guess it doesn't matter...in a few...more months we'll...all be ...together again.'

Harry was unaware of the tall pale figure who had seen her go into the empty room, and was standing outside of the door, listening. His ability to move with silence and stealth had

enabled him to follow without her knowing. He had thought she was up to some sort of mischief, but was shocked when he had heard her start to cry. He wanted to go in and comfort her, but thought better of it. 'Damn, why did she have to come down here to cry? Why the hell did Black ever accept that summer assignment from Albus? Were they both so blind as to think she would just go along and accept going back to the Muggles?' Snape thought furiously. Turning on his heel, he found the nearest hidden passage up to Albus floor and came out opposite the tower. He knew Black would be there with the Headmaster, but it no longer mattered. Black had made a serious mistake, and Snape had to rectify it now!

"Cream Puffs," he angrily gritted his teeth on the password, and mounted the moving stairs two at a time. He didn't bother to knock at the top and burst in on Dumbledore and Black, who were talking over their plans. "Black you bastard, how could you think Harry would just accept going back to those Muggles?" Snape yelled grabbing Sirius by the collar and punching him in the face, catching him unaware.

Sirius fell backwards into Dumbledore's desk, and recovering himself, flung himself at Snape. "You greasy git, how dare you storm in here and tell me what I can and can't do with my goddaughter!" he yelled as he flung Snape back against the wall.

"*Immobilius*," Dumbledore yelled angrily, freezing the two men before the fight went further.

"I expect better behavior from my professors. What is this all about Severus?"

"Headmaster, if you will please release me, I will explain," Snape replied quietly, glaring at Sirius.

"I am going to release the both of you, and I will expect you to act like adults rather than a couple of first years," Dumbledore answered, his blue eyes angry. "*Undunio*," he waved his wand freeing his two professors. "Well Severus I'm waiting, why did you attack Sirius Black?"

"Because his goddaughter is down in one of the unused classrooms in the dungeon, sobbing hysterically, because he is having her sent back to the Muggles. She believes he doesn't want her. She also still believes that she is going to be killed by Voldemort. I overheard her talking to her dead parents. She deserves better than you, Black. She cares about you, but you don't seem to care about her," Severus stared icily at his boyhood enemy, daring him to refute his statements.

"Albus, what is he talking about?"

"I was just about to tell you when Severus so angrily interrupted our discussion. I spoke with Harry on the way back from Hogsmeade. I told her she would be going back to stay with the Dursley's for at least part of the summer."

"Albus, I thought we were going to talk to her together? Why didn't you wait for me?" Sirius demanded, growing annoyed at the old man.

"I felt it would be prudent to tell her when she was in a good mood. I knew she was upset but I didn't realize she would take it so badly."

"Badly, Headmaster? She is ready to just give up. All she ever wanted was a home to go to, and you have both just let her down. The next few months will be crucial for her, and now all she cares about is being with her parents. She is angry that they died and left her with no one who cared about her," Severus yelled at his mentor. His face was no longer pale, but a bright pink, his dark eyes flashing.

"Oh, Merlin," Sirius groaned, "Where is she Snape? I didn't know Albus was going to tell her today. I don't want her to feel that I don't want her. Damn, I love her so much it hurts." Sirius moved over to the moving stairs at a run, Snape following. "I thought she would understand that it would only be until the end of July. I was going to make sure I was back in time for her birthday," he told the other man as they entered the hidden passage to the dungeons.

"Well she either doesn't know that, or she doesn't care. Lily's family treat her badly, Black. They always have. The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"I need to do this job for Albus. Maybe if he'll let me tell her what it is she will understand better," Sirius answered as they reached the dungeon to find Dumbledore had gotten there ahead of them. Sirius marveled at how the old man could move around the building without their knowing it.

"She's in the last room on the left," Snape led them through the dungeon, never making a sound as his feet touched the stone floor.

Approaching the classroom, they could hear Harry sobbing and talking to herself. She was talking to her mother and telling her how lonely she had been, her aunt never showing her any kind of affection. Dudley had gotten everything, while she had only been given a bedroom after starting Hogwarts, because they were afraid of what she might do to him. "Mama please, she hates me more than she hated you. She's jealous and cold and I'm treated worse than some of the house elves. Dad, why did you follow your principals instead of your heart? Sirius as good as killed you himself when he had Peter become your secret keeper. God, why did that damn curse have to back fire? I want to go home..."

Sirius was stunned. She was beginning to blame him for James and Lily dying. True, he had always felt responsible, but Harry had always told him otherwise, until now. He felt as if a knife had been stabbed into his heart.

Dumbledore was worried and upset. Harry hadn't been happy with the news that she would have to go back to the Dursley's, but he didn't believe she had been this upset. He was angry at himself for not seeing how much he had hurt her. He had known the Dursley's weren't very loving towards Harry, but she never told him how badly they had really treated her. Now he was faced with a serious dilemma, cancel their plans for Sirius mission, or lose Harry's trust in them.

Severus was so angry at his mentor and Black, he was ready to leave Hogwarts and give up working for the Order. Their one hope to defeat the Dark Lord without a major bloodbath was ready to call it quits and let him win. Severus understood what it was like to grow up feeling alone and unloved. Indeed, if it hadn't been for his older sister, he might very well have been in Azkaban or dead now. She and Albus had seen what James Potter had also seen in him. That it was the anger and loneliness that had been eating him alive and sent him straight to Voldemort in a bid for power and attention. Harry was in a similar situation. She was vulnerable and needed to know others would support her. She had no sense of security, no place other than Hogwarts, which she could call home.

The three men stood outside the door looking at one another, uncertain of what to do. They wanted to comfort her, yet if they burst in, she might become even more angry and distraught. They were suddenly startled by her angry voice, calling out to them.

"I can sense your presence, so either come in or go away."

"Miss Potter," Snape came in with Dumbledore and Sirius behind him, "I was concerned that something had happened. What is troubling you?" he asked in a gentle voice, and Harry just stared open mouthed.

"Child, it is chilly down here. Why don't you come up to my sitting room and we can talk about what is troubling you."

"Dumbledore is right, Miss Wings, you'll catch a cold sitting on the floor like that," Sirius approached her cautiously, his voice showing genuine concern.

"There is nothing to discuss. Apparently, everyone has made their plans and just believed I would go along with them. Go away, Sirius, I never want to see you again. You have a habit of running off when the people you supposedly care about need you the most. You killed my mum and dad, and abandoned me. I hate you!" Harry sobbed angrily.

Sirius felt like a part of him had just died. The one person in the world who he considered his family, no longer cared if he was around. He had hurt her so deeply she did not want anything to do with him.

"Harry, honey, you don't really mean that."

"Child, don't blame Sirius for my decision. You are unaware of many things. Sirius was simply trying to help. The mission I am sending him on is one of major importance. We both genuinely believed you would understand that it was truly a matter of life and death."

"Whose, certainly not mine? I'll be trapped in a bedroom with bared windows and locks on the door. I'll only get the food that is placed in front of me to eat, or pushed through the cat flap on the door, when I get that. Fortunately, Professor Snape was kind enough to buy me some clothes so I won't have to wear my fat cousin's cast offs. I will have no one to talk to, and Hedwig will be confined to her cage. I'm also reasonably sure that Snuffles will not be permitted within ten feet of the house, let alone inside," Harry sobbed, her sides heaving with anger and frustration. "My cousin will torment me because he knows that I don't dare defend myself or his parents will cast me out, and I'm not permitted to use magic outside of school. Everyone always says how much they love me, but it seems I always come last."

Sirius was dumfounded. He had had no idea that Lily's sister had been treating Harry so badly. He wondered how much Dumbledore was aware of; he was really in a bind. This mission was so important and he knew that if Harry knew what he was up to she would at least forgive him. Surprisingly Snape tried to intervene on his behalf.

"Miss Potter, Harry, I have a large house in London. While I too will be working with the Order over the summer, I will not be going out of town. If the Headmaster and your godfather will allow it, would you like to come and stay with me?"

"You?" she questioned, hope creeping into her voice, "can I?" Harry pleaded looking at the other two men.

"Will your sister be present?" Sirius looked at Snape, a surge of protection coursing through him.

"It is a moot point gentlemen," Dumbledore spoke firmly, "Harry will be safest in the home of her aunt and uncle until Sirius is able to come for her. I will have placed the proper charms on Sirius home by then. Your offer is noble, Severus, but it will put the two of you and your sister at a severe risk," It pained the old man to see the hope drain from Harry's eyes.

"I'll never go back, never!" she sobbed, her green eyes filling with anger, "you can't force me. I'll run away so far even you won't be able to find me." Harry's voice had been growing louder, until she was screeching at Dumbledore, "All you care about is getting rid of Voldemort. Did you ever care about my parents or me; or did they die merely to satisfy the whim of an old man? Maybe Voldemort was right, there is no good and evil, only power. What's the matter old man, don't like the competition? Well soon there will be two of us!" Harry screeched, her anger peaking. As it did so, something unexpected happened. A chair sailed across the room at Dumbledore. He was able to deflect it with a brief glance, and it crashed to the wall. Harry had developed the power of telekinesis. She paled, and looked stunned, and a look of panic filled her green eyes.

"It's all right now Child," Dumbledore smiled seeing the look of shock and disbelief on her face. She flew into his open arms, terrified by what she had done. "Severus, let's adjourn to your sitting room and have some tea. It will help to soothe Harry's nerves and calm her down."

The Headmaster gently steered her in the direction of the Potions Master's quarters, and sat her down on the sofa. He then lit a fire in the hearth and sat down across from her. Sirius came to sit beside her, and she instinctively sought the comfort of his arms. He was relieved that she wanted to be near him, and eased her head onto his shoulder.

Snape sat down in his favorite chair, and crossed his legs, studying Harry. 'Her powers are growing stronger, and she doesn't know how to control them. I will need to work on her ability to command her emotions so that she has power over them. She needs to organize her thoughts to be able to direct the objects to move.'

"Sirius, I didn't mean what I said to you," Harry sniffed, "I just wanted to make you hurt like I was hurting. It was a terrible thing to do; I'm sorry." Harry looked up at him, her lip quivering, "I love you very much."

Sirius looked down at her, his brown eyes warm and tender, kissing her gently on the forehead. "Sh...just try and calm down. I love you too. I didn't want to hurt you, and I don't think Albus realized how much you were counting on coming home with me."

"Here Child, have some tea. You need to relax. You're emotionally worn out," Dumbledore beamed.

Harry took a sip of the tea, and noted the Headmaster had added some mint leaves. "Professor Dumbledore, you're smiling like a Cheshire cat. I don't understand what is making you so happy. You should be angry."

"I'm happy because I love you and a wonderful thing has just happened. You have a new power. You possess the skill of telekinesis, as I do."

"Professor Snape, please check his head. I think I must have hit him with that chair. He's gone totally daft."

"Harry, he's always been a bit daft. It's what makes him so special. He should be equally mad at me, but he isn't."

"Mad at you, why?"

"Take a look at your godfather's face a little closer."

"What?" Harry looked confused and turned to study Sirius. "Sirius, your lip is split and your face is bruised on the left side."

"Snape has a hell of a right cross. He heard you crying in the dungeon and came up to Dumbledore's office to give us both what for. Punched me in the face and balled Albus out good," Sirius grinned wickedly, as he flicked his wand towards his face and muttered a healing spell.

"You heard me?" she eyed Snape with interest.

"Yes, I saw you go into the classroom and went to investigate. I thought at first you were up to some of your tricks. When I heard you crying I went up to find your Godfather and the Headmaster."

"You were upset with them," Harry face brightened with the knowledge that Snape had been worried about her.

"I was not. I merely thought they should know you were in an unauthorized location," Snape said stiffly, his face slightly flushed.

"Then why did you haul off and belt Sirius in the face? What's more, you yelled at the Headmaster, and I know how much you respect and care about him."

Professor Snape sat up straighter and the corners of his lips curved into a slight smile.

"He will never admit to it, Child. Severus is a very private person."

"I think what he did was very sweet. It's nice to know that someone agrees with me about going back to my aunt and uncle. You both deserved it," she looked brazenly from Sirius to Dumbledore. "Please don't make me go back there. You don't know what it's like. I wasn't exaggerating when I said they lock me in my room and have bars on my windows," Harry's voice had begun to tremble again in trepidation.

"Child, I want you to listen to what I am going to say, and don't interrupt me."

"All right, I'll listen," she agreed snuggling closer to Sirius. She needed to feel his closeness, and allowed herself to scan him. He was concerned about her, and she could feel how much he cared. She also knew he had been really hurt by her earlier remarks, feeling he had let her down. His arms tightened around her, and she could feel how much he truly loved her. "I'm sorry, I really didn't mean it," she whispered again, her eyes moist.

"I know, honey, I should have known better than not to tell you right away," Sirius whispered back as Dumbledore stared at the fire sipping his tea, giving them a few minutes to talk between themselves.

"Headmaster, if I may, I have to finish preparing the exam for the fourth years. Perhaps it would be prudent to leave the three of you alone?"

"No, Severus, I want you here, this concerns you to," Dumbledore explained, continuing to stare into the fire for another ten minutes. Harry was beginning to think he had begun to doze off when he finally spoke, "First of all, let me say that I did not make this decision lightly. I asked Sirius to do an important service for the Order since his ability as an animagus would provide an excellent cover. I did err however in not considering Harry's feelings. We both assumed that you would understand without question. You must forgive an old man for forgetting you are getting to be quite a young woman now, and deserve an explanation. I am going to go against protocol and tell you what Sirius will be doing. I think then you will feel better. I know he is torn about leaving you, especially after today's events, but once you know, you will agree with his decision. He took on this assignment for you, since it will involve someone you care about. He will be staying in the safe house and guarding Molly Weasley while Arthur and Percy are at work. He will be posing as their pet dog."

Harry was visibly startled, and looked at Sirius ashamedly. He would be protecting the woman who had acted more like a mother to her than her own aunt. Her best friend's mother, someone she loved dearly. "Why couldn't the two of you just tell me?"

"Hush, Child, let me finish," Dumbledore rebuked quietly; "he will be finished by the end of July when Molly goes to Romania to visit with Charlie for a fortnight, before returning home with Ginny and Ron. While she's away, Percy will be on vacation visiting Penelope's family in Wales, and Arthur will be staying with me. Once the whole family is reunited, the Aurors will keep an eye on them and various charms will be placed on the Burrow to aid in their protection. I am trusting you not to say anything about this, especially to Ron and Ginny since they do not know."

"I have a question," Harry looked from one to the other.

"What is it, honey?"

"Do you guys enjoy making me look foolish and feeling guilty for acting like an a...er... jerk?" she said catching her language just in time. Severus arched his brows and Sirius grinned, while Dumbledore looked at her over his glasses.

"Does this mean you're not mad at us anymore?" Sirius squeezed her affectionately.

"No, it means that I'm disappointed you both felt I couldn't be trusted with this kind of information in the first place. Do either of you really believe I would have just gone back to my aunt and uncle willingly and without question. All I've heard for the past few months is that now I'll have a real home to go to. Then you decided to pull the rug out from under me. I have never asked for anything before, but I don't want to go back to Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. Besides, my cousin and the neighbors all think I'm a boy."

"The neighbors will have had their memories altered," Dumbledore replied calmly. "Your cousin will be told the truth by his parents."

"Sirius, I can't go back there...you promised...me" Harry was becoming angry and depressed.

"Is working for the Order more important than me?"

Sirius had been dreading the fact that, even knowing the circumstances, she might ask him that question. He knew in that moment he was falling in love with her. He only hoped he could give her a satisfactory answer, since her adolescence was causing her to be somewhat selfish. 'James, help me. She needs to understand that I love her, but I also have a job to do,' He mentally spoke to his dead friend, Harry's father, as he formed his words.

"Harry, I love you more than life itself. You're my only family, but you have also got to understand that if I don't do this now, and something happens to Molly, you will never be able to forgive me."

Harry studied Sirius, her green eyes boring into him, as she searched her soul. "And if you do it, and you get yourself killed like my parents did, what will happen to me then?" she

whispered fearfully, the words her mother had written haunting her, *'and cry with you, should you ever have a broken heart.'*

Sirius scooped Harry into his arms and hugged her tightly, "Honey I intend to keep my promise. I will be back by your birthday and we'll all celebrate together. You will never have to see the Dursley's again if you don't want to. But I have to do this first. I owe the Weasley family that much for helping to keep me safely hidden while Peter was being questioned. Nothing is going to happen to me."

"Child, I promise to give you a message from him every week," Dumbledore came over and patted her gently on the shoulder. "I can also make the time with the Dursley's a little more bearable for you."

"How?" Harry asked holding onto Sirius.

"If Severus is still willing, you may spend the weekends with him in London, as Professor Lupin and myself will be there also, as will his sister. One of us will also take you out one day a week."

"Headmaster, I will be happy to have Harry as an additional house guest on weekends. My sister, Circe, can act as her chaperone. I am sure that should be acceptable to Black."

Sirius nodded, and looked at Harry, "See, you'll be fine, and that git of a cousin had better watch himself or you're liable to send a chair at him."

"Don't say that! They lock me up when I do things by accident. The first night you ever saw me was the night I had blown up my Uncle Vernon's sister."

Harry looked at him remembering the night she had run away, and was startled by a large black dog, prior to boarding the Knight Bus. It had actually been Sirius in his animagus form following his escape from Azkaban. Harry and Sirius stared at each other for a moment and then both began to snicker. While Sirius had not seen the woman floating, he had heard about it, and thought it was hilarious.

"Now that we have come to an agreement, Child, we can discuss your ability to throw chairs."

"We still have another problem. What about Snuffles?"

"I will take the dog with me," Snape offered, "this way she won't be too lonely for you."

"I believe that is an excellent idea, Severus. Harry will be able to see Snuffles three times a week."

"I don't know," Harry hesitated, "Snuffles isn't used to the city."

"Would you rather have her stay with Hagrid, Child?"

"No, let's see how she does with Professor Snape. He has her spoiled anyway, always giving her dog treats."

"Excellent!" Dumbledore beamed. "Now can we get back to the chair throwing?"

"Honestly, Headmaster, I don't know how I did it."

"I know that," Dumbledore laughed, "I had the feeling you would develop the power, just not so soon. I believe it was triggered by your emotional upheaval. You became angry at me and you unconsciously wanted to throw something. You quite simply made it happen."

"Headmaster, Miss Potter needs to learn how to control her emotions. This way she will be able to direct her power to move objects. I should like the opportunity to teach her."

"Snape since when are you telekinetic?"

"He's not Sirius, but he is a telepath. You really have to watch what you do in his class when his back is turned because he usually knows what you're up to," Harry said locking eyes with Snape in one of their usual staring matches.

"Snape can read my mind?"

"No, he's not that strong, but he has an uncanny sense of what people are up to," Harry looked at Sirius, breaking eye contact with Snape. "He also knows how to manipulate people very well by using an authoritative demeanor. He loves to scare the crap out of the first years."

"I seem to remember one first year that didn't scare too easily. In fact, it cost Gryffindor five points when the student had the nerve to talk back to me," Snape responded silkily, his dark eyes alight with amusement.

"Harry why do I get the feeling he is talking about you?"

"Sirius, let's just say it was the start of a very rocky relationship."

"Severus, I believe we would both do well to help Harry over the summer. She needs to be able to control her mind and her emotions. It will be an interesting challenge for her."

"Professor Dumbledore, in case no one has told you summer is for rest and relaxation, not school work," Harry groaned.

"Think of it as extra credit towards your seventh year at Hogwarts," Dumbledore teased, his blue eyes twinkling. "How many other students are allowed to throw chairs at the Headmaster?"

"How many Headmasters can deflect them?"

"Now that you're calm, would you like to try moving something else?"

"Go ahead, Harry, I'm curious to see if you can do it again," Sirius looked at her with fascination.

"But I don't have a clue as to how I did it in the first place."

"What were you thinking, Child, when the chair came at me."

"You were right before when you said I was angry and wanted to throw something. That is exactly how I felt."

"Then pick an object...this teacup will do," Dumbledore set his cup down on the table in front of her, "try to send it over to me."

"How? What should I do?"

"Concentrate on sending me the cup," he instructed casually.

"I feel silly. It won't work."

"Don't be so certain, Miss Potter, do as the Headmaster says."

Harry studied the cup, felt foolish, and then began to concentrate on making it move across the table. The room was silent except for the ticking of Professor Snape's clock for about five minutes. Finally, Harry sighed, and looked up.

"I told you it wouldn't work."

"You give up too easily, Harry," Sirius admonished her, "Try again."

"I'll do it once more, and that's it."

"Try thinking that the cup contains the antidote for a poison I have just drunk and you can't get up to give it to me."

"Professor Dumbledore, that is not funny!" Harry looked at him darkly and then studied the cup. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, and small beads of perspiration had begun to form on her forehead, but she stayed focused on the cup. 'Move, you stupid cup! It will make the Headmaster happy.' Very slowly, the cup began to shake, and then it sped across the table. Dumbledore caught it before it fell to the floor.

"Oh, this is not good. Why do I have all these rare powers?" Harry asked warily.

"Which powers are those, Miss Potter?"

"First I'm a Parsel Mouth, second, I not only become an animagus, but a magical one, third everyone finds out that I'm an empath, and now this. Don't you find that all a bit much?"

"Not really, Harry," Dumbledore looked amused, "there are things you have to work at. You're excellent with Charms, but you still need to study and practice to get them right. You definitely do not like Herbology, and while you have gotten to like doing Potions, you do not have a natural talent for them like Severus does."

"Not to mention that James was a natural flyer and an animagus himself," Sirius winked, "so that runs in your blood. You just have some of the more rare powers. You aren't a telepath and you can't become invisible at will, and forget about divination."

"Good points, now if you all don't mind, I would like to go and have some dinner and then soak in the tub. My back aches, and I have two Potions finals tomorrow."

"Two Potions finals?" Sirius questioned.

"Yes, I have my regular one and then tomorrow evening I have to mix the Wolfbane potion for Remus. Professor Snape scheduled it for the full moon. He has an extra set of ingredients just in case I don't get it right. We'll know tomorrow night who will win our wagers."

"Harry, do you need to go to the infirmary? You said your back was hurting," Dumbledore asked with concern.

"No, Headmaster, there is nothing wrong with me that won't go away by itself in about three or four days; which would explain why I am probably so moody and emotional right now," Harry replied as she stood up and stretched, looking over at him with a grin.

"Hmm...we should have realized it was that time of the month. Even Remus doesn't get that crazed," Sirius chuckled with amusement.

"Then be glad I'm not a werewolf or you would all be in real trouble."

"I think dinner is an excellent idea," Dumbledore smiled, "I understand we are having roast chicken tonight."

"Then let's go, my stomach has been growling for the past half hour," Sirius remarked enthusiastically.

"Black," Snape said rising, "your stomach is always empty. It's amazing how much you can eat and never gain a pound."

"I'm still making up for twelve years in Azkaban. The slop they fed us was worse than dog food, and I should know," Sirius remarked as they all headed from Severus Snape's sitting room towards the Great Hall.

Harry took her seat on the Gryffindor table with Ron, who was bubbling over with enthusiasm. He had just heard from his parents that he would be going to Romania over the summer to visit his brother. Hagrid was to accompany both him and Ginny. Their mother would arrive by the end of July, spending a fortnight, before bringing them home to get ready for the school year ahead.

Harry pretended to be happy for him, and a part of her was, but the other part was still smarting with pain and jealousy. Sirius had chosen to protect Ron's family over her. She understood he felt he owed them for what they had done for him, and she did love the whole Weasley family. Yet her heart was filled with foreboding. She couldn't get it out of her mind that something was going to happen over the summer. She could sense Sirius watching her from across the room, and knew that he was worried.

Excusing herself early on the pretext of needing to take care of Snuffles, and wanting to review the Wolfbane Potion again, she headed up to her room. Nearing her door, she saw a big black shaggy dog waiting for her, sitting up and begging. Sirius had taken one of the secret tunnels to head her off, and transformed to try to cheer her up.

"Sorry, Padfoot, but I'm fresh out of dog treats. You'll have to go and get some from Professor Snape. He keeps a jar of them hidden in his desk. Just make sure he hasn't laced them with some poison," Harry joked flatly, as she opened her door. Turning back to him, she found he had transformed back into human form.

"Harry, I know your still hurting, but I really want you to understand. I know if something were to happen to Molly Weasley you would never forgive yourself."

"It's not Mrs. Weasley I'm worried about. It's you," Harry avoided his eyes, busying herself with pouring Snuffles her dog food. "Sirius I just can't shake this overwhelming feeling that something bad is going to happen. That's why it's so important to me that we spend the summer together."

"Your scar hasn't been hurting has it?" he asked, immediately alert to the possibility that Voldemort may be going to try something before Harry left school.

"No, and for once I actually wish it was."

Sirius turned Harry to face him and gently pushed her glasses up onto her head, so he could look directly into her eyes. They stood that way for five minutes, neither one of them moving, and Harry knew he wanted to kiss her. She also knew she wanted him to kiss her, and not in a parental kind of way. She pulled back from him, and he gently reached down and kissed her forehead.

"I promise you that I will be very careful and if I even think something is wrong, I will send for help immediately."

"You better; I don't think I could bear it if something happened to you," she hugged him fiercely.

"Now, why don't you go and take that hot bath you were talking about, and get some rest. You have a big day tomorrow. We're all counting on you to mix that potion and win our bets."

"I hope I don't let you all down, especially Neville Longbottom."

"Longbottom, what about my dinner out on the town?"

"Oh, don't worry. If you loose the ladies will just have to suffer," Harry teased her mood brightening. "Now go on and see to our resident werewolf. I saw him with you at dinner and I'm sure he's hurting. If I wasn't so tired I would go and give him some healing energy to make him feel better."

"I'm on my way, Miss Wings. Will there be anything else?"

"Yes, tell Remus I'll do my best for him tomorrow. If I don't get it right this time I'll just have Snape help me some more over the summer," Harry smiled as she walked him to the door.

"I will," Sirius smiled, tweaking her nose before leaving the room.

She watched him go up the hall for a minute and then retired to her room. 'Girl you had better finish growing up fast. You've got it bad for all of them. You're just plain fickle,' Harry said to herself as she went in and took her bath. She then settled down for the night, and fell asleep going over the ingredients for the Wolfbane Potion.

She dreamed she was flying with Fawkes, and they were soaring free over the mountains. She could see Hogwarts in the distance, and down below the people of Hogsmead were laughing and celebrating in the streets. Her parents were there, and they were smiling at her. Her father was telling her he had known all along she was special, and her mother saying never to forget 'Abra Kadabra.' There was also a strange old woman there, and Harry seemed to know her. She was telling Harry that she would really have a charmed and wonderful life, just as her mother had said at her birth.

Harry woke feeling relaxed and refreshed, and while she was still unhappy with having to go back to the Dursley's, she knew Sirius would keep his word and it would not be for the entire summer. She had breakfast with Ron and Neville, and they discussed the upcoming Potions exam. Neville was his usual nervous wreck, so Harry did her best to calm him down. She suggested that he try an old Muggle trick when having to do something like a practical exam or public speaking.

"What do they do?" Neville asked worriedly. "You know that Professor Snape will stare at me just to see me get nervous and fail. He hates me."

"He doesn't hate you Neville; he knows you're capable of doing it. He tries to make you mad so you will succeed to prove him wrong."

"So what do you want me to try?"

"If you start to get nervous while he's watching you mix the potion, picture him in his underwear!"

"What?" Neville and Ron chorused together laughing in disbelief.

"I'm serious. Try to picture him getting dressed and walking around in his shorts, or whatever kind you think he wears."

"Harry that is crazy," Ron shook his head, laughing even harder, "I can just picture him in cartoon shorts, or maybe ones with funny sayings."

"Do you think he might wear black, like his robes?" Neville blushed. "Or maybe he wears men's bikinis. I'll try it Harry, but what do I do if I start laughing out loud?"

"Just politely apologize and tell him you learned a new relaxation technique, and are trying it out."

"And what should he do if Snape asks what it is?"

"Yeah, Harry, what do I do then?"

"Tell him I taught it to you, but I made you give your word not to say what it is. Tell him that you wouldn't feel right telling him without my permission, and that if he is interested I said I would teach it to him."

Neville and Ron burst into waves of laughter again. Ron finally composed himself enough to ask, "You really wouldn't tell him, would you?"

"Sure I would. He could picture Dumbledore as his relaxation technique," Harry giggled, her cheeks red, as they got up, and headed to Charms for Professor Flitwick's final.

Professor Flitwick had each one of them conjure a moving picture. Harry had to do one of an event from her life. She chose the Triwizard Tournament. Her chosen scene was when she had to retrieve the egg from the dragon. When she had finished, she could tell Professor Flitwick had been pleased with her efforts.

The rest of the day went smoothly, with Potions being her last class. They were paired in teams of two, with each having to mix a batch of Veritaserum. Unfortunately, there were an odd number of students. Snape asked for a volunteer to work alone, so to save time, Harry raised her hand. Snape blatantly ignored her, and smiled at Neville.

"Mr. Longbottom, I'm sure you won't mind taking the front desk and working on your own, will you?"

"No Sir," Neville choked. Harry winked and rubbed her waist as a hint to remind him about the underwear, and he started to smile.

Snape strolled about the room as they worked, and made sure he kept stopping over by Neville's worktable. Neville would look up and smile, but he continued working. When he had finished he turned in his potion, cleaned up his workstation, as per Professor Snape's instructions, and got up to leave the class.

"Mr. Longbottom, if you will wait outside in the hall, I will see you in a few minutes," Snape's sardonic voice called.

"Yes, Professor," Neville answered nervously, as Harry smiled in reassurance.

"Miss Potter, Mr. Weasley, if you would both wait with Mr. Longbottom in the hall. I would like a word with you both," Snape looked at them when they had finished.

"Professor, would you object if I go to the ladies room while we wait?" Harry inquired pleasantly.

"Very well, Miss Potter, but make it quick."

"Make it quick, he says," Ron muttered, "what does he think, that you can just time the whole thing out like mixing one of his potions?"

"You never know," Harry laughed as she headed for the bathroom to relieve herself.

She and Ron had made a good team, and she was confident they had passed. She also knew that Snape was suspicious, and wanted to know why Neville could do so well. They waited for approximately half an hour, until the last student had finished, and then Snape ushered them back into the classroom.

"Sit down, all of you. I want to know how you all managed to mix that potion so well. Mr. Longbottom made only one minor mistake, and you and Mr. Weasley had none."

"Professor, before you go and make any kind of accusation, I will tell you that we did not cheat. You know it is also impossible since there are charms on all the quills and equipment. There was a simple relaxation technique involved, but I won't divulge my secret until after I take my next test with you," Harry said calmly looking Professor Snape in the eye, and gave him a smile.

"Indeed, and you taught this technique to Mr. Longbottom?"

"I suggested it, yes."

"Then you will be happy to know, that in view of his performance this afternoon, he will be passing Potions with an O.W.L."

Harry and Ron both broke into cheers and smacked Neville on the back. Neville just grinned in amazement.

"Harry, you were right, it worked! How can I ever thank you?"

"There is no need to thank me, Neville. Just wish me luck. I have a much harder potion to mix than the Veritaserum in a little while. In the meantime, remember what I taught you in case I don't get it right. It will help you in all your classes by the way."

"Mr. Weasley you also have passed the class. I would also appreciate it if you would refrain from making comments about the need to use the restroom while out in the hallway."

"I will, Professor Snape," Ron swallowed hard, his face beet red with embarrassment. 'How the hell does he always know?' He thought shaking his head as he and Neville bid Harry good luck and headed back to the Gryffindor common room.

"Is Professor Dumbledore coming down to act as an impartial judge?" Harry inquired as soon as they were gone.

"He will be here shortly as per our agreement."

"It's driving you crazy isn't it?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Potter?"

"How Neville did so well on your final. It is driving you crazy."

"I'm enough of a telepath to know you had something to do with it."

"I would be interested to know myself, Harry. I have never seen Neville so exuberant,"

Professor Dumbledore's voice came from the door.

"Just a little Muggle relaxation technique. I'm going to use it myself, while I go for broke, and mix the Wolfbane Potion. I will tell you both what it is when I'm done."

"Do you have any questions before we begin, Miss Potter?"

"Just two. Can I have a cold drink? It's warm in here from the cauldrons and my throat is dry."

"Of course, Child," Dumbledore nodded to Snape who moved off to his desk and poured her a glass of iced tea from a pitcher on his desk. "What is your other question?"

"Do I get to find out if I mixed this potion correctly when I'm finished, or do I have to wait?"

"Severus?" Dumbledore looked at the Potions Master over his spectacles, blue eyes twinkling.

"Your grade will be posted with the others by Wednesday."

"Ooohhh..." Harry pouted as Snape assumed his familiar stiff stance, arms crossed.

"Are you ready to begin, Child?" Dumbledore asked as she finished her iced tea.

"Sure, why not," Harry grinned as she looked at Snape, glad he didn't know what exactly it was she was thinking.

Dumbledore and Snape each took a seat facing her worktable, as she began to collect and organize her ingredients. She took her time, and could feel Snape scrutinizing her as she worked. Every now and then, she would look up at the two men, and smile. She worked carefully, checking and rechecking herself as she went along. At one point she stopped, and looked up at Snape. She was not to ask questions, but needed to use his knife sharpener, and had to get permission. Snape saw her study her knife and anticipated her need before she spoke.

"You may use the knife sharpener," Miss Potter. He followed her over to his sharpener, and watched her closely.

She knew he was including her technique as part of the exam, and smiled again, just to whet his curiosity. She then went over to light the cauldron so that it would get hot, and added the necessary amounts of water to boil. The timer rang as soon as she had finished chopping her dry ingredients, and she added the ingredients starting with the liquids, one at a time. The wolf's blood was last to go in, and then the potion was to simmer for ten minutes. She

watched the cauldron carefully, and stirred the mixture intermittently. Finally, it was finished, and she swung the cauldron arm away from the flames and put out the fire. She then ladled the mixture into the necessary bottle, and set it aside to cool while she cleaned up her workstation.

"Do I really have to wait until Wednesday to know if I mixed this correctly?"

"Severus said you do, Child, and it is his class," Dumbledore smiled broadly winking at her.

"Headmaster you really shouldn't drop any hints to Miss Potter."

"That's okay, Professor Snape, because I know even if I didn't get it perfect, I came damn close."

"Indeed, Miss Potter. Will you tell us your secret for relaxation now?"

"I could make you wait till Wednesday," Harry laughed blushing.

"Child, what is it that is making you blush so?"

"Well, all I taught them was to use an old Muggle technique that I learned from a teacher in my last year of Primary school."

"Pray Miss Potter, what might that be?"

"Well, when ever you need to get up and speak or someone is watching you do a practical exam and makes you nervous, you just picture them in their underwear," Harry grinned looking from one to the other. Dumbledore laughed uproariously, while Professor Snape raised both brows, his lip twitching in amusement, but there was an odd expression in his eyes. "I find it especially useful since I know what kind of under things most of the teachers wear. It pays to do detention in the laundry," she said as she gathered her books winking at the two of them, and left the classroom. She could have sworn they were both blushing bright pink.

All the exam grades were posted during the night on Tuesday, so that the students would have them available on Wednesday morning. Harry woke early and ran down to the entrance by the Great Hall to check her marks. She was fairly certain she had garnered that N.E.W.T. from Professor Snape, and as she hurried down the stairs she was met with applause from the students who had already gathered there. Professor Lupin was also there, and gave her a warm smile.

"Congratulations, Harry, you eared a N.E.W.T. in Potions," he then bent to whisper in her ear, "I should know, he gave me the potion you mixed on Monday as soon as you had left the dungeon. Sirius is ecstatic and we're all to meet in Dumbledore's office for breakfast, Ron included."

"Harry you did it!" Neville shouted with glee before heading into the Great Hall for breakfast.

"Way to go Harry," Ron hugged her. "What did Sirius say?"

"Professor Lupin tells me he is in his glory. Now, if you don't mind I would like to see my other grades."

"Sure thing, Harry. You did fantastic. Wait till Hermione hears, she'll be thrilled."

"Yeah, she will also tell me that I should pull these kinds of grades all the time," Harry remarked studying the board. She had garnered N.E.W.T.'s in Potions, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts and Charms. She had O.W.L.'s in Herbology, Divination, History of Magic, and Care of Magical Creatures. "How did you do, Ron?"

"I got two N.E.W.T.'s. One in Charms and the other in Defense from Professor Lupin," Ron grinned over at the Professor, who was waiting for Harry. All the rest are O.W.L.'s. Mum will be ecstatic."

"How did Neville do?"

"He managed to pass everything, and got O.W.L.'s in three of his classes, including Potions, and a N.E.W.T. in Herbology. His gran will be thrilled," Ron told her as they followed Professor Lupin up to the Headmaster's office.

Breakfast was a happy affair, and true to his word, Snape had made arrangements to keep his part of the bet. Dumbledore already had his lemon drops, and he was taking Sirius out as soon

as they arrived in London. Harry made Snape promise to keep Sirius out of trouble, and warned Sirius to behave. Professor Lupin and Snape would determine what day Lupin would have off for a long weekend when they returned in the fall, and Harry reminded him he was to be nice to Neville Longbottom the whole of next year.

They had all been impressed with Harry's technique to relax for an exam, and agreed that it was helping to make the difference with Neville. Professor Dumbledore was glad, because Neville was such a nice boy. When the meal was over, he sat back in his chair, and studied Harry and Ron.

"I have something to say to the two of you, and I have decided not to wait until you get your letters for next year. Hermione will be a Prefect."

"Yes!" Ron raised his arm in a victory salute and Harry hugged the old man.

"I am also going to tell you both that Ron too, been named as a Prefect. Ron you will head Gryffindor, and Harry, in view of all you have done over the last six years you will be Head Girl, overseeing the Prefects of the four houses."

"Headmaster..."

"No, Harry, you are not allowed to decline the position. I know you don't enjoy notoriety but the staff voted unanimously, and that includes Professor Snape, with Sirius abstaining for the obvious reasons," Dumbledore informed them as Sirius grinned like a Halloween jack-o-lantern, and Snape nodded, arching his brows sardonically. "You have also been named Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

"Did you know about that?" Harry turned abruptly to Ron.

"Who do you think nominated you?" he laughed happily. "Wait till mum hears Hermione and I both going to be Prefects; and you Head Girl and Quidditch Captain. She'll be on cloud nine."

"You've got that right," Harry grinned but was unable to hide the sadness in her eyes when she looked over at Sirius.

She knew that all too soon he would be standing guard duty over Molly Weasley, while she was sitting alone in her room on Privet Drive.

The end of year feast was held the next night, and the students would be leaving on the Hogwarts Express the next morning. All agreed it had been an interesting year, and the sixth years were looking forward to some rest before starting their last year at Hogwarts. They wished their older friends who were leaving Hogwarts well, and there were the usual tears and good-byes. Harry kept her eyes off Sirius at the staff table, afraid she would start to cry again. She knew something was coming again as her scar had been hurting during the night, but she didn't say anything, not even to Dumbledore. She had also received a letter from Draco, which had been delivered to her, as promised, by Dobby.

He had told her that the Dark Lord had punished him when he found out she had escaped. He had only hit him twice with the *Cruciatus* curse, since he should have known better than to let a junior member of his team guard her. The staff that had been guarding the grounds had been treated much more harshly, as none of them saw her leave. He had also said that the Dark Lord was planning something big for during the summer, but he had been unable to find out what it was. As soon as he found out he would try to warn her, as he had heard him drop Harry's name when he thought Draco had left the room. Harry could tell by the handwriting that Draco had written the note in a hurry, his hand shaking. Whatever was going to happen, she would be ready for it.

Friday morning came all too soon and as she got down from the carriage at the Hogsmead Station, she waved to Hagrid, and gave him a hug good-by. She looked around hopefully for any sign of Sirius, but there was none, so she climbed on board with Ron. She had felt certain he would at least come to see her off, and had to bite back the tears, a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Ron had gone up to see Seamus and Neville a few compartments up, and Harry was sitting alone. She stared out the window for a few minutes, and then closed her eyes, a lone tear running down her cheek, as the train slowly pulled out of the station for the long trip back to London and Platform 9 3/4. The compartment door opened, and she assumed Ron was returning.

"Let me know when the cart gets here. I'll buy us some candy. I could use something to cheer me up," Harry said her voice husky as another tear escaped from the corner of her eye.

"Remus, don't we have a school rule about crying on the Hogwart's Express?"

"Dumbledore absolutely forbids anyone to do it."

Harry's eyes had flown open, and her mouth dropped. Sirius and Remus were sitting opposite her, grinning from ear to ear.

"You really didn't think we would let you go back to the Dursley's without an escort to make sure they know how to treat you, Miss Wings?"

"That's right. Dumbledore is not happy with their behavior and he has let them know it in no uncertain terms."

"Seems the old man paid them a little visit, and made sure they took the locks off the door and the bars off the windows. Old Vernon was petrified and your Aunt Petunia kept falling all over herself trying to say that they were strictly for your safety," Sirius told her with a chuckle. "I'm just going to make sure they know that come the end of July, when I come to fetch my goddaughter home, I had better not hear of any other ill treatment on their part. If I do, then my friend and I will just have to make sure they know who they are trying to play with."

"Dumbledore has also let them know that you will be going out one day each week, and will be away from Friday night till Monday morning," Remus told her casually. "Somehow they got the idea they're behavior is being monitored. I think they will be more than a little subdued."

"After all, you may not be able to do magic away from Hogwarts, but we all can," Sirius looked at her slyly, his brown eyes brimming with laughter.

Harry just hugged them both, and Sirius wiped her tears away. While she was still apprehensive about Voldemort, she knew Sirius would keep his word, and return in time for her birthday. She also knew that Dumbledore must have been furious with them for the way they had been treating her. If nothing else, things were starting to look up. It was going to be an interesting summer.